Christ-Centered Preaching in the Postmodern World: Problems, Challenges, and Suggestions

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The apostle Paul's admonition to the early Christians to "understand the present times" in which they lived (Rom 13:11) is sensible advise for us today. In one way or another, either as observers or participants, every Christian relates with the *Zeitgeist*. Consciously or unconsciously, believers exist within the bounds of the temporal dominant ethos and are implicated in its moods. It may be granted that the current encompassing worldview is discussed only in the academia, with the rest of the world seemingly oblivious about it, but this does not imply that its tentacles are confined within library books and scholarly journals. In fact, it pervades every aspect of human interaction. Our children's education, our economic immersion, our socio-political opportunities, our psycho-neurological inputs and outputs, and even our entertainment options are prejudiced by such an overarching metatrend called postmodernism.

Even the Church's mission and ministry are not invulnerable to the sphere of postmodernity's influence. The evidence lies in the superabundance of publications dealing with several aspects of the Christian ministry in the twenty-first century. One such ministry is preaching. It is particularly important that the challenge is addressed, particularly for those who are the descendants of the Protestant reformers who emphasized the centrality of the Word in communal worship. Preaching is a liturgical given. The liturgy anticipates the Word and is incomplete without it. For Evangelicals, this liturgical Word-centrism is inseparable from an equally important Christocentricism. This is why the title of the paper is apt. This essay is not only concerned with proclamation; it is interested in the proclamation whose Subject-Object is the person and work of Jesus Christ, our Lord. So the question is: what challenges does postmodernity bequeath to our Christ-centered preaching today?

The Challenge of Postmodernity

Postmodernism is not a geographically-defined culture, or a unified worldview or ideology. Rather, it is primarily a new epoch that replaced the modern era.[1] Hence, it is *post*modernity. Modernity's ideologies, which dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are rendered archaic, and are succeeded by new axioms. According to Thomas C. Oden, it "is not that modernity is corrupt, but that it is defunct, obsolete, passé, antiquated."[2] Although Oden might be right that modernity's absolutizing claims are now replaced by amiable leniency, his totalizing judgment that modernity is "already dead" is not entirely accurate. As shall be extricated here, some features of postmodernity are discernibly only as a hyperextension of some of modernity's fundamental principles.

Just as the modern era had several dogmas, postmodernity also has its own set of creeds. Here, however, only three important postmodern maxims are elaborated, as they represent the greatest challenge to the church's Christ-centered preaching. First, postmodernity is characterized by an inherent suspicion of any claim for objective or true knowledge, leading to what J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh call "radical perspectivism."[3] Because objective truth is thought to be beyond discovery, knowledge of things are ultimately a product of the knower's own devises. Nominalistic methodology and positivistic epistemology are replaced by a neo-agnosticism that espouses an essence-less reality. Heideggerian correspondence theory becomes an inapplicable epistemology because the thing signified is inaccessible. Ultimately, all that is left are arbitrary signs with no ontological referent. To attempt to know the ontology of a reality is considered both an unachievable cause and a violent project against it. Jacques Derrida's destruction of "ontotheology,"[4] coupled with his "metaphysics of presence" and Michael Foucault's warning about the violence of naming,[5] have virtually won the debate. Postmoderns have given up on the modern quest for objective knowl-

1. David S. Dockery, "The Challenge of Postmodernism," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 13.

2. Thomas C. Oden, "The Death of Modernity and Postmodern Evangelical Spirituality," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 21.

3. Middleton and Walsh, Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 31.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 50.

5. Michael Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 133.

edge of the *is*, arguing instead that the is-presentation of one is as valid as the is-interpretation of another.

Secondly, building on an agnostic ontology and a pessimistic historicism, postmoderns also exude a blatant rejection of metanarratives and all forms of centricity. As Jean-Francois Lyotard famously stated, "Simplifying in the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."[6] This should not come as a surprise. If reality and real history are ultimately unknowable, then legitimizing a single story is unacceptable and elevating it as the overarching narrative is even more chimerical. Grounded in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's argument that there is a "broad ugly ditch" between the past and the present (history), the signified and the sign (ontology), meaning and language (linguistics), it is natural that "accidental truths" can never become metanarratives that can encompass the experience of all people. Indeed, as John Milbank succinctly summarizes, the postmodern situation is "the obliteration of boundaries, the confusion of categories... There are no longer any clear centers of control, and this means that new weight is given to plurality and the proliferation of difference. However, none of these differences ever assume the status of a distinct essence: rather they are temporary events, destined to vanish and be displaced."[7] Thus, the postmodern culture, Kurt A. Richardson adds, "will likely prove to be a silver-aged formlessness between forms... it is axiomatically incompatible with maturity, permanence, and any aspiration toward *monumentality.*"[8]

Milbank's and Richardson's analyses insinuate a third postmodern axiom: pluralism. As Terry Eagleton remarked: "We are now in the process of wakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into a laid-back pluralism of the postmodern."[9] "Relativism of religious pluralism," Michael Pocock writes, "is such a hallmark of postmodern thinking and culture."[10] Relativization of

6. Jean-Fancois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

7. John Milbank, "The Gospel of Affinity," in *The Strange New World of the Gospel: Re–evangelizing in the Postmodern World*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 1.

8. Kurt A. Richardson, "Disorientations in Christian Belief: The Problem of De–traditionalization in the Postmodern Context," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 53.

9. Terry Eagleton, "Awakening from Modernity," *Times Literary Supplement,* February 20, 1987; cited in Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be,* 37.

10. Michael Pocock, "Christ Centered Epistemology: An Alternative of

truth is the predictable progeny of the partnership between ontological agnosticism and a centerless universe. Since real reality is inaccessible and all that remains are mere interpretations and stories, it becomes a necessity to accept all truth claims as equally valid. Toleration must be insisted because none can claim to be true anyway. Nicholas Rescher offers a very pointed definition: pluralism is "the doctrine that any substantial question admits of a variety of plausible but mutually conflicting responses."[11] This mental climate, which Richard Livingstone calls "the Age without Standards," inevitably facilitates confusion of thought, especially of religious belief.[12]

The Shapings of Christ

So the problem is how Christ-centered preaching be maintained in the context of ontological agnosticism, narrative decentering, and pluralism. The postmodern preacher, in grappling with this dilemma, wants both to remain Christ-centered and appealing to postmodern audiences. Unfortunately, the usual approach to answering the question is to begin with uncritically accepting the doctrines of postmodernity as true before attempting to construct a Christological argument. Soon, however, "methodological assumptions" became "an ideological judgement."[13] The consequence is that postmodern axioms become the Procustean bed with which Christ-speech is fashioned. Discernibly, the real challenge is not located in the *act* or *method* of preaching.[14] It is the *content* of preaching—Jesus Christ himself—that becomes compromised. The tendency is to fashion a Christ that appeals to postmoderns, so that, in doing so, Christ-centeredness is supposedly upheld. Marc Cortez is right: the category "Christocentric" is ambiguous. The problem is that anyone who has a Christological element in whatever one proclaims and does could claim to be Christocentric.[15] This is why Bruce McCormack's distinction

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to Modern and Postmodern Epistemologies," in *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions*, ed. Mike Barnett and Michael Pocock (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005), 94.

11. Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 79.

12. R. J. McCracken, "Let the Preacher Preach the Word," *Theology Today* 2 (1945): 78.

13. Edgar V. McKnight, Jesus Christ Today: The Historical Shaping of Jesus for the Twenty-First Century (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009), viii.

14. Rick Gosnell argues that inductive preaching will be more appealing than deductive preaching to postmoderns, in "Proclamation and the Postmodernists," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. D. S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 374-86.

15. Cortez, "What Does it Mean to Call Barth a 'Christocentric'

between *formal* and *material* Christocentricity is important.[16] This means that although many preachers may place Christology at the center of their preaching at the *formal* level, the *material* content of their specific Christologies may vary from each other. The issue, thus, is: "Who is the Christ placed at the center?" Following McCormack, at the formal level, the academia may be truly Christ-centered. In fact, the multiplication of Christs today may be an evidence of the prodigious devotion to Christ and missions. There is no shortage of Christs in the world. A quick Google Image search offers an array of different Christs: Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Black, Caucasian, Buddhist, and so on. But a theological introspection needs to be done to determine whether these Christs are the Christ of the gospels. Sadly, the response is mostly negative.

The fashioning of many Christs is an easy maneuver. Because the essence of reality is perceived to be ultimately unknowable, everything said about something are nothing but poor interpretative glimpses. Guided by religious egalitarianism and claim for intellectual freedom, different glimpses are equally treated as valid. Because the assumption is that no one knows who Christ truly is, everyone can nonchalantly fashion a Christ. Since nobody has privileged access to Jesus Christ as a historical and personal entity, all expressions must be true and untrue simultaneously. For postmoderns, Jonathan Culler declares, "truth is either meaningless or arbitrary."[17] Here is the dialectical satire of the situation: on the one hand, although these Christ expressions are empty of ontological essence, they still deserve attention; on the other hand, because these Christ expressions are empty of ontological essence, they do not deserve attention. It is here that the ironic tension between *individualism* and *conformity* is unmistakable. Individualism is exemplified in that every interpreter is a hero, who himself is the criterion for interpretation. It is the celebration of the *homo autonomous,* humanity as law (*nomos*) to himself (*autos*), leading to *anomy,* the state of loss of any secure sense of a meaningful order.[18] No wonder that Kenneth J. Gergen argues that postmodernity is characterized by "macho masturbation" which celebrates a "self-serving autonomy."[19] Conformity, on the other hand, is exemplified in that everyone agrees to the consensus that there is no consensus.

Theologian?" *SJT* 60 (2007): 128.

16. McCormack, Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 453-54.

17. Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism for Structuralism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 22.

18. Middleton and Walsh, Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be, 36, 48.

19. Kenneth J. Gergen, The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 195.

Moreover, since metanarratives are implicated as inherently violent, the postmodern solution is to abandon the Jesus of Nazareth in order to make room for the Christs of local histories and cultures. For preachers, especially those with strong sense of cultural and nationalistic belongingness, the tendency is to fashion ethnic Christs. The Christ of the Bible, usually and unfairly equated as the Western Christ, is judged as irrelevant. A new Christ, especially designed for a specific culture, is necessary for the salvation of a specific nationality. Contemporary Christ-fashioning varies from culture to culture, but in some instances, these new Christs are absurdly exaggerated. Japan, for instance, has the ominous Shoko Asahara, founder of the Aum Shinrikyo, who thought that he was the Christ of Japan.[20] England has a Jesus whose ancestors are Druids. China has the "eastern lightning" Yang Xiangbin. Korea has Myungseok Jung and Sun Myung Moon. In the Philippines, there are quite a few new self-proclaimed Christs. In all of these instances, they are Christs who preach about themselves! Milder forms of agenda-based postmodern Christ-preaching are as problematic as the culture-grounded ones. To name a few, prosperity preachers preach a Santa Christ, faith healers preach a Herodic Christ (Luke 23:8), and Christian philosophers preach a Socratic Christ. These are certainly not the Christ-centered preaching the world needs today.

Missional shapings of Christ can take at least two forms: weak and strong. In its weak form, a specific character of Christ is underscored in order to address a specific context. The servanthood and suffering of Christ, for instance, seem to be palatable to suffering Filipinos. *Christus victor* is appealing to Africans, whose struggles are against shamans and spirit warriors. Ultimately, this approach still maintains the person of Christ. It sees no need to craft a new Christ identity and Christ is not emptied of his gospel identity. Therefore, it remains within the bounds of orthodoxy and is still respectably acceptable. The strong form, however, fashions a completely new identity that is quite distinct from the Christ of the gospels. The name "Christ" is emptied of ontological content and only becomes a name for a completely different entity. For instance, a local adaptation and reinterpretation of Christ in Japan narrates a unique history. According to the local legend, after growing up in Galilee, Jesus visited Japan before his public ministry started in Palestine. At the age of thirty-three, after encountering opposition from Jewish leaders, he returned to Japan and began preaching the coming

20. Harold Netland, "Mission and Jesus in a Globalizing World: Globalization and the Pluralistic Jesus," in *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions*, ed. M. Barnett and M. Pocock (EMS 12; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 137.

of the heavenly kingdom, which is Japan. Jesus's brother, Isukiri, was crucified in Jesus's place on the cross. Jesus died at the age of 106 and his tomb in found in northern Japan.[21]

Ironically, in these approaches, in the hope to make the name "Christ" the center of mission and proclamation, Jesus Christ is de-centered. The result, intended or not, is primarily that of *replacement*. In short, the existing metanarrative has to be replaced by another narrative. Ultimately, there is also a power issue involved here, somewhat similar to something like the Marxist rise of the proletariat against the existing dominant powers. Foucault discerned that power is found in centrism and "is employed and exercised through net-like organization."[22] The prescription therefore is that every centrism and everything that bears traces of homogeneity must be expelled. José Míguez Bonino describes this trend to autonomous pluralism as "partisanship," or the "opting for one side, radical opposition to the existing system."[23] The promotion of a new agenda, thus, includes a disturbing bashing of existing dominant structures and principles. In order to assert authority and dominance, rigorous fault-findings in existing powers transpire, with the eventual aim to anathemize and supplant. In Christianity, in order to exalt culturally-imagined Christs, the other dominant Christ had to be critiqued. In the hope of placing Christ at the center, he is actually marginalized. In the hope of being pro Christ, one actually becomes *contra Iesus Christos.* More than often realized, calls for contextualization and indigenization, especially when they are geared towards *transformation* instead of mere *translation,* can be baits "to move us in the direction of a more pluralistic, even relativistic, understanding of the gospel."[24] Sadly, as Harold Netland asserts, "religious pluralism makes room for Jesus, just not the Jesus of orthodox Christianity."[25]

The consumeristic culture is also a variable in the equation. Because the postmodern culture is "a smorgasbord of realities,"[26] people are turned into consumers. Unfortunately, religious belief is not exempt from this. As Peter Berger anticipated, even belief is now commodi-

21. Netland, "Mission and Jesus in a Globalizing World," 134-35.
22. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 89.
23. José Míguez Bonino, "Reflections on the Church's Authoritative Teachings on Social Questions," in *What Should Methodists Teach?*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood, 1990), 67.
24. Richard Mouw, "Preaching Christ or Packaging Jesus?" *Christianity Today*, Feb 11, 1991, 29-30. The categories of *translation* and *transformation* as two approaches to contemporizing are explained by Millard Erickson in *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 122-29.
25. Netland, "Mission and Jesus in a Globalizing World," 132.
26. Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be,* 43.

fied: "The religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be marketed. It must be 'sold' to a clientele that is no longer constrained to 'buy'. The pluralist situation is, above all, a *market situation.* In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities."[27] And in order to market one's product, "one must modify certain features of the institution or its message because otherwise one will not be able to reach this or that recalcitrant clientele."[28] Ironically, this predicament is a product of globalization. Instead of producing a common sense of belongingness, globalization elicited competition for recognition and dominance. The reason is explained by William T. Cavanaugh: "The compression of space in the 'global village' has not only exacerbated but produced insecurity and conflict in the late twentieth century, since global mapping brings diverse localities into competition with one another." Competition, he added, "produces an apparent attachment to the local," because "diverse places must emphasize what is unique and advantageous to their location."[29] "Global deculturalization incites local reculturalization."[30] Hijacked by nationalism and parochialism, "romantic folklorists"[31] have surfaced to create a plethora of unprecedented new Christ forms and expressions for marketing purposes. Kevin Vanhoozer calls this the many's "theological ethnification,"[32] that frighteningly "produces fragmented subjects incapable of telling a genuinely catholic story."[33]

The root of the quandary, already insinuated above, is the uncritical acceptance of postmodern axioms and making these the assumptions through which a Christological apologetics is constructed. Netland

27. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 138.

28. Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 27

29. William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T&T Clark), 107–8.

30. William J. Larkin, "The Relevance of Jesus as the Source of Salvation and Mission for the Twenty-first Century Global Context," in *The Centrality of Christ in Contemporary Missions,* ed. M. Barnett and M. Pocock (EMS 12; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 110. Globalization led people to turn to the ancient religions of local cultures.

31. Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 100.

32. Vanhoozer, "'One Rule to Rule Them All?': Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity," in *Globalizing Theology: Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 104.

33. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination,* 98.

is right: "To the extent that the values and assumptions of pluralism shape the contexts within which Christian missions occur, the orthodox teaching on the person of Jesus Christ will be resisted, being perceived as implausible."[34] The supposed "dialogue" between postmodernity and Christianity actually becomes one-sided, because one dictates the criteria of formulation to the other. This *aggiornamento*, which Peter Berger sees as the *via media* between assimilation and defiance, involves a bargaining process where there is a sort of "mutual cognitive contamination."[35] But the critical question is: "Who is the stronger party?" As Berger concludes, "the theologian who trades ideas with the modern world… is likely to come out with a poor bargain, that is, he will probably have to give far more than he will get."[36] The problem, thus, is that in the dialogue between postmodernity and Christ, it is Christianity that is mostly contaminated. It is Christianity which seems to have given up a lot of its previous commitments in order to gain very little (or nothing!). The devilry of the situation is this: "The theologian who sups with *it* [for our purposes, postmodernity] will find his spoon getting shorter and shorter—until that last supper in which he is left alone at the table, with no spoon at all and with an empty plate. The devil, one may guess, will by then have gone away to more interesting company."[37]

Worse still, Christian pluralists have forgotten that Jesus Christ is a person, not a proposition or a concept. Bargaining processes in dialogues can proceed without much complication as long as the subjects under deliberation are ideas and ideologies. The current Christological conundrum with postmodernity is unique in that the subject of inquiry is a person, whose identity and ontology cannot be altered without doing violence and injustice to the person. In fact, the deconstruction and reconstruction of a personal identity not only violates the re-shaped person, but also deceives the audience, for in reality, the presented person is neither genuine nor truly existent. John Hick may have discerned this, which is why instead of attempting to deconstruct Jesus Christ directly, he proposed a theocentricism that consequently enabled him to re-interpret a general "God" using particular religious figures.[38] At least, Hick realized that Jesus Christ is a unique person, whose being is unalterable. McKnight is right: "The creative movement toward Jesus today may be seen as 'cheating' or as a 'twisting' of the tradition, or a

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34. Netland, "Mission and Jesus in a Globalizing World," 146.
35. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 26-27.
36. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 27.
37. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 28.
38. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).

'confiscation' of the tradition… Jesus today cannot be assigned just any identity."[39]

In *Jesus Christ Today*, Edgar V. McKnight argues that the shaping of Jesus Christ to make him palatable is not unique to the postmodern era.[40] McKnight's presentation is not comprehensive, as he begins to narrate the historical shaping of Christ in the *Leben-Jesu Forschung* movement of the nineteenth century, but his thesis is clear: the modern theological era was also characterized by attempts to mold Christ using modern Procrustean beds. Like the postmodern era, Alasdair I. C. Heron comments that modernity produced "a quite bewildering variety of 'reconstructions' of Jesus' personality and history, having for the most part only one thing in common—the conviction that whatever the truth about him might be, it was not the traditional Christian picture of him."[41] The difference might be that in the modern era, the identity of Jesus Christ was attacked by skeptic positivism and objectivistic nominalism; today, the identity of Jesus Christ is attacked by agnostic pluralism. Although the starting points are different, the assumptions are the same. Like their modernist ancestors, academics today have uncritically accepted the presuppositions of postmodernity that the Jesus of the gospels is irrelevant and unpalatable to the residents of the current *Zeitgeist* until creative Christological modifications are done using the very methods and apparatuses of the recipient culture.

McKnight's study is fascinating, because it reveals that postmodern theologians have not only failed to learn the errors of modernity, but are actually duplicating them. The church is still adapting its message to the existing *Zeitgeist* in order to justify its faith before existing tribunals, with the disastrous consequence that its message is reduced to nothing more than a reflection of contemporary society's own ideologies.[42] Rudolf Bultmann's abandonment of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, in favor of an existential and exemplar Christ is, in intention and effect,

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39. McKnight, *Jesus Christ Today*, 39. McKnight, however, adds that Jesus "is capable of being what we most need in our new epoch." As such, "Instead of seeing the different shapings of Jesus Christ in history as progressive falsifications of the original figure of Jesus, we may see the process as one enabling us to define in a more satisfactory way the identity of Jesus. Instead of distorting the identity of Jesus, the identity of Jesus is made more complete and compelling" (p. 35). A scholar who thinks that deconstruction is beneficial to postmodern preaching is Phil Snider in *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012).

40. McKnight, J*esus Christ Today*.

41. Alisdair I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Thought* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1985), 19.

42. McCracken, "Let the Preacher Preach the Word," 82.

not dissimilar to the arguments of Roger Haight's imaginative reframing of Christ in the light of contemporary cosmological and spatio-temporal insights. The contextualizing efforts of Western modern theologians, epitomized by deism, are being replicated by non-Western postmodern theologians in shaping a Christ who is hoped to be relevant to non-Western cultures. When one looks at Christianity in Europe today, however, one can conclude that the modern contextualizing efforts have indubitably backfired. Instead of Christianity making an appeal, Christianity is in decline. The achievement is far from the intended result. For Berger, this outcome is not surprising. Berger's warning needs to be heard today:

> A secularized Christianity has to go to considerable exertion to demonstrate that the religious label, as modified in conformity with the spirit of the age, has anything special to offer. Why should one buy psychotherapy or racial liberalism in a "Christian" package, when the same commodities are available under purely secular and for that very reason even more modernistic labels? The preference for the former will probably be limited to people with sentimental nostalgia for traditional symbols, a group that, *under the influence of the secularizing theologian*, is steadily dwindling… In other words, the theological surrender… represents the self-liquidation of theology and of the institutions in which the theological tradition is embodied.[43]

Ways Forward

The current situation calls for a responsible Christology in our preaching and proclamation. The evidences suggest that Christian theologians criticize the very Gospel that saved them, and substitute it with a gospel that did not lead them to Christ. Many have lost faith and have become skeptic about the very gospel that they received from others (many Asian Christians heard the Gospel from Western missionaries). In the name of intellectual freedom and freedom of expression, they promote their own Christological views and feel no responsibility whatsoever to a grand narrative, a theological compass, or to the Christian tradition. Admittedly, there might be coteries of academics to whom something like a "Buddhist Christ" has an appeal, but a flag with this inscription is unlikely to be taken up by the majority of Christian believers.

Secondly, theologians and preachers cannot acquiesce to the radical creativity of postmodernism. Today, there seems to be an open willingness to accept revisionist Christologies without historical support, portrayed most vividly by the phenomenal success of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci*

43. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 25-26.

Code. But in relation to the person of Christ, the goal must be unoriginality. This was what Paul wrote to the Galatians: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!" (1:8–9, NRSV). Paul's repetition in the passage is intentional, because it is an important warning. In relation to persons, particularly Jesus Christ, unoriginality and reiteration are more valuable than creative innovations. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Heb 13:8). Creative imaginations, no matter how ingenious, need to be controlled. As Richard Hart asserts, "imagination can be the best torturer," so preachers have to guard against "aimless wandering."[44] In the first place, the goal of Christ proclamation is not intellectual amusement, but personal encounter and reconciliation (John 12:21).[45] Anything new must be treated with extreme prejudice and suspicion, and must be examined in the light of the Scriptures as interpreted by two thousand years of Christian tradition.

Thirdly, the relationship between the historical Christ and the subjective Christ must be revisited. After the rise of historiography and historicism in the modern era, emphasis was given to the historical Christ at the expense of the Christ of faith (or theological Christ). In fact, the Christ of history and the Christ of interpretation were so bifurcated that even theologians fell prey to abandoning the Christ as revealed by the Church. Today, however, the pendulum has shifted to the other side. The Christ of history is overshadowed by the many Christs of interpretation. Of course, this is a consequence of an essence-less ontology and suspicion of history prevalent in postmodernity. The authority of the facts of history is replaced by the authority of the knowing subject. Personal impressions and feelings become criteria of truth. With this comes the rise of multi-cultural Christs. The historical particularity of Jesus Christ of Nazareth is altogether dismissed. While trying to relocate and give Christ a place in world religions, he is also ironically uprooted from his Jewish political and religious backgrounds. In fact, the particularity of Jesus is treated as scandalous to cultures and gender and as a hindrance to effective missions. These prejudices must be overcome. Furthermore, the historicity of Christ must be recovered, using the example of the

44. Richard Hart, "Creative Preaching: Walk with Imagination in the Footsteps of Jesus," *The Priest*, September 2012, 89.

45. McCracken, "Let the Preacher Preach the Word," 87. See also Glenn Nielsen, "Preaching Doctrine in a Postmodern Age," *Concordia Journal* 27 (2001): 20-23, 29.

early church, when orthodox Christianity emerged out of competing theologies.

Finally, postmodern Christians must capitalize on postmodernity's emphasis on community, but establish the primacy of the Church in the process. The Church is the primary community to which Christ belongs. As Lovell Cocks writes, "The preacher is not in the first place an artist, an individualist expressing truth through the medium of personality, but the spokesman of the Church's witness. He does not enter the pulpit to air his own views on religion, however original or striking, or to lay bare his soul in poetic abandon…. His own faith gives him part in the company of witness…. Here runs the true line of apostolic succession, in a witness that is at once the verdict of an individual man and the rolling 'Amen' of the Christian centuries."[46] Theologians seem to have forgotten that cultural interpretations are not the last word. The community responsible for validating interpretations is the Church, not cultures or nations.

Conclusions

Today, as in the modern era, there is a strong insistence on the *effectiveness* of communication at the expense of the *content* of the communication.[47] The Christ of the gospels is a unique historical person whose identity is unrepeatable and inviolable. Christ is one, not a Legion. Christ-centered preaching whose Christ is not the man who was born at Nazareth, crucified, died, buried and rose on the third day, is a distortion of what it means to be Christ-centered. Like the modern era, as Netland asserts, what is desperately needed is a "retrieval—that is, overcoming the effects of distorted perspectives on Jesus and enabling people to encounter the biblical Jesus, accepting him rather than other alternatives"[48] Especially as Asians, the temptation of reducing Jesus to merely one among many great religious leaders and domesticating him to Asian contexts, just so he is given a home within the existing

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46. Lovell Cocks, *By Faith Alone,* 111; quoted in R. J. McCracken, "Let the Preacher Preach the Word," 83.

47. On the history of changes in rhetorical focus and style in preaching, see Rick Garner, "The Rhetoric of W. A. Criswell: Implications for Preaching in the Postmodern Era," *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (2003): 71-82; and Ted A. Smith, "Theological History, Practical Reason, and the Demands of Preaching Today," *Homiletic* 37 (2012): 16-27. Smith's article argues for a Christological understanding of the relationship between the theological and empirical perspectives in preaching.

48. Harold Netland, "Mission and Jesus in a Globalizing World," 123.

religious frameworks, must be avoided.[49] Biblical preaching in the post-modern era does not need to borrow methods and approaches from the postmodern library.[50] Instead of uncritically succumbing to postmodern canons, as Ronald Allen says, "our work and the witness of the church will be enhanced if we subject postmodernity itself to the hermeneutic of deconstruction."[51] It is time, Craig A. Loscalzo asserts, to apologize for God: "Apologizing for God means *apologizing* for God, not *making apologies* for God. In other words, it means making a case for the gospel in all of its scandalous reality. Apologizing for God means rightfully reclaiming the apologetic role of the pulpit for the cause of Christian faith."[52] If context is important in preaching, then the most important context to consider is the dialectical tension between God's grace and humanity's predicament, with Jesus Christ at the center.[53]

Postmodernity boasts that all groups have the right to speak for themselves, with their voices considered authentic and valid. This means that Christians can now unashamedly speak from a distinct biblical-Christian perspective, without the need to be authenticated by extra-Christian structures and paradigms.[54] The postmodern world has finally turned its ears on Christians as equal correspondents, but its residents are hearing a Babelian community of competing and diverse messages. What the Church needs to do is to proclaim the one and irreplaceable Jesus the Nazarene (Matt 2:23) in her Christ-centered preaching. The primary task toward this is to make the Bible the supreme authority

49. Netland, "Mission and Jesus in a Globalizing World," 124.

50. Robert Kysar and Joseph M. Webb disagrees in *Preaching to Postmoderns: New Perspectives for Proclaiming the Message* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006). If there is a postmodern strand that preachers and theologians can benefit from, it would be the postliberalism advocated by George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas, which argues that Christian reflection and proclamation should not be measured against criteria inherently external to the field. For examples of preaching found in the Bible, see Harold Wells, "Why Do We Preach? A Brief Theology of Preaching the Word of God," *Touchstone* 32 (2014): 4-11.

51. Ronald J. Allen, "As the Worldviews Turn: Six Key Issues for Preaching in a Postmodern Ethos," *Encounter* 57 (1996): 35.

52. Craig A. Loscalzo, "Apologizing for God: Apologetic Preaching to a Postmodern World," *Review and Expositor* 93 (1996): 413.

53. See Gabriel C. Rochell's discussion of Forsyth's preaching ideologies in "Apophatic Preaching and the Postmodern Mind," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 50 (2006): 397-401, 418-19. On specific guidelines on preaching should be done today, see Jeff Crittendon, "Three Goals for Preaching in Our Context," *Touchstone* 32 (2014): 40-45; and Richard Rehfeldt, "Preaching to Shape Congregational Identity," *Word and World* 34 (2014): 206-14.

54. Jim Kitchens, *The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era* (Herndon, VA: Alban, 2003), 11-14.

in both proclamation and theology. Cultural commitments, although important, can become incipient biases that dominate both the procedure and product of reflection and proclamation. The postmodern orientation to be technique-centered in communication and delivery should be honored without having to surrender the content - or the Who - of proclamation as revealed in biblical revelation. Every Christ-preaching, no matter how intellectually amusing and stimulating, should be evaluated using the basic questions: "Who is the preached Christ? Is he the Christ of Nazareth?" Christ-preaching that fails to pass this test is simply not gospel-preaching.