

A Book Review (Reaction Paper):
Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World

I. SUMMARY

Craig A. Loscalzo's book, Apologetic Preaching: Proclaiming Christ to a Postmodern World, grapples with the immense difficulties of proclaiming God's truth to an age that doesn't seem to care, doesn't believe in absolutes, and is self-centered to the core. For this, the author is to be commended because it is a question that must be addressed. The back cover states the theme and direction of the author, as the editors proclaim, "How can we preach when traditional approaches don't work?" The author attempts to answer that question (one that tends to betray much of the author's negative presuppositions regarding the sufficiency of the Scriptures), in a short book that deals with people today, people who are glutted with information, burdened by doubts, relativistic to the core, and think in a way that is different than their previous generations.

II. ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

1. Strengths and Weaknesses.

There is truth to be gleaned in this book, if you look closely and hard and enough. One example is when the author rightly declares, "We must offer Jesus Christ as the unique – one and only – ultimate source and goal of meaning" (p. 37). He couldn't be more right and this truth is often assaulted today, even from within evangelical circles.

I also loved it when he said, "We have become so hyper cautious that our sermons at best offend no one and at worst merely bore. We fear being irrelevant, so our sermons become

mundane chatter about raising self-actualized children or coping with the latest midlife crisis or providing five easy steps for managing anxiety” (p. 12). This is spot on, but then, he goes about for the rest of the book to deny this very truth that he so boldly proclaims. Loscalzo fears to preach God’s Word, because it may mean that the postmodern unbelievers will not listen. I though the church gathered to be edified and then split up to herald the Word of God and the Lord’s good news?

The area of my strongest disagreement lies with Loscalzo’s view of the authority and sufficiency of God’s Word. I am certain that he would theologically subscribe to these, but by his methodology he denies them. Furthermore, and because of this, he completely misses the mark, and ends up giving the Word of God a crutch so that it may stand in days like these. He says, “Likewise, we must consider the postmodern idiom if our preaching is to gain a hearing... This pulpit philosophy, saturated with rationalism, focused on factual knowledge as the sole medium for communicating religious truth... For modern pulpits, faith often became unwittingly a synonym for rationalism” (p. 21). Is biblical faith rational?

I also disagree with his promotion of the inductive (versus deductive) preaching approach. He flatly says, “The homiletic method I propose, without being dogmatic about methodology, is based on induction rather than deduction” (p. 39) and then picks the perfect “Bible” for such an delivery (“Eugene Petersen’ *The Message* is a wonderful contemporary translation to use” (p. 133)). How does one inductively preach Romans, Jude, or any epistle for that matter?

2. How is the Author’s Approach to Preaching Similar or Different from My Heritage and Conviction (theologically, hermeneutically, and stylistically).

Since the author does not engage in expository preaching (at least based on the sample sermons at the end of the chapters), we could not be farther apart in every area. I believe this stems from his man-centered approach that is so popular and it fits right into the modern pulpit and church. This is a logical extension for those absorb with the “seeker sensitive” movement and put exegeting the audience on the same plain as exegeting God’s Word.

My approach is overtly objective when it comes to preaching, but the author is 180 degrees from where I am, as evidenced when he said, “I suggest that the argumentative approach, often used in nineteenth-century pulpits, will seldom yield effective results today... I propose a narrative or story-based apologetic as the homiletic model. Postmodernism responds better to subjectivity than to objectivity... longing for participation in each other’s story should be a hint to preachers about the homiletic method that will most effectively communicate the gospel to postmodern hearers” (p. 39). I stand convinced that God’s Word, faithfully and boldly proclaimed, can cut through the callousness of all its hearers, from postmodern to post-post modern and beyond.

To counter the author when he says, “Thus I am proposing that apologetic preaching to postmodern listeners be sensitive to their appreciation of stories and take seriously their desire to be led to – rather than bombarded with – theological truth” (p. 40), I would like to offer an alternative. I am proposing that apologetic preaching to postmodern listeners be sensitive to God’s revelation about how He wants His Word preached, and to take seriously their calling and mandate to be led by the Spirit to do so – rather than bombard themselves with their own pitiful paradigms that minimize the effectiveness of the Word of God.

3. This Book’s Vital Contribution to the Rationale of My Ministry.

As I said in another review, this book strikes a chord in me, namely, to keep preaching the Bible verse by verse, sequentially, and trusting that the Lord of the Word will do His work in the His sheep. If the goats attend, then God can pierce their hearts as well (see 1 Cor 14:23-25). My professors at TMS and SBTS have taught me well, and consequently, my goal is faithfulness rather than what Loscalzo promotes, which he states as, “My goal is to show postmodern listeners that I am aware of valid objections they raise to the way Christians have treated others in history. This creates a level of authenticity and credibility for skeptical ears” (p. 57). I believe the Bible needs no defense and furthermore, I am not sure he even believes what he says because immediately after he makes this statement, he then includes a sermon that he preached, which for all intents and purposes, is devoid of the Bible (“On Eagle’s Wings”, from Isaiah 40:28-31; Luke 6:18-23; pg. 63 ff.). What an indictment. I would rather preach for God’s glory and get no response, similar to the ministry given to Jeremiah, than be concerned with attracting unbelievers and not glorifying the Lord in the process. The preacher’s goal has nothing remotely close to the author’s statement, namely, “Gaining such a hearing is the ultimate goal of apologetic preaching” (p. 78).

His appeals for this are not even based on the Bible. He even says, “Based on my own preaching experience more than on a widespread study, I suggest that postmodern people will have to be convinced differently. They do not assume the major premises of Christian faith” (p. 76), so why should I listen to him or follow his example? His second sentence is very true, but when that follows the first sentence, he completely tosses out the whole corpus of Holy Writ (which equips the pastor/elder for all aspects of pastoral ministry (2 Tim 3:16, 17)). I believe this is the number one problem with churches today, which is their lack of belief in the sufficiency of God’s Word.

4. Elements of Discussed Preaching that I intend to Employ.

Initially, I was not convinced that this book could assist me in any way, shape, or form. After some reflection, I think some of it can be useful in the area of the evangelistic messages I preach on Easter and Christmas day. In these rare cases, I think my sermons would be more beneficial than they are now. The author makes a good suggestion that I intend to employ, that is, “Evaluate the types of series or sermons you’ve preached. Ask yourself some questions like these:

- Would seekers know what Christians believe?
- Would unchurched people understand why Christians believe what they believe?
- Would detractors of the faith have had their objections addressed?” (p. 124).

He goes on, “Another way to create the illusion of the first time is to ask yourself questions like these: What would I think if I were reading this story for the very first time? Would I be shocked, surprised, worried, confounded? (p. 106). Exegeting the Christmas or Easter audience (versus your own regular congregation) would help out here, especially when it comes to using theological terms, by being cognizant of the audience and further clarifying the words so that all could intellectually understand what was being said. It also would force me into the creation mode of evangelism like Paul used when he confronted pagans who had no previous knowledge of God (unlike the Hebrews). In these cases (like Acts 17), Paul always started with creation, then discussed that this Creator had the right to be the Judge, and that only a Savior could help. I wish Loscalzo would have intimated this, or better yet, went straight to the Word for his methodology. Instead, he gives as an example sermon (p. 41) that he says, “...unapologetically presents the Easter story as the basis for authentic faith and meaning”. Actually, his sample sermon is an embarrassment because it does not preach the Bible, it does

not stem from the Bible, and it denies what the Bible teaches. I frankly would not want to be one of these guys at the Bema Seat Judgment.

We need books that actually deliver what the publisher says. On this book, the publishers say, “Here is a book for everyone who wants to proclaim the certainty of God’s Word in a (sic) era of change” (back cover). I call that false advertising at best.