

Article

From Skepticism to Story: Reclaiming the Bible's Metanarrative for Postmodern Audiences

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Abstract

This article examines the epistemological and homiletical implications of postmodernity for Christian preaching. It addresses the communicative crisis introduced by postmodern skepticism toward metanarratives. It proposes a constructive theological response through the re-articulation of the gospel as a coherent, storied, and transformative metanarrative. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship in theology, homiletics, epistemology, and cultural theory, this study argues that a thoughtful engagement with postmodern critique can serve as a catalytic force for ecclesial renewal. The article advocates for a homiletic method that re-engages Scripture's narrative form while emphasizing relational epistemology, incarnational witness, and contextual sensitivity. By utilizing narrative theology, post-critical epistemologies, and performative models of preaching, this study proposes a recalibrated approach to gospel proclamation, adapted for fragmented and skeptical audiences, while safeguarding theological orthodoxy.

Keywords: postmodernism; gospel proclamation; narrative theology; epistemology; preaching; homiletics; metanarrative; theo-drama

1. Introduction

The intellectual upheaval of postmodernity, characterized by a widespread suspicion of universal truth claims, metanarratives, and foundational epistemologies, poses a significant challenge to the Christian preacher. Jean-François Lyotard's oft-cited formulation of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984) crystallizes the cultural milieu in which gospel proclamation now occurs. Within such a context, traditional models of preaching that rely on propositional assertiveness or systematic coherence often fall flat, failing to resonate with audiences shaped by pluralism, relativism, and affective epistemologies.

Jean-François Lyotard further explains that postmodernism reflects profound skepticism toward the grand, totalizing stories that once conferred legitimacy to knowledge, culture, and social institutions. This incredulity is not merely a cultural sentiment but is intimately tied to the advancement of the sciences. Paradoxically, the very progress of scientific knowledge both results from and reinforces the rejection of universal explanatory frameworks. As scientific discourse becomes increasingly specialized, fragmented, and pragmatic, it undercuts the legitimacy of overarching philosophical and ideological systems that once provided coherence to human understanding.

Lyotard connects this epistemological shift to the broader crisis facing metaphysical philosophy and the traditional university, both of which historically functioned as guardians and transmitters of grand narratives. In the postmodern era, these institutions



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struggle to maintain authority in a world where knowledge is no longer legitimized by appeal to universal reason or transcendent truth. Instead, knowledge is validated through performativity, utility, and localized narratives.

Moreover, Lyotard observes a transformation similar to that of narrative itself. The classical structure of narrative, with its heroic protagonists, epic journeys, and transcendent purposes, is dissolving. The narrative function, once deeply rooted in teleology and cultural cohesion, is now scattered into diverse linguistic fragments: denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and others. These narrative elements, which he metaphorically describes as “clouds,” each carries its pragmatic valence, functioning within specific language games governed by context, usage, and power dynamics.

As a result, individuals today find themselves situated at the crossroads of multiple, often conflicting discourses. Each person inhabits a complex web of localized narratives, with no guarantee of coherence or communicability. The stability once provided by unified worldviews has given way to a pluralism of meanings, where the interplay of diverse language games resists totalization. What emerges is not nihilism per se, but a condition in which knowledge, identity, and truth are negotiated within provisional, contingent, and often incommensurable frameworks.

Nevertheless, this article contends that postmodernism, rather than being merely a deconstructive force, presents an opportunity for theological recalibration and homiletical renewal. The grand narrative of Scripture need not be abandoned in a postmodern context; rather, it must be re-envisioned through rhetorical, theological, and incarnational modes that engage the imagination and relational sensibilities of contemporary hearers. This article aims to articulate a homiletical strategy that retrieves the storied logic of Scripture, integrates post-critical epistemology, and embodies theological truth in culturally credible forms.

2. The Postmodern Paradox: Rejecting Metanarratives While Longing for Meaning

This Postmodernism promotes the idea that truth, knowledge, and meaning are socially constructed and context-dependent. It challenges the notion of a singular, objective truth and encourages individuals to question and deconstruct dominant narratives, uncovering the underlying power dynamics and ideologies. Ronald J. Allen explains, “Postmodernism is an umbrella term that encompasses trends in fields as diverse as architecture, art, theater, literature, cinema, and television, as well as philosophy, theology, and ethics” (Allen et al. 2001). Postmodernism emerged as a critical response to the principles and assumptions of modernism, which emphasized the power of reason, the objectivity of knowledge, and the concept of universal truth. Postmodernism rejects the idea of grand narratives or metanarratives (including the “grand narrative of the biblical storyline”), which are overarching stories or theories that attempt to explain the world comprehensively.

While postmodern discourse frequently critiques and rejects the concept of metanarratives, those overarching, universal stories that attempt to provide meaning and coherence to life, notably, many individuals shaped by postmodern sensibilities are still deeply drawn to such narratives when they encounter them in popular media. The widespread appeal of cinematic epics such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, or, more recently, *The Wheel of Time*, suggests that the human longing for grand, transcendent stories persists even amidst a cultural climate skeptical of objective meaning. These narratives resonate not merely as sources of entertainment but because they tap into a fundamental human impulse: the desire to understand existence through the lens of purpose, conflict, and ultimate resolution.

Ironically, these stories often embody the very structure that postmodern theory claims to resist, the age-old struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, sacrifice and

redemption. This contradiction highlights a significant tension between postmodern claims and postmodern behavior. While many deny the existence of absolute moral categories, they are simultaneously captivated by narratives that rely upon them.

C.S. Lewis, in *Miracles*, offers a compelling theological reflection on this phenomenon. He argues that mythic patterns, especially those reflecting death and rebirth cycles found in nature and ancient mythologies, persist across cultures because they mirror a deeper divine reality. Jesus himself draws on this imagery in John 12:24, referencing a grain of wheat that must die to bear fruit. According to Lewis, these recurring archetypes in global storytelling are not coincidental; they are echoes of a more profound truth embedded in creation by its Creator. The Christian claim is that the myth became fact in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, the fulfillment of humanity's collective story. Therefore, far from signaling a departure from narrative coherence, the postmodern fascination with mythic storytelling may instead point to an unspoken yearning for the ultimate metanarrative, one that finds its fulfillment in the gospel (Lewis 2001). This paradox warrants further exploration as it raises important questions about the nature of truth, the role of imagination, and the enduring power of story in human experience.

Postmodernism rejects the idea of a master or grand narrative, which suggests a dominant story that asserts its authority while marginalizing alternative narratives. Instead, it embraces a plurality of narratives, recognizing that different stories can coexist and provide valuable insights into various aspects of human experience. One primary reason postmodernism struggles with Christian preaching is its tendency to view biblical claims, including those made by Christianity, as parts of a larger narrative of power and control. Postmodern thinkers contend that religious beliefs and institutions have historically been used to enforce social hierarchies, oppress marginalized groups, and exert control over people's lives. They argue that those in power construct religious narratives to maintain their dominance and perpetuate inequality.

3. Postmodernism and the Displacement of Certainty

Postmodernism represents both a philosophical critique and a cultural shift characterized by a profound skepticism toward absolute truth, objectivity, and universal narratives. At its core, postmodernism displaces the certainty once championed by modernism, challenging the legitimacy of grand, all-encompassing metanarratives, including those embedded in Enlightenment rationalism and empirical science.

Emerging largely as a resistance movement, postmodernism arose from a deep-seated distrust of modernism's epistemological claims, particularly its confidence in human reason and progress. As Walter Truett Anderson observes, "Postmodernity challenges the view that the truth is, as Isaiah Berlin put it, one and undivided, the same for all men everywhere at all times. The newer view regards any truth as socially constructed, contingent, and inseparable from certain people's peculiar needs and preferences in a certain time and place. This notion has many implications; it leaves no value, custom, belief, or eternal verity totally untouched" (Anderson 1997). In light of this cultural climate, preaching the Bible's Grand Narrative requires a thoughtful and responsive approach. Rather than assuming shared assumptions about truth or authority, preachers must acknowledge the fragmented, pluralistic nature of postmodern thought. This does not mean abandoning the biblical metanarrative, but rather re-presenting it in ways that are relational, incarnational, and open to dialogue, emphasizing lived experience, narrative engagement, and the beauty of mystery over rigid propositionalism.

The postmodern intellectual tradition, articulated through thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault, calls into question the epistemic scaffolding of modernity: the autonomy of reason, the neutrality of language, and the stability of meaning. Language, once considered

a transparent medium of truth, is now seen as inherently unstable and ideologically laden. Michel Foucault's theory of discursive formations (Foucault 1972) and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism (Derrida and Spivak 1997) effectively decenter any claims to absolute interpretive authority.

In the postmodern intellectual terrain, the preacher is no longer regarded as a neutral conveyor of objective truth but rather as a participant in a contested discursive field, where every claim to truth is interpreted through the lens of power, context, and narrative. This cultural shift undermines the assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism, which posits that truth is universal, accessible through reason, and independent of the knower. Consequently, sermons that rely heavily on propositional logic, scholastic dogmatism, or detached exegesis may strike postmodern listeners as epistemologically naïve or even ideologically oppressive, reflecting what Michel Foucault calls "regimes of truth," systems in which power legitimates knowledge (Foucault 1974).

Yet theologians such as James K. A. Smith and Kevin J. Vanhoozer have argued that postmodernism's critique of modern epistemology can be appropriated theologically rather than resisted outright. Smith, drawing from Augustine, critiques modernity's overreliance on rationalism and instead retrieves a more affective, embodied, and communal vision of knowledge. In *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* Smith contends that the church must "inhabit the postmodern condition" by recognizing that knowledge is always perspectival and shaped by desire and practice (Smith 2006). For Smith, truth is not a disembodied proposition but something one lives into within the formative practices of the church.

Modern affect theory, particularly in the work of Brian Massumi, sharply distinguishes "affect" from "emotion". In this framework, affect refers to pre-cognitive, bodily intensities, unconscious, visceral experiences that occur before meaning is formed.

In contrast, emotion is the socially and linguistically mediated interpretation of those affects. Massumi defines affect as the capacity to affect and be affected, noting its autonomy and resistance to narrative capture, while emotions emerge when this intensity becomes qualified through cognition (Massumi 1995).

Silvan Tomkins initially laid the groundwork for this distinction, suggesting that affects are universal, neurophysiological mechanisms that are preverbal and nonconscious. At the same time, emotions are constructed through culturally shaped responses over time (Tomkins 1991). Tomkins identifies nine innate affects (e.g., interest, distress), arguing that affects are biological impulses, whereas emotions emerge culturally and narratively. In summary, affects circulate between and around bodies, while emotions are felt and framed through language and culture.

Integrating this affect–emotion distinction into your discussion enriches our understanding of gospel engagement: the gospel awakens bodily resonance and relational affections (pre-cognitive stirrings of hope, longing, and awe), which then find expression in emotion and spiritual narratives. So, the gospel doesn't merely inform the mind; it impacts the soul and body before it is even understood, creating fertile ground for transformation.

Similarly, Vanhoozer proposes a "canonical-linguistic" approach in *The Drama of Doctrine*, wherein Scripture is not a static set of rules or doctrines, but a divine script meant to be performed by the church. He argues that doctrine is dramatized rather than merely stated, and that meaning emerges within the communal performance of the biblical narrative (Vanhoozer 2005). This reframing positions theology not as a cold system of truths, but as a participatory drama that is both storied and embodied. Vanhoozer's approach resonates deeply with postmodern concerns about the instability of language, while simultaneously affirming the possibility of theological coherence within the interpretive community of the church.

Together, Smith and Vanhoozer illustrate a constructive path forward: instead of retreating into modernist apologetics or abandoning theological claims altogether, preachers can embrace a storied, participatory vision of truth, one that speaks compellingly to the postmodern imagination while remaining faithful to the gospel.

4. Recovering the Grand Narrative: Theological and Hermeneutical Foundations

Despite postmodernism's widespread suspicion of metanarratives, the Christian faith remains unavoidably narrative. The Bible presents not a fragmented anthology of moral teachings or isolated religious sayings, but a unified, redemptive drama that unfolds through the sweeping narrative arc of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. This narrative coherence is not incidental to Christian theology; it is its scaffolding. As Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen emphasize, "At a very deep level, human beings live out their lives in the context of a basic, foundational story. The technical word for this is metanarrative; a metanarrative is a grand story that aims to tell the true story of the world" (Bartholomew and Goheen 2014).

Postmodernism, however, is deeply skeptical of such grand, totalizing narratives. As Walter Truett Anderson explains, postmodernity "challenges the view that the truth is, as Isaiah Berlin put it, one and undivided, the same for all men everywhere at all times," replacing it with a notion of truth as "socially constructed, contingent, and inseparable from certain people's peculiar needs and preferences in a certain time and place" (Anderson 1990). From this perspective, the Christian metanarrative appears not as divine revelation but as one narrative among many, shaped by power, culture, and historical contingency.

Yet scholars such as N. T. Wright and Kevin J. Vanhoozer have proposed constructive hermeneutical frameworks that affirm the integrity of the biblical metanarrative while remaining sensitive to postmodern concerns. Wright suggests a "five-act" hermeneutic in which the Bible functions like a Shakespearean play, inviting its readers not merely to observe but to engage with and inhabit the drama (Wright 2005). Similarly, Vanhoozer's "theo-dramatic" model sees Scripture as a canonical script that the church is called to perform faithfully in every generation (Vanhoozer 2005). In this light, preaching becomes a dramatic act, less the repetition of fixed propositions and more the contextualized direction of God's people into participatory faithfulness.

This metaphorical shift in homiletics, from lecture to liturgy, from proposition to performance, enables preachers to maintain theological substance while resonating with the aesthetic and epistemological sensitivities of a postmodern audience. The preacher is no longer the sole authoritative "speaker of truth," but a "director" helping the ecclesial community improvise faithfully upon the canonical script. This does not entail a surrender to relativism but a reimagining of how truth is embodied and enacted. As Bartholomew and Goheen observe, "Individuals and societies may be unconscious of the story they indwell, but always it is some particular grand story that an individual or community is living out" (Bartholomew and Goheen 2014).

Therefore, preaching in a postmodern age must be both compassionate and intentional, compassionate in acknowledging the distrust and fragmentation many feel, and deliberate in guiding them to see how the biblical story offers a redemptive narrative that both explains and redeems the human condition. This requires not only exegetical clarity but also hermeneutical hospitality. "In this way," Bartholomew and Goheen conclude, "the Bible not only tells us the true story of the world but also invites us to make the story our own" (Bartholomew and Goheen 2014). This is not just a proclamation; it is an invitation.

5. Epistemological Reorientation: From Cartesian Certainty to Narrative Knowing

A central contribution of postmodern philosophy lies in its sustained critique of foundationalist epistemologies, systems of thought that attempt to ground knowledge in indubitable, universal principles. The Cartesian ideal of the autonomous, rational subject, the *cogito*, epitomizes this approach, portraying knowledge as a matter of internal certainty achieved through detached reasoning. Postmodern thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and Jacques Derrida, have dismantled this ideal by demonstrating how knowledge is socially embedded, linguistically mediated, and shaped by historical power dynamics (Foucault 1972). The result is not the end of knowing, but a reorientation: a move from certainty to coherence, from abstraction to embodiment, from autonomy to relationality.

This epistemological shift opens rich possibilities for Christian theology. Rather than lamenting the loss of Enlightenment certainties, theologians such as James K. A. Smith and Kevin J. Vanhoozer have argued that postmodern critiques provide an opportunity to retrieve older, more ecclesial and covenantal models of knowing (Vanhoozer 2005). Smith, for instance, recovers Augustine's insight that knowledge is shaped by love (*ordo amoris*), that we do not think our way into a new way of living, but live our way into a new way of thinking (Smith 2006). Knowledge, in this light, is not simply the assent of the intellect to propositions but a holistic, embodied participation in truth within the context of a worshipping community. Similarly, Vanhoozer speaks of "doxological epistemology," in which knowing is inseparable from trusting and worshipping the triune God (Vanhoozer 2005).

In this context, narrative epistemology, especially as developed by Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur, offers a compelling model. Frei emphasized the narrative shape of biblical texts, arguing that Scripture must be read as a unified, self-interpreting drama rather than reduced to abstract theological propositions or moral lessons (Frei 1974). Ricoeur, likewise, proposed that human identity and understanding are formed through narrative configuration: "We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated" (Ricoeur 1992). This storied understanding of human identity aligns naturally with the biblical mode of revelation, which privileges drama, poetry, and parable over discursive abstraction.

Preaching that honors this epistemology does not merely deliver information or argue deductively from first principles. It tells the truth *narratively*, by drawing hearers into the unfolding drama of God's redemptive work. It evokes understanding through analogical imagination, emotional resonance, and lived participation. As Vanhoozer notes, "The Bible is less a textbook of timeless truths than a script for worship and witness" (Vanhoozer 2005). Truth is not diminished by being storied; it is more deeply apprehended. It enters not only the mind but the heart and body of the listener. Narrative preaching, therefore, does not reject reason but re-situates it within the broader context of covenantal fidelity, ecclesial embodiment, and doxological response.

6. The Practice of Preaching: From Propositional Monologue to Performative Witness

Traditional homiletical paradigms, particularly those shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, tended to emphasize propositional content, linear logic, and didactic monologue. These forms of preaching, aiming for rational persuasion and doctrinal precision, reflected the epistemological confidence of modernity (Long 2016). However, in the postmodern context, such approaches can appear reductionistic, disembodied, or epistemologically naïve. The cultural shift from certainty to suspicion, from universality to plurality, has and is transforming the homiletical landscape. Sermons that presume the neutrality of

language or the universality of logic often fail to resonate with audiences who are shaped by fragmented identities, interpretive multiplicity, and narrative hunger.

Responding to this shift, homileticians such as Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, and Anna Carter Florence have advanced inductive, narrative, and participatory models of preaching (Craddock 2001; Lowry 2001; Florence 2007). These models reject the one-directional monologue of traditional preaching in favor of sermonic forms that foreground tension, suspense, ambiguity, and emotional engagement. Rather than offering conclusions at the outset, these sermons invite the listener into a journey of discovery. Craddock's "inductive method," for instance, emphasizes a structure that mirrors the way people experience and process meaning through unfolding insight rather than deductive argument (Craddock 2001; Lowry 2001; Florence 2007). Florence, similarly, emphasizes the *performative* and *embodied* dimensions of preaching, insisting that preaching is not merely about what the text says, but about what it *does* in the lives of the preacher and the congregation (Florence 2007).

In this light, preaching is best understood as a performative act in the theological sense, not merely as theatrical performance, but as a sacramental event in which the Word becomes flesh anew in time and space. Drawing on speech-act theory and incarnational theology, Kevin Vanhoozer has argued that preaching is a "theo-dramatic performance" that both declares and enacts truth (Vanhoozer 2005). The preacher does not simply transmit a message; they embody it. The congruence between message and messenger becomes essential. As Richard Lischer notes, "The preacher is not only saying something but being someone before the people" (Lischer 2005). The preacher's ethos, marked by humility, vulnerability, and authenticity, becomes part of the sermon's persuasive force, particularly in a postmodern culture that distrusts abstraction but hungers for integrity.

In this ecclesial theatre, the preacher is not a lecturer delivering religious data but a witness bearing embodied testimony to the reality of the living God. The logic of the Incarnation demands this convergence of word and flesh. Preaching, then, is not only about proclaiming truth but enacting it in the life of the church. In the words of David J. Lose, "Preaching in a postmodern world means offering not answers, but space, space to experience God, space to question, space to respond" (Lose 2003, p. 94).

7. Homiletics as Incarnational Theology: Testimony and Embodiment

The doctrine of the Incarnation provides the quintessential model for contextual, embodied communication. Just as the eternal Logos entered human history in the flesh, communicating God's love and truth in culturally intelligible forms, so too must preaching translate theological truths into forms that resonate with specific cultural and existential contexts (Vanhoozer 2005). This is not a capitulation to relativism or cultural accommodation; rather, it affirms the missional logic of divine self-disclosure: God speaks in time, in space, and in flesh.

In this incarnational paradigm, the preacher functions as both a herald and a witness. Preaching becomes more than an oral delivery of doctrinal propositions; it is an embodied act of testimony, declaring not only what is true but *that* it is true *through lived experience*. When the preacher's life and message align, proclamation becomes sacramental, making visible the grace of God in human form (Lischer 2005). Anna Carter Florence highlights this performative dimension by portraying the preacher not as an authoritative expounder but as a *witness*, one who has seen and known the transformative power of the Word and now speaks from that encounter (Florence 2007). Testimony, therefore, serves as a hermeneutical bridge, enabling listeners to grasp biblical truth not only through cognitive understanding but also through relational resonance and narrative imagination.

This homiletical approach is especially compelling in postmodern contexts, where audiences often resist authoritative claims but are drawn to authenticity, story, and relational integrity. The biblical metanarrative, when embodied through personal testimony and narrative preaching, can still capture postmodern imaginations. As Brian J. Walsh observes, “A meta-narrative purpose/function is to address questions of ultimacy” (Walsh 2001). Films, novels, and popular culture often echo the structure of Scripture’s grand narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, revealing a profound human yearning for coherence and meaning.

Luke-Acts, in particular, offers an epistemologically and morally satisfying vision that speaks to postmodern concerns of marginalization, justice, and power. William J. Larkin contends that Luke’s portrayal of Jesus as a displaced, suffering servant, beginning life under imperial oppression (Luke 2:1–7) and ending as a victim of mob-driven injustice (Luke 23:13–25), provides a compelling vision for those alienated by dominant narratives (Larkin 1995). Acts continues this portrayal by depicting the early church as a marginalized and persecuted community that bears witness to a countercultural kingdom. Whether it is uncredentialed apostles defying the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:13) or Paul being mistaken for a radical and subjected to Roman interrogation (Acts 21:37–40; 22:24–25), the story presents the gospel as flourishing at the margins (Larkin 1995). This narrative holds immense promise for preaching in postmodern contexts where power, identity, and suffering remain urgent themes.

In such a landscape, homiletics must embrace the incarnational logic of the gospel. The preacher becomes both messenger and message, embodying the Word in weakness, authenticity, and Spirit-empowered presence. Preaching is thus a sacramental act that bridges divine truth and human story through testimony, suffering, and solidarity.

8. Postmodern Homiletics: Practical Implications and Theological Constraints

To preach effectively in a postmodern context, preachers must adopt a posture of theological humility, cultural fluency, and rhetorical creativity. Postmodernity’s suspicion of metanarratives and resistance to authoritative claims do not negate the need for proclamation; they call for reimagined forms of it. Several strategic practices arise as both theological responses and practical necessities:

- Framing sermons within the broader narrative arc of Scripture rather than presenting isolated propositions. This metanarrative orientation offers coherence in a fragmented world and reinforces the redemptive trajectory of God’s work in history (Bartholomew and Goheen 2014).
- Embracing ambiguity and mystery as theological virtues rather than epistemic deficiencies. Postmodern listeners resonate with complexity, paradox, and mystery—realities that Scripture itself affirms, particularly in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection (Vanhoozer 2005).
- Integrating personal and communal testimony to foster relational trust and embodied truth. Testimony does not replace Scripture but complements it as a lived demonstration of its truth (LaRue 2002).
- Prioritizing dialogical and participatory modes of preaching that invite listeners into the sermon event as co-interpreters rather than passive consumers (McClure 2001).
- Ensuring that contextual adaptation does not dilute doctrinal integrity or eclipse the Christocentric focus of the message. Cultural relevance must serve, not subvert, gospel fidelity (Keller 2015).

Such preaching must hold in tension the necessity of contextualization with the constancy of Christian orthodoxy. As Carl Trueman warns, “Contextualization without

confession becomes capitulation” (Trueman 2012). The preacher must resist the drift into relativism, therapeutic moralism, or reductionist appeals to felt needs. The authority of the sermon resides not in rhetorical prowess but in the ontological reality of God’s redemptive action in Jesus Christ, mediated through the Spirit and the Scriptures.

Postmodernism’s radical skepticism toward universal truth claims and its tendency to deconstruct stable meaning pose not just cultural or rhetorical challenges, but deeply theological ones, particularly for a faith rooted in the authority of Scripture, the objectivity of divine revelation, and the historical particularity of the incarnation. For instance, if all truth is viewed as socially constructed and language inherently unstable, then doctrines such as the exclusivity of Christ (John 14:6), the inerrancy of Scripture, or the historical resurrection risk being reduced to subjective interpretations rather than objective realities. Acknowledging these dangers more explicitly would clarify what is truly at stake when preaching in a postmodern context.

The homiletical strategies proposed, such as narrative preaching, relational authenticity, and imaginative engagement, are valuable, but their theological integrity depends on how well they uphold the non-negotiables of Christian orthodoxy. This is where the “theological constraints” of the gospel must be taken seriously. The preacher must avoid pandering to postmodern sensibilities in ways that dilute essential doctrines or relativize biblical authority. Instead, faithful preaching must carefully negotiate the tension: speaking in culturally resonant ways while remaining anchored in biblical truth.

A deeper dive into how these strategies explicitly guard against relativism while still offering a compelling invitation to postmodern listeners would strengthen the argument. For example, demonstrating how personal narrative or aesthetic imagination can point beyond subjectivity to objective, transcendent realities, thus subverting postmodern skepticism from within, would not only strengthen the theological grounding but also show that engagement with postmodernity need not equal capitulation to it.

9. Preaching the Grand Narrative in a Postmodern World: Context, Story, and Witness

The relationship between postmodernism and the Bible is complex, shaped by varying philosophical orientations and individual interpretations. In contrast, some postmodern thinkers challenge meta-narratives, while others open space for renewed theological engagement precisely because of their interest in story, experience, and plurality. Within this dynamic, preaching has not become obsolete; instead, it must be reformulated to engage the postmodern ethos in a meaningful way. The “Grand Narrative” of Scripture, God’s redemptive drama from creation to consummation, offers a compelling framework for reimagining preaching that speaks authentically to postmodern listeners.

First, preaching in a postmodern context must be deeply contextual. It must be attentive to the audience’s cultural, intellectual, and social framework. Walter Brueggemann insists that “preaching and liturgy must, therefore, be contextual, local, and pluralistic,” urging preachers to meet people where they are, amid the competing narratives of postmodern life (Brueggemann 1993). This requires exegetical fidelity not only to the biblical text but also to the cultural context in which that text is proclaimed. The Grand Narrative offers a coherent framework for engaging the fragmented sensibilities of postmodern hearers while affirming the theological unity and purpose of Scripture.

Second, postmodern audiences tend to favor narrative coherence over abstract propositions. The biblical story, encompassing creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, resonates with a generation that seeks meaning through story and metaphor. As Craig A. Loscalzo notes, “The preacher’s ideal role resides in meaning giving . . . preaching helps people to grasp the world theologically, to bring theological meaning and understanding to their

lives . . . it offers theological meaning to a culture that desperately seeks significance but does not know where to turn to find it" (Loscalzo 1992). Narrative preaching not only conveys truth but evokes imagination, allowing hearers to locate their own stories within the overarching drama of God's redemptive work.

Third, authenticity is a highly valued trait among postmodern individuals. They are less likely to be persuaded by abstract doctrine alone and more inclined to be moved by lived experience and existential integrity. Incorporating personal testimony, when done with theological care, can bridge the gap between ancient text and contemporary life. James W. Thompson affirms this, arguing that the preacher must "not only be able to address the issues of life theologically . . . but also be enablers of theological reflection by the individual members of the community" (Thompson 2001). Through testimony, the preacher embodies the gospel, making visible the transformative power of God's Word in concrete human experience.

Fourth, preaching in a postmodern world must become more dialogical and participatory. Rather than functioning as a one-way transmission of propositional truth, preaching can benefit from adopting a conversational tone, inviting questions, fostering interaction, and acknowledging mystery and doubt. Hugh Mackay rightly notes, "Only a pulpit that identifies with the milieu of the time will be heard over the babble of other voices demanding people's attention. . . identifying with the postmodern world does not mean *prima facie* acceptance or rejection of its values or worldview. Creating identification means taking the postmodern world seriously and addressing it from a collaborative rather than adversarial stance. A postmodern world demands a pulpit willing to be a viable conversation partner" (Mackay 1994). Dramaturgical preaching views the sermon not merely as a transmission of information but as a relational and participatory performance in which both preacher and congregation are actors in the unfolding drama of God's redemptive story. In the postmodern context, where suspicion toward authority and propositional certainty runs deep, this dramaturgical approach complements the need for dialogical, interactive preaching. Rather than standing above the congregation as a distant authority figure, the preacher steps into the shared space of meaning-making, inviting listeners to inhabit the biblical narrative and respond from within their own lived experience.

This approach aligns with Mackay's call for a pulpit that resonates with the prevailing social context of the time. A dramaturgical homiletic doesn't surrender theological conviction but enacts truth in a way that is embodied, relational, and open to dialogue. It allows space for mystery, tension, and even doubt, reflecting the contours of human life and inviting the congregation to engage in active interpretation and faithful performance of Scripture. This dialogical approach models humility, relationality, and mutual respect, traits highly valued in postmodern discourse.

Ultimately, postmodernism acknowledges the diversity and complexity of human experience, thereby allowing for multiple layers of meaning. The biblical Grand Narrative itself is not monolithic; it spans diverse genres, voices, and theological perspectives, all coalescing around God's redemptive mission. Preaching can honor this narrative depth by embracing paradox, tension, and theological mystery. Biblical faith affirms that life is both created by God and consummated by God. We need to take account of both the past and the future while refusing to absolutise the present. In fact, the present needs to be understood in the light of the past and the future; both modernity and postmodernism deny the biblical accounts of creation and consummation, making the present absolute (Brueggemann 1993). Preaching that holds together creation and consummation offers a hopeful alternative to the fragmentation of postmodern thought.

Ultimately, preaching in a postmodern context must present the enduring truth of the biblical Grand Narrative in a form that is culturally resonant, relationally authentic, and

theologically robust. Brueggemann further observes, “The preacher’s task is to supplant amnesia with memory and despair with hope while living in a covenantal present, giving us back our forfeited past and holding out a hopeful future. Preaching must then reshape the present in the light of the past and future to ‘imagine’ a self, a world, and a community in which greed, acquisitiveness, and idolatry no longer dominate our present, forming an evangelical grid of memory/covenant/hope” (Brueggemann 1993). Such preaching does not dilute the gospel but re-embodies it, evoking the power of the living Word through testimony, imagination, and incarnational presence. In doing so, the preacher becomes not simply a communicator of doctrine, but a witness to the redemptive reality of God at work in the world.

10. Conclusions

Postmodernism, far from rendering Christian preaching obsolete, has provoked a necessary and constructive reformation of homiletical theology and practice. Its epistemological critiques and cultural sensibilities have exposed the inadequacies of modernist assumptions that once undergirded much of Western preaching, namely, the supremacy of Cartesian rationalism, the reduction of truth to proposition, and the privileging of detached objectivity over embodied witness. Yet this very disruption has opened a fertile space for theological renewal. Rather than reacting defensively or capitulating to cultural skepticism, the preacher is called to retrieve the deepest resources of the Christian tradition and reimagine preaching as a form of storied, sacramental, and participatory witness.

At the heart of this homiletical reformation lies a recovery of Scripture’s intrinsic narrativity and the drama of redemption it proclaims. The Christian canon is not a random anthology of doctrines or moral imperatives, but a coherent, divinely inspired story stretching from creation to consummation, with Christ as its cruciform climax. In response to postmodernism’s suspicion of metanarratives, theologians such as N. T. Wright and Kevin Vanhoozer have emphasized the dramaturgical shape of Scripture, encouraging preachers not merely to explain the text but to perform it, inviting congregations into the redemptive narrative as active participants rather than passive spectators. This move from information to formation, from proclamation to performance, is not a loss of truth but a deepening of its relational and eschatological dimensions.

Simultaneously, the homiletical imagination must undergo an epistemological re-orientation. Foundationalist models of certainty must give way to covenantal, ecclesial, and doxological ways of knowing that reflect the lived nature of biblical revelation. As Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur have shown, human understanding is fundamentally storied; we know ourselves and our world through narrative coherence and symbolic resonance. Preaching, then, must not only assert theological truth but evoke it through metaphor, testimony, analogy, and shared imagination. This narrative epistemology aligns with the biblical logic of incarnation: just as the eternal Word took on flesh, so must the preached word become embodied, contextual, and relationally situated. The sermon becomes an event in which truth is not only proclaimed but encountered.

In this light, the role of the preacher is radically redefined. No longer a detached exegete dispensing doctrinal data, the preacher becomes a witness, one whose life, words, and presence testify to the transformative power of the gospel. This witness is performative in the theological sense: it is a sacramental act in which the Word becomes flesh again through the vulnerability, integrity, and Spirit-empowered voice of the preacher. As Anna Carter Florence has argued, preaching rooted in testimony does not undermine the authority of Scripture. Still, it recontextualizes it, showing how the ancient text continues to speak into the complexities of contemporary life.

Preaching to postmodern hearers, therefore, must be marked by humility and hospitality. It requires cultural fluency without theological compromise, rhetorical creativity without doctrinal dilution, and personal authenticity anchored in ecclesial identity. Such preaching engages ambiguity not as a threat to truth but as a space for faithful exploration. It invites listeners to see their fragmented stories re-narrated within the grand story of God, a story that speaks truthfully about suffering, justice, redemption, and hope.

In the end, the preacher is not simply a communicator of religious ideas but a theologically formed participant in God's redemptive action, a witness who embodies and enacts the story of Christ amid a world still longing for beauty, coherence, and truth. Postmodernism does not demand the end of preaching; it requires its deepening. It calls for sermons that are not only heard but lived, sermons that point beyond themselves to the living Word who still speaks, still heals, and still saves.

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