

Following Jesus Today: Challenges and Opportunities

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Words and Deeds

Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.” Followers of Jesus believe God’s Word shapes our priorities. The Bible directs our actions to be in concert with God’s very best for us and for our world. In this session, Ray Hylton, pastor of the historic First Presbyterian Church in Evanston, Illinois, examines the role of proclamation as he preaches each week to a diverse congregation adjoining one of the world’s great academic institutions.

Paul Detterman

Scripture

Mark 1:14–15 The scope of Jesus’ mission and the content of his message are to repent and believe.

Romans 10:14–15 Paul desires people to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord through those who hear and gladly proclaim good news to all.

Prayer

Loving God, when you said, “Let there be light,” creation dawned. Shine that light into our hearts, that we may receive your good news and know that it is good. You have called us out of spiritual darkness and made us a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation—your own people. You have revealed yourself to us in Jesus Christ. Help us face the darkness in the world with confidence through your Holy Spirit, and nurture us to become proclaimers of your Word in all we say and do. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Introduction

The great British author Charles Dickens wrote the most recognizable opening lines in all of English literature. In his classic *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens imagined the years leading up to the French Revolution: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was

the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. . . .¹

Dickens's words are an apt description of the challenges and opportunities facing the church. It is the best of times to form a unique community, different from the surrounding culture, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Few church people would question the character of the church's mission: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? . . . You are the light of the world. . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:13–16).

However, it is the worst of times for those who want to maintain the patterns, practices, mind-set, and misconceptions of the institutional church. The institution we know as "church" is changing—some would say dying—rapidly. Our commission by Jesus to be salt and light has never been more urgent.

Jesus sends his followers into the world as agents of redemption. We are called to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind. This call leads to questions: What is proclamation? What are the challenges to gospel proclamation in our post-Christendom context? Why should we, as followers of Jesus, be concerned with proclaiming the good news?

What Is Proclamation?

Proclamation begins with Jesus Christ. The Gospels present a robust picture of Jesus engaged in the ministry of proclamation:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. (Mark 1:14)

When [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

1. Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (New York: Books, Inc., 1868), 1. Found at Questia, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning, www.questia.com

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:16–19)

Even in John’s account of Jesus’ life, proclamation is at the heart of his work. The woman at the well did not know she was talking to Jesus, but she knew one thing: “The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us’” (John 4:25).

The content of Jesus’ proclamation is clear: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). Urgency radiates throughout the proclamation of good news. Those who hear Jesus’ message are invited to repent (change their minds and hearts) and believe (invest their faith and trust) in response. When we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, we express—in our words and deeds—a specific message Scripture describes as good news.

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Challenges

For some, the word *proclamation* conjures up images of spellbinding or silver-tongued preachers, or it evokes a Billy Graham-type figure whose very name can fill a stadium. Proclamation means *preaching*, most often by those trained in seminary or by extroverts with a rich vocabulary.

In our post-Christendom culture, verbal proclamation of the good news alone is rarely compelling. Christendom—the age in which the church, its teachings, its stories, and its moral assumptions were accepted as the norms of society—is past and gone. Now, in a post-Christendom culture, the church exists at the margins. Words and concepts the church takes for granted, such as *gospel* and *salvation*, are foreign to many people today. The preached gospel seems to resonate only with those whose lives are already formed by the

values of church and Scripture. Others hear the message of Jesus and are confused.

Take these two snapshots of post-Christendom—a culture in which the Christian story is unknown and churches are alien institutions whose rhythms do not impinge on most members of society:

- In a London school, a teenager with no church connections hears the Christmas story for the first time. His teacher tells it well, and the student is fascinated by this amazing story. Risking his friends' mockery, he thanks her for the story. But one thing had disturbed him, so he asks, "Why did they give the baby a swear word for his name?"
- One Sunday in Oxford a man visits a church building to collect something for his partner who works during the week in a creative-arts project the church runs. He arrives as the morning congregation is leaving and, recognizing the minister, asks, "What are all these people doing here? I didn't know churches were open on Sundays."

Just a few years ago, neither story would have seemed credible. Today, however, they are but two among countless stories that point to the era of Christendom's fading in Western culture.²

Tim Keller, a Presbyterian pastor whose mission is to reach professionals in New York City with the good news, identifies some of the challenges to proclamation in a post-Christendom or post-Christian culture:

What if the growing majority of people outside the church live by such a radically different view of life that much of what is now said and done by the Christian community is inexplicable or even deeply offensive to them? What if many listeners hold a profoundly different understanding of the concepts of God, truth, right and wrong, freedom, virtue, and sin? What if their approaches to reality, human nature and destiny, and human community are wholly different from our own?³

2. Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (United Kingdom: Paternoster, 2004), 1–2.

3. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 264.

Yet it is still the best of times: Many people in our post-Christendom culture, while rejecting the church, are fascinated by the way of Jesus when they encounter it lived well. Christendom is gone, but the good news is living and vibrant. God's call to proclaim the good news is much richer, much deeper, and much wider than most of us imagine. All disciples of Jesus are invited to live the good news in their families, their vocations, and their networks of relationships.⁴

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Why Is Proclamation Important?

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God restored our broken relationships with God and with one another. Now it is our turn to reach out to a broken world. Theologian David Bosch challenges the way North American congregations understand mission. Bosch explains that the *missio Dei* (God's mission in the world) is grounded in the relationship of the Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God's mission is “derived from the very nature of God.” God the Father sent the Son into the world to save the world. The Father and the Son sent the Spirit as a sustaining Presence. Now, says Bosch, the Holy Spirit is sending the church. The church does not have a mission; it exists to be a mission.⁵

In *Missional Church*, Darrell Guder reasons that if God's mission is to restore and heal creation, then “salvation” means bringing God's healing and restoration to communities and organizations. Guder writes, “For a bank, it might mean granting loans in formerly redlined neighborhoods; for a public school, it might mean instituting peer mediation training among students.”⁶ All this is proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind.

As we see in the accounts of Jesus' life, embodying the good news is not just a matter of sharing good words; it also involves the messy work of transforming the conditions that dehumanize and restrict people who are made in the image of God. Twenty-first-century

4. See anabaptistnetwork.com/endofchristendom for additional details about post-Christendom and the gospel.

5. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 389–90.

6. Darrel Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 136.

people will remain distant and skeptical if our proclamation is based on religious words that have no meaning to their world. When the church weds proclamation with compassion, or good words with good works, we create a compelling apologetic for others to hear and believe in the way of Jesus. Are you looking for ways to proclaim the good news in your particular culture? Consider ideas like these:

- Discover and share the many places in Scripture that illustrate God wants not only to save souls but also to heal the whole creation.
- Consider different ways you can earn the right to be heard among people outside your church through your willingness to serve them sacrificially. Create receptivity to the gospel by embodying love, compassion, and Christ-shaped community.
- Form a small group with others in your congregation where you practice demonstrating your faith in your vocational, recreational, and family life. Bring the good news of Jesus Christ into many different parts of your local culture.

If the institution of the church is just a social agency with a unique story, proclamation of that story is secondary to the major work of the church—helping people. If, on the other hand, followers of Jesus proclaim the good news in words (story) *and* deeds (serving people), proclamation becomes crucial to the church’s identity. It gives answer to the inevitable questions “Why are you helping us? Why do you care?”

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Spiritual Practice

Followers of Jesus who desire to deepen their love for their community might consider a prayer walk. Walk through the different neighborhoods of your city, and pray for individuals, homes, schools, businesses, people who are homeless, and neighboring universities and other institutions. Prayer walks help us *see* our community in new ways that we can miss when we are focused on driving in a car. Record what you see and hear. Assess specific opportunities to proclaim the good news.

Questions for Reflection

What are some of the reasons you can think of for the great divide that exists between the believing church and a skeptical world?

How does proclamation informed by the practices of Jesus bring healing to such a divide?

What is your congregation doing to proclaim the good news in both word and deed? What more can they do?