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Sermons

REIMAGINED

PREACHING TO
A FLUID CULTURE

RICK CHROMEY

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SERMONS REIMAGINED: PREACHING TO A FLUID CULTURE

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CONTENTS

Introduction Deaf Men Dancing	7
Chapter One What Just Happened?	15
Chapter Two New Wineskins	25
Chapter Three Think Different	39
Chapter Four Can You Hear Me Now?	49
Chapter Five Starfish	63
Chapter Six The Truth Is Out There	75
Chapter Seven Feed the Need	89
Chapter Eight Go Deep and Go Home	103
Chapter Nine Bloodlines	119
Afterword	133
Appendix One 20 Resources for Preaching in a Fluid Culture	139
Appendix Two The Sermon Process	141

Chapter One:

WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

“When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

—Jesus (Matthew 16:2-3)

Change is a beautiful thing.

Just ask a butterfly. Or the owner of a new car. Or an infant with a dirty diaper. Jimmy Buffet was right: Changes in latitudes spark changes in attitudes. New Year’s Eve is a global cultural celebration. Though nothing truly changes when the clock strikes midnight (except the year’s number), we still kiss loved ones, pop champagne corks, and watch various objects drop like there’s no tomorrow. The old is gone. The new is here.

Deep down we all hunger for change, yet we also know there’s a price for transformation.

From the day we’re conceived, humans are constantly changing. We change physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually. We change communities, contexts, and cultures. We change clothes and careers, hobbies and habits, direction and duties. We change beliefs and biases, presuppositions and promises, rules and reasons. As we grow older the changes become painfully clear. We lose our hair, gray, wrinkle, and slow down. We change our marital status, family dynamic, and financial situation. We change our hearts, minds, and bodies through self-improvement strategies. Change happens every day, even every moment.

Change also hurts. It’s rooted in pain, discomfort, or wounds—past or present (with a healthy amount of fear about the future). Change is hard. We have to work to lose the pounds, quit the habit, or pay the debt. Change forces new chapters. We learn (often the hard way) to rehabilitate to fresh circumstances, context, or culture. And, let’s be brutally honest, change rarely happens without frustration, fear, and failure. We all hunger to become butterflies but find the metamorphosis cocooned in crisis and

conflict. It's also difficult to spread our wings and fly if all we've ever done is crawl and creep. Change is particularly painful if we didn't ask for it, want it, or pursue it.

Just Do It!

Want to *feel* change? Fold your hands. Now switch your hands so the OPPOSITE thumb is on top and hold it for several minutes. How does it feel? Go ahead and admit it. It feels wrong. It's not what you're used to. But give it time and it's not so bad.

This book is all about change. In particular, the need to change our communication style if we want to be heard by postmodern generations. Trust me, the process will feel uncomfortable, strange, and even wrong at times. We relish our comfort zones, but if we resist change in a changing world we'll also lose

influence. We'll lose the ability to connect and communicate. The message is eternal but the methods (and messenger) are not...just ask Kodak.¹

Or the Apostle Paul:

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:21-23)

In this Corinthian passage, Paul outlines Communication 101. *Know your audience. Contextualize your message. Creatively communicate it.* And that's the problem I see with most preaching today including my own: it's self-serving. I listen to a lot of preachers and hear hundreds

of sermons every year. Many of them exegete the Greek, investigate ancient Greco-Roman-Judeo culture, analyze literary nuances, and create insightful central theses. (Whew!) Most preachers, trained in biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) and preaching (homiletics), have not studied educational theory and practices. Consequently, they know stuff (good stuff), but they don't know how to creatively communicate the stuff.

When I ask preachers to consider techniques that are more experiential and interactive, I hear a lot of excuses, rationales, and alibis.

Digital Killed The Photo Star

In 1975 a Kodak engineer actually invented the first digital camera. But when he presented the idea to his company about a "filmless camera," they shut it down. Kodak was the number one photography company in the world but failed to embrace an emerging digital economy in the 1990s. By 2012, Kodak was bankrupt.

The number one response? It's not "my style."

Ah, but that's the problem. Preaching isn't about me and what I like. We preach so that people might hear, believe, and become like Jesus (Romans 10:13-15). What I prefer and how I want to preach is actually immaterial. My style can change. My methods *should* change. And the reason I change is so *they* can hear.

Now let me be clear and honest: If the majority of your congregation is gray-haired, blue-haired, or no-haired, this book isn't for you. You're preaching to the geriatric choir, and they're grooved toward a communication style truly old school (lecture). That's okay. And while I hope you'll keep reading, I understand if you don't. But if you speak primarily to under-55 types or you're ready to draw younger generations to your message, then keep reading. This book is for you...or really for them.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step and no small amount of retrospect. We can't go forward without looking back; to exegete the future, we must start by plumbing the past. In the past fifty years everything has changed. The younger generations born since 1960 feel it the most, especially at church. They feel like they're spiritually folding their hands different every time they enter a Sunday service. Awkward. Uncomfortable. Even wrong.

In the movie *The Matrix*, the character named Neo is challenged with an ultimatum:

This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back.

You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes.²

If you want to communicate to postmodern generations, it's time to swallow the red pill and learn what just happened. But beware: This rabbit hole runs deep.

CHANGE HAPPENS

In the sciences of paleontology and geology there's a rule: "*The key to the past is the present.*" In other words, observation of what is (a fossil) can help scientists piece together what happened (an ancient event). For futurists, the rule changes slightly: "*The key to the future is the past.*" In my doctoral studies, I learned semiotics (how to read cultural signs). Lesson one: You can't chart the future without parsing the past. It's nothing new. Weathermen do it every day. Every weather prediction relies upon what's happened in the past. Yesterday's weather patterns forge tomorrow's forecasts. Anomalies occasionally happen but, overall, Solomon was right: There's nothing new under the sun.

Jesus criticized the religious leaders of his day for their inability to “interpret the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:3). It’s no different today. Cultural relevance isn’t a sin, but we also mustn’t confuse fads with shifts. Fads fade. Shifts reinvent.

Therefore, in order to grasp the postmodern shift and reveal fresh strategies for communication to the postmodern mind, we must first gaze into the rearview mirror of history. We need to push rewind and review what happened then search for cultural clues from the past. History will prove insightful for where we’re going.

THE MODERN MACHINE

Modernity is a loosely and classically framed period from 1500 to 2000. During these five centuries, civilized cultures experienced renaissance and reformation, periods of enlightenment, sprinkled with scientific and industrial revolutions. But modernity didn’t just happen. It was a cultural reaction to major technological innovations that emerged between the 14th and 16th centuries. These “mega-techs” shifted society and spawned new cultural languages (how society processes and communicates information).

Such “mega-techs” aren’t new. In fact, about every 500 years there are seismic technological innovations that charge and change civilized cultures, whether it’s an innovation in communication (paper, printing), war (crossbow, gun powder), industry (furnace, watermill), or transportation (arch bridge, compass).

Technology That Changed How Cultures Operated/Interacted

700-300 B.C.	200 B.C.-A.D. 200	A.D. 300-700	A.D. 800-1200
Crane	Paper	Paddlewheel Boat	Gunpowder
Crossbow	Watermill	Horse Collar	Movable Type
Blast Furnace	Arch Bridge	Greek Fire (weapon)	Mariner’s Compass

It’s important to remember most technology until the Middle Ages was confined to local cultural and ethnic contexts. Even larger empires like Greece and Rome were largely landlocked to Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. During the Renaissance, civilized cultures began to explore new worlds and, in occupying these territories, inculcated their culture within fresh contexts. Ships sailed virgin oceans and discovered new products, beasts, and lands.

Modernity, unlike previous shifts, proved more global. The world got smaller, especially as later technological advances in transportation (ships, planes, automobiles) allowed man to travel farther at faster speeds. Wherever civilized cultures dwelled, modern technology ruled. And three “mega-techs,” in particular, shifted and changed the cultural languages of modernity:

- The **printing press** (Johannes Gutenberg, 1450)
- The **mechanized clock** (circa 1400)⁵
- The **telescope** (Hans Lippershey and Zacharias Janssen, 1608)

The Renaissance (1300-1600), which literally means “rebirth,” reimagined the world and introduced new ideas to western culture. Of course, the ability to mass produce information through print technology was most significant. In fact, the printing press is without question the greatest invention of the last millennium for its influence upon all cultural institutions.

For example, the European university had been around since the 11th century, but the emergence of mass media (books) spawned spectacular growth in academic institutions. Europe boasted 29 universities just four centuries after the University of Bologna opened in 1088, but between 1400 and 1800, that number exploded to 143! The Renaissance birthed the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the father of modern philosophy, famously quipped, “I think, therefore I am.” His words continue to control Western and modern thinking to this very day.

The printed page ruled modernity through various formats: books, periodicals, journals, telegraphs, bulletins, letters, photographs, handbills, posters, and postcards. Words were recorded and catalogued. The first book Gutenberg printed was the Holy Scriptures, or *hagios biblos* (Holy Book). Later, Robert Stephanus parsed the Bible into verses during the mid-16th century. In some church circles, the moniker “people of the Book” was promoted to announce their “biblical” Christianity. The problem? This tag is technological not theological.

In a modern word-based culture, communication shifted from short homilies into lengthier speeches, sermons, lectures, and monologues. Modern speakers (and preachers) relied upon logic, rhetoric, debate, illustration, quotes, analogy, and outline to secure their points to the modern mind. In the 20th century, radio and television spawned the age of the communicator. The lecturer, pulpit, and microphone emerged as symbols of authority, popularity, and eventually celebrity.

The mechanized clock impacted culture as much as the printing press. It forged a new frame of reference and reinvented time into “chunks.” Time was boxed within seconds, minutes, and hours. A clock “told” time and that time was authoritative. The mechanization of time invoked its own philosophical, theological, and

psychological consequences. Modernity ran like clockwork. Truth was packaged and objectified first into arguments, then behind walls, and, in the church world, eventually closeted within denominations. If your truth wasn't my truth then you were wrong, even heretical.

Modern institutions mechanized and operated by the clock. Factories, schools, and churches employed assembly-line, industrial models to manufacture widgets, students, and disciples. In modern Christianity, church services were eventually framed to fit inside 60 to 75 minutes, with multiple "inside the box" worship gatherings. Theology was also systemized. The clock controlled spirituality and packaged faith within principles, programs, and curriculum. The preacher controlled the service like a master of ceremonies.

The third modern mega-tech was the telescope. This innovation was culturally significant, for it elevated man as the superior center of the universe. Isaac Newton proposed a closed universe that resembled one big box. Newtonian physics influenced science for centuries and defined all of life within time and space. Philosophically, this centralizing of authority gave rise to humanism (Erasmus, Machiavelli), empiricism (Locke, Bacon), rationalism (Descartes, Spinoza), and skepticism (Hume, Voltaire). In a sense, Darwinism is a scientific and philosophical argument for man's ultimate centrality and superiority. He's king of the universe.

As a result of the influence of the printing press, mechanized clock, and telescope, fresh cultural languages emerged. If you listen, you can still hear them speak.

Word-based. Mechanism. Passive. Closed.

For centuries modern culture reflected boxes within a box (confined by time and space), operated mechanically, and interacted through word-based communication. In fact, most churches still reflect modern sensibilities.

Christianity is confined within walls and by times, or "order of service." Churches operate like businesses with very select hours, opening one to two hours a week inside spiritual boxes known as "sanctuaries" or "worship centers." These sacred spaces are logically arranged into rows, where the chairs and pews are often bolted to the floor or connected to each other. Church is locked within time and space. It's even in our vocabulary when we say, "I'm going to church" or "I went to church."

The modern church DNA revealed a passive flock led by centralized authority (preacher, priest) in a baptism of words (song and sermon, liturgy and lesson). The church of modernity was a closed spiritual universe that proudly flew (and still flies) its theological banners to label her boxes (Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Nazarene, Pentecostal, and countless other "non-denominational" denominations). It's no wonder we struggle to grow disciples. The

DNA of “sit and soak” rarely becomes seek and serve, except to the few who are called into specialized Christian vocations.

For centuries, centralized authorities allowed the powerful, rich, and educated to create social frames and control media. In a modern world it was possible to censor information. Leadership was centralized around the educated: preachers, vicars, presidents, chiefs, generals, bosses, professors, and principals. The rise of the educated elite reinforced the pulpit (sermon) and lectern (lecture) as a power tool. The one who controlled the church and school ruled society. This is why most Protestant churches today still exhaust more than 50 percent of their worship time with the sermon.

In a word, modernity was about *control*.

Modern theology, science, and philosophy reflected a controlled universe. Machines were controlled objects. Unlike an agricultural society that depends on the blessing of nature (sun, rain, dirt), the factory belched a 9 to 5 job to create a new economic class known as “the middle.” Middles ruled in modernity. The bell curve. Suburbs. Middle management. Mainstream media. Middle of the road. In a machine culture, everyone was the same (a product)...except the educated elite. Knowledge was power and prominence.

In the spring of 1912, a British ocean liner with a titanic moniker sailed her maiden voyage from Southampton, England to New York City. On board were 2,224 passengers, divided into three classes: first, second, and third (or “steerage”). The wealthy elite boasted millionaires like John Jacob Astor IV and Margaret “Molly” Brown. The affluent enjoyed the best in opulent comfort, five-star dining, and luxurious entertainment, including ornate cabins, a gymnasium, swimming pool, and libraries. The steerage passengers, mostly European emigrants, lived in small, shared cabins with few bathrooms and little food. Sandwiched between the two were second-class passengers who experienced better comforts than steerage but clearly not as pampered as first class.

The Titanic boasted the best in machinery, navigation, and communication. The ship, by design, was unsinkable and the fastest of the seafaring fleets. The captain of the ship controlled the experience while everyone, including the crew, lived in little boxes segregated by their wealth. Any mixing of the classes was unintentional and momentary.

Around midnight on April 14, the unthinkable happened: The Titanic struck an iceberg and started to sink. Within a couple hours, the mighty ship slipped beneath the icy 28-degree dark waters and death came quickly. The lifeboats deployed serviced the wealthy, particularly women and children. By dawn, more than 1,500 passengers were dead while only 710 were rescued.

The Titanic is a potent parable for the demise of modernity and, in many ways, is a historical marker signaling the beginning of the end. Within three decades, two world wars, the Great Depression, and a growing global cultural awareness (helped by new emerging technologies) would prove to be icebergs that sunk modernity.

Moderns engineered environments that reflected the superiority of man's knowledge and capacity for control. Therefore, creative thought was considered "thinking outside the box." Social institutions were framed inside acceptable boxes. Modern cities were laid out in squares, spreading from the center. The rich lived in their box (usually on a hill), while the social steerage dwelt in slums (at the bottoms). Later the post-war suburbs created a segregated middle class, sandwiched between the rural farmer and the inner city factory worker, who commuted in moving boxes called cars.

In a modern culture the church thrived. The exclusivity of Christianity proved successful in a world of boxes. A church operated both as its own universe and university. In fact, many European modern churches had box seats. Each family worshipped within a high-walled box, uniquely decorated to their taste. This is why pulpits were positioned high. Inside the box, worshippers had to look up and listen to the sermon. The preacher was in full control. Eventually the walls were gone but the pews remained, revealing row after row of passivity.

Church resembled a library, a place of sacred silence around two books: the Bible and hymnal. Church services were secularized, particularly in the 1970s, to reflect a performance-based "Woodstock" worship frame. Today's contemporary worship (and preaching) now resembles a concert with a spiritual lecture.

It's no wonder fewer and fewer people are listening anymore.

And it explains why fewer and fewer of the emerging generations even "go to church." Church is a place for getting married and buried and part of Christmas and Easter traditions. If you think about it, people rarely attend church to hear the message anyway. They go to see family and friends and to experience God. A smaller percentage will go to serve, give offerings, and to hear a biblical message. It's not that people dislike sermons. It's just not as significant as preachers think.

Here's a test: If you shaved off five minutes of your message every week and used the extra time for testimony, worship experiences, creative prayer, and music, would anyone care? Or even notice?

Modernity created a box-church. But postmoderns live beyond boxes.

In the 20th century, the emergence of television technology changed the cultural language from WORD to VISUAL. Emerging generations now process information visually or, better, multi-visually. Just like the printing press, mechanized clock, and

telescope ushered in modernity (and released culture from 500 years of ignorance during the Dark Ages), television has reinvented communication.

Two other mega-techs—the cellphone and the Internet—have contributed to the emergence of a postmodern world.

What are the new postmodern cultural languages?

Interactive. Open. Experiential. Image-driven.

The signs of the times are clear. Everything has changed. The postmodern generations no longer relate to modern strategies. And that's why we need to think different.

Endnotes

1. For an excellent treatment of Kodak's demise, read Thom Schultz's blog titled "The Church's Frightful Kodak Moment," <http://holysoup.com/2014/01/15/the-churchs-frightful-kodak-moment/>.
2. International Movie Database (IMDB), *The Matrix*, "Quotes," http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/trivia?tab=qt&ref_=tt_trv_qu.
3. Identifying the exact date for mechanical clocks is very difficult, given there were mechanisms for hourly clocks that emerged in the 1200s. The detailed "spring-driven" mechanization of the clock, indicating minutes and seconds, happened in the late 15th and 16th centuries. Early mechanical clocks were woefully inaccurate and inadequate timekeepers.