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Finding a Voice: A Preaching Model To Address the Postmodern and Post-Soviet Young Adults at the Compass Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tallinn, Estonia

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ABSTRACT

FINDING A VOICE: A PREACHING MODEL TO ADDRESS THE POSTMODERN
AND POST-SOVIET YOUNG ADULTS AT THE COMPASS SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH IN TALLINN, ESTONIA

by

Mervi Cederström

Adviser: Kenley Hall

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Professional Dissertation

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Title: FINDING A VOICE: A PREACHING MODEL TO ADDRESS THE POSTMODERN AND POST-SOVIET YOUNG ADULTS AT THE COMPASS SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN TALLINN, ESTONIA

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Problem

In Northern and Eastern Europe, probably more than in any other part of the world, the gap between the inner culture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and that of the surrounding culture has grown large, hindering the church's ability to share the Gospel to young adults (ages 16-29) in a meaningful and clear way. It is especially true about people who have grown up in the Postmodern and Post-Soviet context of Estonia and have very little biblical knowledge. This present study concentrates on homiletics and how this culture gap can be bridged via preaching.

Method

A five-part preaching series was created with young adults in Estonia being the primary target audience. The sermons were preached in Compass Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tallinn, Estonia from November 20 until December 18, 2021. All listeners were invited to fill in a feedback form after each church service. Over the period of five weeks, 116 evaluation forms were collected and the anonymous feedback analysed.

Results

The church members and visiting guests were given an opportunity to evaluate my sermons and express their ideas on different preaching-related topics. The main areas of feedback were as follows: topic and organisation of the sermon, the role of the preacher, inclusiveness, and narratives. Every thematic section had both open-ended questions and questions with scales from 1 to 5. The results showed that young adults—both the regular attendees and occasional guests—are interested in topics that touch their everyday reality and choices, they appreciate preacher's openness and emotional honesty, they find it easiest to follow sermons with a simple structure and a single focus, their attention is caught by good stories, they appreciate supportive visual materials, and they long for an inclusive Christian community where they could be seen and appreciated as individuals.

Conclusions

Preaching in a Postmodern and Post-Soviet context where the general knowledge of Christianity and the Bible are very low is a constant challenge. Yet, with a careful sermon preparation process which takes into account the individualistic and fragmented worldview of the Postmodern people, it is possible to preach sermons that touch both the hearts and minds of young adults. When the context-sensitivity is supported by the

preacher's emotions and integrity of life, the preaching act can be and is an effective way

of communicating the Gospel truths.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the Compass church family for offering me a spiritual home and also for holding up a mirror where I could see myself in a clearer way as a preacher. My heartfelt appreciation belongs also to two important individuals. Firstly, to my father Rein who was the first preacher I ever remember hearing and whose dedication to the church has never stopped inspiring me. And secondly, my gratitude belongs to my husband Samuel whose unwavering support helped me through the process of writing this dissertation. I am deeply grateful to you.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, one could read from a weekly Christian news outlet *The Tablet*

the words of L. Freeman (2003):

> Preaching is not a medium of communication that is much liked or effective today.
> There was a time when thousands would gather in the open air to hear a famous
> preacher; today everyone wants to be heard, and attention spans are decreasing.
> Telling people what is good for them to hear, without giving them a chance to express
> their views or even or even ask questions, is about the worst attempt to communicate
> imaginable in our culture. (11)

Undoubtedly, the pessimism of this statement is familiar to many contemporary

preachers. Sometimes the people whose calling it is to preach the Gospel can get

discouraged, trying to proclaim it to a world that does not seem to want to hear it. The

world has changed dramatically over the past century and the gap between the culture

within the church and outside has grown ever larger, leaving preachers perplexed and in

need of new communication patterns. Is the Word of God still powerful or has it lost its

appeal and strength? Is preaching hopelessly out of date? One can wonder sometimes.

As a young minister in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the frustration of

looking for effective ways of communicating the Gospel is all too familiar to me. Having

been born in the already crumbling empire of the Soviet Union and having grown up in

the rapidly changing and developing region of Eastern Europe, I have often wondered

about the effectiveness and meaningfulness of preaching. In this situation, there are two

choices. One can either settle with preaching to the faithful church members and not

worry too much about the world "outside", or one can step out of one's comfort zone, follow the Spirit's leading and make conscious efforts to try and bridge the gap between the Postmodern world and the pulpit in a meaningful way. This dissertation has grown out of my desire and attempt to walk down the second, more difficult path.

This introductory chapter gives a brief overview of my ministry context in Estonia and describes the stages of my project development. The stages are as follows: 1) theological reflections; 2) relevant literature; 3) development of intervention; 4) structure of the intervention; 5) research methodology and protocol.

Description of the Ministry Context

This doctoral project has been carried out in the Post-Soviet context of Estonia, more precisely in its capital city, Tallinn. Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the regaining of independence in 1991, the Estonian society has gone through rapid changes, both in mentality and economy. After a 50-year-long Communist occupation Estonia has Westernised and developed in a dizzying speed.

Yet, the political and religious freedom the Estonian society has enjoyed since the early 1990s does not mean that the years of Soviet propaganda have vanished without a trace. In contrary, in some areas of life, the legacy of the Soviet era is still persistently present. For example, this is evident in the religious atmosphere as most of the population has remained highly suspicious about Christianity and church.

There was a short period in the beginning of 1990s when many Estonians showed interest in religion but unlike in Catholic Poland and Lithuania, Christianity did not regain the moral authority it had had before the Communist era as it was not connected to national identity in a way it has been in the aforementioned countries (Ringvee 2014).

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Instead, different esoteric practices have gained popularity in Estonia. These New Age-based syncretic teachings (Westernised versions of Reiki healing, body-mind-spirit self-help, etc.) are not a coherent worldview; rather they can be seen as demand-based practices which people turn to when they are in crisis and need help (Uibu 2021). This idea of picking and choosing different spiritual ideas to fit one's needs is a thoroughly Postmodern trait. It shows the freedom of choosing one's own beliefs, one's own story without the limitations of an overarching worldview or collective metanarrative.

In such a Postmodern and syncretic Eastern European context, the Seventh-day Adventist Church along with other Christian denominations faces a constant challenge of reaching out to secular people and engaging in meaningful conversations with them. As someone who has grown up in this environment, I can testify that this challenge is great and often burdensome. It feels discouraging to work in an environment where the response is meager and where the church membership continues to decrease. Yet, faithfulness to the Gospel requires one to keep up hope, to look for different opportunities and to contextualise the Christian message in a way that would be accessible to the secular people.

One of the methods employed by the Estonian Adventist church in recent years to strengthen ministry and increase influence in society is church planting. Purposefully creating places for (young) people where they can invite their secular friends to experience Christian fellowship is one of the best ways of bridging the gap between worldviews and connecting with secular people on a personal level.

One such church—Compass Seventh-day Adventist Church—was planted in Tallinn in September 2018 and its goal has been to provide a safe place for (secular)

youth. The church planting core group was mainly made up of people in their 20s and the focus group of Compass church is also young adults and young families. Therefore, having been the Assistant Coordinator of Church Planting in the Estonian Conference and also an active member of Compass church since its birth, this was the perfect setting where I could create and implement a project that would focus on preaching in the Postmodern context. Compass church, its members and visitors were the best possible place for me to get a deeper understanding of the worldview but also the joys and worries of Postmodern young adults.

Statement of the Problem

According to the European Social Survey 2014-2016, 81% of the young adults (aged 16-29) in Estonia identify with no religion (Bullivant 2018). With some reservations, the same data applies to the rest of the population, making Estonia one of the most secular countries in Europe, and therefore in the world.

It is increasingly difficult to find ways to engage in a meaningful conversation with unchurched young adults. The concepts and the language used in the church are often no longer meaningful to the secular young adults grown up in Post-Soviet Estonia. The methods of evangelism have mostly remained Modern, plus the church has found it difficult to adapt to the rapidly developing technology and the rise of importance of social media among the younger generations. Thus, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Estonia and the Compass church is not particularly successful in reaching secular young adults.

Statement of the Task

The task of this project was to develop a preaching model which would be created to specifically engage with Postmodern secular youth. The preaching model was implemented through a preaching series in Compass Seventh-day Adventist Church and the project and its results were evaluated through feedback collected from the young adults attending/visiting the church during the preaching series. It was important for me to get a clearer idea and gain a deeper insight of the needs and wants of the young people attending/visiting Compass and through this to gain new perspectives of my own task as a preacher in the Eastern European context.

Delimitations of the Project

The scope of this project was limited in several ways.

First, this project was implemented in one local church—Compass Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tallinn. The feedback was collected after each of the five church services where I preached. This naturally means that the time and space for people to express their opinion and give suggestions was limited.

Secondly, the number of people who were reached by the advertisement about the preaching series was limited. I used all channels available to me to invite people (my own social media accounts, the Estonian Conference's monthly magazine, a Christian radio station) which means that the message and the invite were shared on Christian and personal platforms. There were undoubtedly many young secular people in Tallinn who were not reached by the advertisement.

Thirdly, the preaching series took place from November 20, 2021 until December 18, 2021. Unfortunately, it was a time when Covid-19 pandemic was at its height in

Estonia and there were several government restrictions in place. The restriction which influenced our church gatherings directly was about the maximum number of churchgoers—the church hall could only be filled 50%. To this outwardly imposed restriction could be added an inward restriction—there might have been people who decided against coming to church out of concern for their health. There is no way for me to know how many people would have come to listen to the preaching series if there had not been for the pandemic and restrictions.

Lastly, the filling and returning of feedback forms was voluntary. Therefore, the feedback was collected from people who *wanted* to give feedback.

Description of the Project Process

The project process culminated in the preparation and preaching of five sermons in Compass church on five consecutive Sabbath mornings. Prior to this, a theological foundation for the project had to be established and relevant literature needed to be reviewed. Based on the knowledge I gained from the liaterature, I developed and implemented a preaching model. After the preaching series, feedback was collected and analysed; results were reported.

Theological Reflection

In the context where most of the population is alien or even hostile to the Gospel message, one recalls the environment of the 1st century A.D. where the Christian message started to spread.

Also then, in the times of the apostles, the call for repentance was often met with indifference and mockery. The world, although thoroughly religious, was full of conflicting ideas and ideologies, pursuit of pleasure and selfish ambition. In this context,

the apostles and other early Christian preachers needed to find a way to approach their contemporaries so that it would be meaningful and accessible to their audience. They had to have detailed knowledge of the worldview and beliefs of their listeners, and they needed to use context-sensitivity and creativity to forward the Christian message. They also needed to remain open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who, as the book of Acts so elegantly demonstrates, invited them constantly to embrace the Other and step out of their comfort zone marked by their religious, national, and social borders.

The similarity of challenges between the 1st century and the 21st century makes the early Christian sermons recorded in the New Testament a valuable source of information and inspiration. Therefore, the book of Acts was the main theological foundation for my project. The examples of Paul, Peter and Stephen and their sermons—which were preached in very different settings and for different audiences—within the overarching narrative of God's movement toward the Other enlighten the task of preaching the Gospel also in our Postmodern times. There are many useful parallels to be drawn and much to learn from the most skillful of ancient preachers.

Review of Literature

The review of relevant literature was undertaken. The focus of this endeavor was two-fold.

First, it was important for me to get a sufficient overview of the discussion concerning the nature and characteristics of Postmodernism. In this area, the most prominent writers were Grenz (1996) and Greer (2003).

On the other hand, it was also necessary to review literature connecting homiletics and Postmodernism. The intersection of these two disciplines was the focal point of the

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current study, therefore I was most interested in writings that would analyse the state and future of preaching in the Postmodern reality. In this area, the most useful and informative studies were written by Beville (2010) and Allen (2014), these were supported by the seminal work of Craddock (1985), Robbinson (2001), Long (2005), Stott (1982) and others.

Development of the Intervention

The impulse for the intervention grew out of my experience both as a regular church goer and a preacher, being mostly surrounded with young adults in my home church. The question of what would speak to and engage the Postmodern audience was present for years on an unconscious level but over time it would concretise into a pressing question needing some kind of practical answer.

The reality of my native Estonia is bleak—Christianity is often portrayed as something odd lingering in the periphery of society. Positive portrayals of Christians in the media are scarce. To this can be added the Modern language and argumentations often used in the church that are all but incomprehensible for the secular Postmodern people. Living amid these tensions I decided it was time for a practical project which, naturally, would not solve these problems but which would give me a clearer understanding of my opportunities and tasks as a preacher in a Post-Soviet and Postmodern context.

Structure of the Intervention

The intervention was devised as a preaching series in my home church where most of the people would be in the age group of 15–35. The five-week long series took place from November 20, 2021 until December 18, 2021. The preaching series was structured and created in a way which I hoped would be accessible and relevant also for

potential church visitors. Both the sermon topics as well as the thematic layout of the feedback forms grew out of the knowledge I had accumulated, studying the relevant literature and biblical examples.

The sermon topics I chose relied on the list of topics mentioned by Beville (2010). He writes about Postmodern people having a set of inner needs that grow out of the fragmentation and alienation brought about by the Postmodern worldview: 1) the need for hope, 2) the need for acceptance, 3) the need for ecological awareness, 4) the need for inclusion, 5) the need for a distinctive identity. This list formed the thematic basis for my preaching series.

The feedback forms which were handed out after every church service during the 5-week series concentrated on four areas of homiletical practice. First, the area of sermon topics—the participants were asked to evaluate the relevancy of my chosen topics and they were given space to give suggestions about things they would like to hear sermons about. The second area was that of organisation and structure of sermons, again with space to voice their ideas and comments. The third area was to do with the person of the preacher—her emotions, expressions, appearance and language. And the last section in the feedback forms concentrated on narratives and the place of any given sermon in the metanarrative of the Bible. These chosen topics and areas of interest shape the structures of Chapter 4 and Chapter 6.

Research Methodology and Protocol

The feedback collected during the preaching series was anonymous and voluntary. Before every sermon I explained to the congregation about my doctoral project and why their feedback would be much appreciated. In general terms I encouraged everyone to fill

in the feedback form. The goal was to collect as many feedback forms as possible as my method to analyse the results was quantitative.

As mentioned earlier, the preaching series took place at the height of Covid-19 pandemic with government restrictions limiting the number of churchgoers. In this context, I was able to collect 116 feedback forms, with the first sermon receiving the most feedback (31 forms) and the last one the least (19 forms). For a church with 28 baptised members at the time of the preaching series, it was a very positive result. Both church members and visitors seemed to express themselves freely and with a desire to help me improve my preaching skills; as a result, these 116 evaluation forms constitute the most valuable source of knowledge and advice in my preaching ministry.

Measures were taken to ensure the safety and confidentiality of the data. Once this project is finished and the conclusions drawn, I will give an overview of the feedback to Compass church and publish a series of articles in the Estonian Conference's magazine, all the while making sure the identity of participants will remain anonymous.

Summary

The introductory chapter has given a short overview of the reasons and motivating forces behind my doctoral project. They are a mixture of personal and societal reasons brought together with the desire of becoming a more skillful preacher in a highly secular and Postmodern context. While the current project has been conducted only in one local church and therefore has a number of limitations, I nevertheless hope that the results and conclusions of this dissertation help and encourage my colleagues who work in similar Eastern European circumstances.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Postmodern World and Pre-Modern World

Every era in the history of the world is unique. It is never possible to comprehend fully a time that is in the past nor construct a time that has not yet arrived. But while acknowledging this uniqueness, it is also possible to draw certain parallels between different historical phases and come to conclusions that enlighten both the past and the present.

When one looks at the present times in the Western and Eastern part of Europe, they are a curious mixture of historical and cultural, philosophical and scientific, religious and secular, local and global, national and postcolonial traits. Europe's roots and culture have been heavily influenced by Christianity but globalisation, the long shadow of centuries of oppressive imperial rules, the Postmodernism and the legacy of the 20th century with its turbulence and violence have thrown Europe into a cultural, societal and spiritual turmoil.

Hunt (2013) states that over the last century, the visibility of the Christian community, its message and practices has been greatly reduced by "individualism, materialism and consumerism" (330). The similarities with the biblical times seem to be minimal, if not non-existent. Yet, when one takes a closer look, one discovers that there are several parallels which connect the present time in Europe and the ancient world of

Rome where the Christian message was born and started to spread. There are at least four similarities worth mentioning:

1. The similarities of pre-Modern mindset and Postmodern mindset, especially in the religious context.

The philosophy and science of the Modern era failed to obliterate maladies like war and poverty, as was optimistically expected. Once the rationalism of the Modernist world was taken off the pedestal, belief and hope in spirituality (but not always religion) was revived. The form which spiritual beliefs take in the Postmodern world may be rather different from the pre-Modern era. Religion is no longer an integral part of the prominent culture or public life, the definition of morality may be different than in the past, the metaphysical has been privatised and individualised to the point of being excluded from any form of public discourse, as certainly is the case in Northern Europe.

Yet the crisis of Modernity brought about the rebirth of some practices and views of pre-Modern conceptual framework, even if they are now part of the private and not of the public sphere. This applies, for example, to the reading practices of the Scripture. Suppressed practices of memorisation, recitation, or the idea of the Scripture functioning essentially as performance—all these ideas have been revived in the Postmodern context (Walsh Pasulka 2006). To borrow Keck's (1996) words, the Postmodern mind is able to let the Bible's "mythological language restore imagination to our faith and thought" (138), emancipating biblical studies from the "tyranny of modernity" (135).

2. During the last thirty years of the 1ˢᵗ century A.D. the church faced a significant shift: the eyewitnesses of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus passed away and gave way to a generation that did not have eyewitnesses (Witherington III 1998). Suddenly the

believers had to rely on the sacred texts and oral tradition which were given down from earlier generations. No longer could anyone start their testimony about Jesus with John's words, "What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1, NRSV).

In such a context, says Hauerwas (1974), preaching as a means of persuasion and affirmation of faith becomes central and thus, the Christian church becomes a "story-formed community" (46). Morality, ethical and existential issues find their essence and their power in the form of a story; the reading of and reflection on a sacred text becomes a central means to bring about change in human life. This, in turn, means that skillful storytellers are required in church; people who know how to connect the age-old narratives with their audience in a sensitive and delicate manner.

The Postmodern mind is opened to and fascinated by good stories—one only has to think of the profitability of the movie industry or take a look at the charts of best-selling books to realise that the art of story-telling is as popular as ever. People seem to find existential solace in well-told narratives. For preachers, this is an opportunity and an invitation to embrace story-telling and to find ways in which the Christian narrative can bring meaning and hope to the Postmodern people. Using narratives is the best way "to amplify the Scriptures" (Schueddig 2015, 46). It is certainly a link we in the Postmodern world share with the first century Christians.

3. Both in the first centuries of the common era as well as in the 21st, the church has been trying to find a voice in a pluralistic environment, a voice that would be heard and understood among the people who are not familiar with the Gospel. It is a challenge that never ceases to exist and that builds a bridge between us and the world in which Paul,

John, Peter, etc. ministered. Both in our world and in that of the apostles many people are/were genuinely confused "as to whether any single voice among the contending opinions lays claim to the truth" (Miller 1982, 267).

This condition may discourage preachers. In the age of uncertainty and anxiety where one's voice sounds feeble among the multitude of voices and where the culture outside the church may feel threatening and scary, it may be difficult to act with confidence and sensitivity; the effort of preaching might feel draining. In such context, it is liberating to realise that the apostles faced the same challenges, and that Paul knew his preaching would sound like "folly" (1 Cor 1:21) to many of his contemporaries.

Yet, he stayed true to his message, he embraced both the successes and failures, he kept his heart open to God's prompting to cross and obliterate socio-religious boundaries, and he remained authentic and vulnerable when communicating the Gospel to people around him. He found the connecting points between his own faith and that of his listeners, opening up conversations and dialogues which made the Gospel resonate with his audience. By doing this, Paul and the other apostles discovered moments of unexpected respect and openness toward new ideas, the openness that led to preaching of the Gospel and conversions.

The Postmodern preacher may similarly discover openness toward different views which leads to people finding their personal savior in Jesus.

4. The fourth similarity between the world of Acts and the Postmodern world of the 21st century that can be pointed out concerns the connection between the church and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The focus of the book of Acts is firmly on God and God's actions through the agency of the Spirit; time and again the church seems to be slow in joining God in his mission to the world, slow in reaching out to the people God wants her to reach out to. Rhamie (2019) describes the dynamics of Acts as God showing initiative with the church "constantly lagging behind" (216); God is continually pressing the church to embrace the Other and cross the gendered, politicised, ethnoreligious, socioeconomic, and disability-related borders (217).

Two thousand years down the line the church is still struggling with the same issues and same borders that divide people. God is several steps ahead of us, inviting us to become more inclusive and more loving, more open to the Other and more willing to use new ways of outreach.

God's invitation for the church to keep up with him includes the realisation that it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that the ministry can continue and bear fruit. The book of Acts describes a community that, despite it shortcomings, was dependent on the divine power and was filled with the Holy Spirit in a way that helped them overcome the "obstacles of paganism, persecution, and Pharisaism" (Kidder 2013, 21). As long as they stayed connected to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit could persuade and change the worldview of those to whom they witnessed. When people's connection to and faith in the divine power weakened, they discovered that they were as useful as a branch that is no longer connected to the vine.

This need to be fully dependent on God's Spirit and the Spirit's transforming power is also ever present in our times. While planning and strategies may be good, they can never replace the living power of God that leads people into truth and transformation.

The Book of Acts

Bearing these parallels in mind, it would be reasonable to turn to the biblical book which sheds light on the life and ministry of the Christian church in the middle of the 1st century A.D. In addition to the parallels we can find between the ancient Greco-Roman society and the Western culture of the Postmodern mindset, the book of Acts is also a priceless source of sermons. Out of its 1000 verses, the speeches and sermons take up approximately 300 verses (Haenchen 1971).

The contemporary scholarship, when dealing with these speeches and sermons, has concentrated mostly on the accuracy of Luke's speech material. How did Luke obtain this material? How lightly or heavily did he edit it? Did he have Jewish or non-Jewish audience in mind when he wrote them down? While these questions are valuable, focusing on the origin of Acts' sermons may cause us to lose from sight the richness of these early Christian homilies and the implications which they can have for us in the Postmodern context. For one, they are examples of how context-sensitive and skillful the proclamation of the Gospel can be.

Barnett (2008), writing on the sermons found in the book of Acts, draws attention to the Greek word διαλέγομαι ('to converse, to discuss'). The word has been used 10 times in Acts, in each of these cases it is used to refer to Paul's preaching. By using διαλέγομαι, Luke may have wanted to highlight the conversational aspect of Paul's interaction—mentioned briefly in the previous section—with his listeners and his sensitivity toward each particular context. Barnett concludes that Paul's preaching style which engaged listeners and took into account their background and beliefs could be

called dialogical preaching. It was not just any kind of preaching, it was a very distinct type of preaching that Paul used to converse with and persuade his audience.

This 'dialogical preaching' correlates well with the contemporary homiletical emphasis on listeners and their experiences.[1] Once again, it seems as if we have made a full circle and are rediscovering some biblical practices which were very much present in the early church but went unnoticed during the Modern era. Thus, by paying close attention to sermons—and information about their delivery—found in the book of Acts, it is possible to gain insight for preaching in the 21st century.

Although διαλέγομαι is exclusively used for Paul's preaching, Paul is not the only one in the book of Acts who demonstrates deep sensitivity to his audience. Stephen and Peter, whose sermons are also recorded, do the same. The scope of the current study is limited and therefore not all sermons from the book of Acts can be analysed but for the sake of diversity, three sermons from the book of Acts are chosen which shed light to the extraordinary skill of contextualisation. All these three were preached by different people in a variety of contexts:

1. Stephen's sermon to Jewish leaders in Acts 7:2–53

2. Peter's sermon at Cornelius' place in Acts 10:34–43

3. Paul's sermon in Athens in Acts 17:22–31

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[1] For example, see Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 149-51; Kenton C. Anderson, *Choosing to Preach: A Comprehensive Introduction to Sermon Options and Structures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 138, 190, 255-56.

Stephen's Sermon (Acts 7:2–53)

Stephen appears in Luke's narrative in Acts 6. He was a member of Jerusalem church and one of its deacons who earned from Luke praise and positive characteristics—"a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5), "full of grace and power" who did "great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8). Also, the fact that he is the first one to be mentioned in the list of seven deacons refers to his prominence and high status among the community of believers.

Although the seven chosen ones were supposed to organise and oversee the daily distribution of food in the church so that the apostles could devote themselves to "prayer and to serving the word" (Acts 6:4), it is clear that the appointed deacons, including Stephen, were not merely administrators. We know very little about these seven men, about their ministry and fate, but if they were anything like Stephen, they were powerful witnesses to The Way, devoting themselves to ministry and welfare of the community. Stephen's ministry was accompanied by wonders and signs, as Luke tells his readers, he also had a prominent gift of preaching and persuasion.

A number of Jewish people tried to argue with Stephen but they "could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke" (Acts 6:10). After having been falsely accused of blasphemy and of "saying things against this holy place and the law" (Acts 6:13) by his beaten opponents, Stephen was brought to the Jewish High Council and there, in front of the Council members and the high priest, he spoke. It is interesting to note that his "immediate offence was not preaching Christ but speaking against the temple and the law" (Barnett 1999, 218). The context and surrounding could not have been more Jewish.

As there were no non-Jewish parties in this conflict and the setting was thoroughly Jewish, the setting reminds of an ancient Hebrew lawsuit. Placed within such *Sitz im Leben*, Stephen's lengthy speech makes perfect sense both literally, theologically as well as rhetorically (Peterson 2014). Sounding occasionally like an Old Testament prophet, Stephen accuses his audience of being "stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, forever opposing the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). One could almost picture Jeremiah standing in the temple courts, accusing his fellow Jews of their stiff-necked stubbornness, and pleading with them. Suddenly, the roles are reversed and Stephen, the accused one, becomes the accuser.

This, of course, has happened many times during the history of Israel and the Christian church. Time and again the faithful believers have faced accusations and persecution, and with their words and deeds have turned the arrows of accusation back to their opponents. Sometimes it has been done quietly but there are occasions which call for bold preaching in the most hostile of contexts.

As to Stephen's sermon in Jerusalem, preached just a little while after the death and resurrection of Jesus and probably to the very people who had condemned Jesus to death, it can be seen as the "final stinging rebuke of the Jewish elite and populace before mooting the focus of the Gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles" (Peterson 2014, 355). Jews' time as the special people of God is up, with the Pentecost a whole new era has been launched, and Stephen's stinging sermon is one landmark of this changed reality and a bitter reminder to the Jews of their failure. Stephen is not trying to defend himself or secure his future, on the contrary, he accuses his listeners of the most severe of sins, probably knowing this will cost him his life.

Of course, there was no need for Stephen to lecture the Sanhedrin on points of Jewish history. That history was well known to his hearers. But he chooses strategically important events from their national story to highlight a certain pattern. This is their shared history, and despite the harsh rebuke, Stephen remains Jewish and therefore dialogical.

Stephen's speech consists of 7 scenes:

1. God's promise to Abraham (Acts 7:1–8)

2. Joseph and God's faithfulness (Acts7:9–16)

3. Israel rejects Moses (Acts 7:17–29)

4. Moses as Israel's deliverer (Acts 7:30–36)

5. Israel rejects Moses again (Acts 7:37–43)

6. God and tabernacle/temple (Acts 7:44–50)

7. Stephen applying the message to his audience (Acts 7:51–53)

1. Stephen starts where all Jewish histories start. The story of the calling of Abraham is the beginning of the national narrative and source of pride since this is where the special relationship between God and Abraham's descendants was established.

Yet, Stephen reminds his audience that the reality was far from perfect: Abraham was not completely obedient (he did not leave all his relatives and did not go straight to the place God wanted him to go) and the fulfillment of promises was delayed (God did not give him the land, and for a long time, Abraham did not have a child). In addition to these obstacles, a somber prediction was made about Abraham's descendants being under foreign oppression for 400 years. Yet, God gave Abraham a covenant and promise, His faithfulness was bigger than Abraham's obedience.

Therefore, right in the beginning of his homily, Stephen establishes the most important facts: the people of God have been far from obedient and still, God has been faithful to his promise and his plans. Since Stephen was also accused of blaspheming the temple, it is not surprising that another theme reoccurring in Stephen's sermon is that of a temple—the special place of worship and connection. In the beginning of the historical narrative, he reminds his listeners that Abraham had no need for a shrine or temple because God appeared to and communicated with him directly.

2. Stephen continues with the history of God's faithfulness and the story of Abraham's descendants. His next subject is Joseph who is pictured as "paragon of righteousness and the object of God's deliverance" (Whitenton 2012, 151).

The story sees Joseph go through many trials but in the end he has an elevated position in Egypt and is reconciled with his brothers. Through Joseph, God delivers His people from starvation and stays true to His promise. Although he was abandoned by his own brothers and left for dead, he came back mightily and became a savior to the very people who had mistreated him and betrayed him.

Stephen is clearly building a case for Jesus here and behind his words there is an early Christian understanding that in some mysterious ways, Jesus was the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament. As to the temple motif, Stephen emphasises the constant spiritual presence of God—Joseph did not need a physical temple because much like Abraham; he was close to God.

3. Stephen moves on to the next crucial scene in the history of Israel. Moses is introduced and in a lengthy manner his life is described. Stephen is now using Moses' life to build up a later comparison between him and Jesus. God has seen His people's misery

and has decided to act through an appointed deliverer. But Israelites do not recognise God's plan nor what Moses is sent to do. Instead, they ask Moses crudely, "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" (Acts 7:27) Israelites deny Moses has any right to lead them and they reject him, and together with him, also God's plan of deliverance.

4. Although Israel had rejected Moses, God shows through a number of mighty miracles and signs and a close personal relationship with him that neither His choice nor calling have changed. God appears to Moses personally and appoints him as Israel's deliverer. If Stephen's listeners have ears to hear and eyes to see, they should be able to recognise in Jesus a second Moses.

5. Stephen then recalls one of the most dramatic and embarrassing stories from Israel's history, namely the story of the golden calf. This is a story of Israel rejecting Moses' leadership for the second time as they were "unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside" (Acts 7:39). But what is even worse, by erecting the idol, they also rejected God's leadership. Instead of worshipping the living God, they turned to something man-made, reveling "in the works of their hands" (Acts 7:41).

This might be seen as a hidden reference to the Jewish temple as something man-made that had taken the elevated position which should have belonged only to God. Stephen who is being on trial for saying things against the temple has turned the situation upside down, accusing the Jewish leaders of blasphemy. With prophetic vision encompassing both the past and the future, Stephen tells of God's turning away from them and their precious temple. The tragedy is manifold—by turning away from God-sent deliverer and elevating a physical, man-made object to the position of god, Israel has lost its special connection with God. Stephen's parallels between past and present must be obvious to his audience.

6. Yet, God's faithfulness and mercy triumph over judgment. God still stays true to his covenant and remains close to his people, doing it by the means of a tabernacle and later, a temple. However, even the tabernacle/temple could not keep Israelites from rejecting God and His special messengers. While the temple served its purpose as a visual representation of God's presence and the means of forgiveness, it was only that—a representation. Stephen reminds his audience that no temple could contain God.

7. Now, Stephen sharply turns from historical lessons to a present application which takes the form of a dire judgment and condemnation. Sounding again like an Old Testament prophet, he condemns his audience for repeating the errors of their forefathers. The whole historical overview has been built up to underline one message—Israel through her leaders has once again rejected God's deliverer. Like had happened in the past with their ancestors, now they themselves had become "betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:52). The sins of the past have become the sins of the present. Israel is guilty.

Reading this sermon two millennia after it was preached, it still touches a nerve. There are raw emotions in this sermon, and not only that of anger or accusation. There is terrible sadness in Stephen's words as he looks back on the history of his people and realises that not God's hand-picked representatives nor special guidance nor even his presence in the tabernacle/temple could hold them back from going down the wrong path and murdering the Righteous One (Acts 7:52). It is not difficult to picture Stephen finishing his fiery sermon with a shaking voice and teary eyes, lamenting the terrible tragedy of the Jewish nation.

It was a sermon which triggered a very emotional—even violent—reaction. There was no yawning, minds did not go wandering mid-sermon, every single heart in the Council was touched. Although the outcome was not favorable for Stephen, it still stands

as one of the most touching and courageous sermons in the history of the Christian church.

Homiletically speaking, this sermon may not sound particularly interesting or intriguing to our Postmodern ears. It is a lengthy narrative, ending abruptly in a condemning conclusion. But when seen in its original Jewish context, it is a brilliant example of the use of "Jewish exegetical techniques" and "interpretive traditions" (Whitenton 2012, 149) which the author has employed for persuasive purposes.

Stephen uses the key figures in Jewish history, modifying and highlighting certain aspects of their story with rabbinical skill, he plays with the motifs of temple and God's presence, he draws certain parallels between past and present, all this within the context of Hellenistic Judaism. Not only is this speech an apologetic discourse within the context of the accusation of blasphemy, it is also a homily that skillfully connects "three principal themes of pre-A.D. 70 Judaism—the land (7:2–36), the law (7:37–43), and the temple (7:44–50)" (Sweeney 2002, 188). Thus, Stephen addresses both the accusation in immediate context but also speaks about larger topics that might have interested other Jews.

He does this, using an inductive method, building his sermon up to a climax that cannot be shaken off easily (Craddock 1981). With the coherent flow of ideas which are linked together by transitional phrases, beginning with common, even trivial knowledge and ending with a shocking conclusion, it is burnt into the minds of the listeners long after the sermon is over and in this case, also long after the preacher is dead.

In conclusion, Stephen's homily in Acts 7 is an outstanding example of a context-sensitive and dialogical sermon. By using a familiar narrative and shared knowledge, he is able to stress his main point—the apostasy of Israel—and build tension which is

released in his scalding address at the end of the sermon. With sadness, boldness and extraordinary skill, Stephen demonstrates what a powerful preaching can look like. As we all know, that sermon had a stronger effect on Sanhedrin than Stephen could have imagined.

Peter's Sermon at Cornelius' Place (Acts 10:34–43)

The book of Acts describes the fulfillment of Jesus' prediction: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). It is a book that "contains a strong geographical element" (Alexander 2017: 12). The progress of the Gospel message from Jewish Jerusalem to semi-Jewish Samaria to the Gentile territories is deliberate and clear, yet it did not happen without setbacks or confusion.

There were a great number of inward and outward obstacles that needed to be overcome in order for these Jesus' words to come true. With disarming candor, the book of Acts describes them, and at the same time the book offers us an assurance—the witness of Jesus which began in Jerusalem with a small group of believers did reach Judea, Samaria and then the glorious Rome itself.

It is interesting to note that the sermons in Acts follow the logic and the geography of the narrative. In the opening chapters, Peter is pictured preaching in Jerusalem, among fellow Jews. Stephen addresses the Sanhedrin, the very pinnacle of Jewish religious community. Their messages rely heavily upon the Old Testament, the topic of fulfillment of God's promises and the Jewish nation's resistance to God's activity.

However, from chapter 8 onward Luke starts shifting his focus from the life of Jerusalem church to the Gentile mission, with stories of Philip preaching to Samaritans

and baptising an Ethiopian eunuch (whose bodily disability, by the law of Moses, should have excluded him from the assembly of God). The tension concerning the Gentiles' right to hear and receive the Gospel message as equals reaches its first climax in chapter 10 where God confronts Peter and gives him a direct instruction—or an order—to go to a Roman officer's house and share the good news of the Gospel with his household. This instruction is preceded by a dramatic vision of unclean animals and God's declaration about their cleanness. Thus, Peter's sermon to Cornelius represents a pivotal moment in the book of Acts as a deep shift occurs both in the audience as well as in the mindset of the preacher.

The second climax concerning the 'Gentile issue' occurs in chapter 15 where the Jerusalem council, after many bitter debates and dissenting opinions, clears the path for the Gentiles to join the Christian church on an equal basis with the Jews. In the second half of the book of Acts, concentrating exclusively on the ministry and missionary journeys of Paul (the reader will not hear about Peter after the Jerusalem council as if he had vanished), Luke records a number of Paul's sermons that are preached to non-Jewish churches or exclusively Gentile audiences in multi-religious Roman cities. In this way, the sermons support the general outline of the book of Acts.

As to Peter's sermon in Acts 10, there are several details which connect this story to the story of Jonah in the Old Testament. Both Peter, son of Jonah, and prophet Jonah begin their extraordinary journeys from Joppa. They are both given a commission "Arise and go", a commission to proclaim God's Word to the Gentiles; both stories record the conversion of Gentiles, and result in anger from those who did not deem them worthy of the message (Wall 1987).

These are striking parallels which seem to underline an important principle—Jonah's God is also Peter's God whose mission and purpose has always been the salvation of all. The concrete and easy categories of holy and unholy, clean and unclean are suddenly suspended. The scope of God's saving vision for the world is, again, revealed.

In Peter's context, the implication is that the door of the Christian church must be open to all. Although Peter does not challenge the invitation openly and Luke does not comment on Peter's struggles, knowing his later inconsistency when it came to eating with the Gentile Christians, it is safe to assume that it was a confusing and difficult situation for Peter. Matson and Brown (2006) comment on the story, saying:

> The admittance of Gentiles into the fellowship of the church without recourse to circumcision and Torah observance would radically alter the character of the early Christian communities, from an exclusively Jewish sect in Jerusalem to a multi-ethnic community poised to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. (453)

It is clearly a watershed moment in the history of the Christian movement, a moment of an "illicit meeting of those who should not be together" (Jennings 2017: 109) where God is shattering the religious borders and boundaries deeply rooted in Israelites' religious psyche.

What could Peter possibly say in the context where two conversions are simultaneously taking place—that of Cornelius and that of his own? How does he address his hearers when it is clear that the inclusiveness of the Gospel shocks him as much as it shocks his audience? What can he say in a context where God is clearly moving forward faster than the church leaders? What can a preacher do when her/his viewpoints are challenged as much as that of the congregation?

Peter's short sermon speaks both to his Gentile audience as well as the Jewish one. He starts with an introduction that probably puzzles him and his Jewish companions considerably more than the Gentiles, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34–35). Maybe this is as far as he can bring himself verbally to fully accept the Gentiles within the people of God? With this opening, he annihilates the Jewish pride and prejudices that had accumulated over the centuries, and at the same time, he assures the non-Jews who so far have been excluded from the Jewish religious community. He demolishes all religious walls that had been built between the Hebrews and other nations, not letting his audience see his inner struggles.

Peter then proceeds with the kerygma, summarising the meaning and importance of Jesus' life and death. It all began in Galilee after John had baptised Jesus and he had been anointed with the Holy Spirit and power. He went around, doing good deeds and healing illnesses until his death (for which no explanation is given). On the third day he was raised from the dead. It would be difficult to summarise Jesus' life in less words than those.

Compared to Stephen's speech, there is no direct reference to the Old Testament or the Jewish history. As the sermon concentrates on recent events of Jesus' life and death, the Old Testament background does not seem to be relevant in this context. Neither is there any attempt to prove God's existence or describe His character. Cornelius, living in a Jewish culture, deeply religious, already believes in the God the Jews worship. The only thing that is truly important in this context is the fact that Jesus as God's chosen brought freedom, healing and salvation to all who wanted and needed it. Although he was killed in the most brutal manner, God raised him from the dead and appointed him a

judge over every person living or dead. "The content of the gospel comes home in this sermon to its sharpest truth" (Jennings 2017: 112); this is the only thing Peter thought Cornelius needed at that particular time.

After the kerygma, Peter closes with reminding his hearers that Jesus as the God-appointed judge is the one the Scriptures testify about and that "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43).

This sermon, heard by both Jews and Gentiles, is a textbook example of inclusiveness. No religious or cultural differences are highlighted, there is no trace of the "requirements" for the Gentile Christians the Jerusalem council would agree on in the future (Acts 15). Peter's presence in Cornelius' home supports his message of openness and inclusiveness—he is sharing the good news in a Gentile household. *This* is the main thing.

From a homiletical viewpoint, it is interesting to see how Peter incorporates his personal story in his sermon. Stephen, using a lengthy narrative and focusing on Israel's story throughout centuries, did not include his personal story. Maybe he did not see it necessary or appropriate. Peter, however, uses a different approach. He does not in any way distance himself from the story of Jesus, on the contrary, he mentions twice his role as a witness—he witnessed both the life of Jesus (Acts 10:39) and his death and resurrection (Acts 10:41).

It is important for him to be able to testify to people who had had no personal contact with Jesus about the extraordinary nature of his life and death. He wants his audience to be certain of the truth-value of his words. He assures them that he is the eye-witness of all that he is proclaiming. This is no second-hand proclamation, he himself was

closely connected to Jesus, eating and drinking with him after his miraculous resurrection, and also receiving from Jesus a commission to preach and testify about him.

The appropriateness of sharing one's own story in a sermon has been a subject of discussion among many homileticians. Thulin (1989), for example, cautions preachers and lists a number of dangers that come with self-portrayal: 1) the personal story may become dominant and the biblical text may be forgotten, 2) the biblical text can be trivialised as an afterthought to preacher's own story, 3) the biblical text and the personal story may run as parallels without them never fully engaging with each other.

At the same time, in a Postmodern era of suspicion, trust is often gained through one's willingness "to share, to be genuine, and to be vulnerable" in a sermon (Parker 2016, 100). Analysing Peter's sermon, his own story does not dominate his sermon in any way. But in a manner that would appeal to the Postmodern people, he shares his personal testimony of a life with Jesus and thus adds authority to kerygma. This sermon, preached in surprising and extraordinary context, records and shows Peter's own journey toward and his increasing understanding of an inclusive Christian movement.

This sermon is a good reminder for any Postmodern Christian—one needs to be able to share one's own story and the story of Jesus in a couple of short sentences. The personal testimony needs to be clear and appealing as the opportunity to share faith might be over in a couple of minutes' time. There is no need for long and difficult theological treatise nor a complete list of fundamental beliefs. In unexpected circumstances when one's conversational partner already has some knowledge of the Christian faith, it is important to create an appealing picture of Jesus and tell what one's personal experience with Jesus is. Peter's encounter with Cornelius and his sermonette are encouraging examples of how life-changing such moments can be.

Paul's Sermon in Athens (Acts 17:22–31)

Following the Lukan narrative, we can detect the advancement of the Gospel message as it was predicted by Jesus (Acts 1:8). From Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish religion, the message spread to the surrounding regions. The inevitable tension between keeping the faith Jewish *versus* admitting the Gentiles to the Christian community, was captured within Peter's sermon in Caesarea. As the story advances, we come to the central figure in the book of Acts—apostle Paul.

After chapter 15 when Peter disappears from the scene, Luke turns his literary lens to Paul, concentrating on his missionary journeys on Gentile territories of the Asia Minor. The Jewish audiences are being replaced by those who have no previous knowledge of neither Jewish history nor the person of Jesus, the context of occupied Israel is being replaced with the context of ruling Roman powers. The sermons found in the latter part of Acts reflect the changing scene. The most outstanding example of a sermon preached in a religiously pluralistic and thoroughly Hellenistic context is that of Paul on the Areopagus in Athens. Luke portrays him as a 'second Peter' but while Peter needed divine and direct prompting from God to step into Gentile territory, Paul is here willingly, turning not away from the Gentiles but toward them (Jennings 2017). It is a sermon that demonstrates Paul's extraordinary willingness to embrace people radically different from him and his skill of persuasion.

In a way, Athens and the Postmodern era have a number of traits in common. The religious life of Athens at the time of Paul was pluralistic and polytheistic, people were unusually free to choose the gods they wanted to worship, much like at a market place. The choice of gods was plentiful; it was a world of Rome as a major colonial power

which, by the help of *Pax Romana*, had created a culture of pluralism and had brought the local deities into the melting pot of an empire.

The religious tolerance was relatively high and individuals, as they chose which gods they wanted to worship, were actively engaged in the act of creating their self. The multiethnic and multicultural context of the empire created a fertile soil for the exchange of different ideas. The postcolonial West of the 21st century shares many of the traits of that ancient world.

As to the city itself, Athens boasted of a great number of temples and smaller shrines, all dedicated to different gods or the cult of the emperor. There were a number of temples dedicated to Zeus, Athene, Demeter, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Ares, Dionysos, Hera, Heracles, Poseidon, the Egyptian gods Isis and Anubis, plus shrines in honor of different emperors and heroes (Schnabel 2005). The freedom of belief was accompanied with the freedom of speech.

The Agora (marketplace) in Athens was especially suitable for such exchange of ideas and was a platform for free speech. It was surrounded by impressive government buildings and temples; colonnades offered shade and shelter throughout the year. Stott (1990) notes that the modern equivalent of the marketplace where Paul conversed with people would be "a park, city square or street corner, a shopping mall or marketplace, a pub, neighborhood bar, cafe, discotheque or student cafeteria, wherever people meet when they are at leisure" (281).

Paul did not find it beneath him to mingle with the locals where they felt most comfortable and this created many opportunities for him to share his beliefs. On the contrary, his opening words "ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι" (Acts 17:22) stress Paul's friendly and somewhat informal approach to the town's philosophers as he uses words of kinship

endearment to address them. Although they are different, Paul sees them and approaches them as comrades (Rhamie 2019, 331).

Despite the pluralism, there was also a conservative element in the city which balanced and regulated the abundance of beliefs available—the council of elders who in the past had had significant political power but who, in Paul's days, had ceased to have political authority and who were regarded as the guardians of the traditional Athenian ways (Camp 2001). During Roman times, there were around a hundred members in the council. As Paul catches the attention of Epicureans and Stoic philosophers at the marketplace (17:18), he is brought to the Areopagus and the educated audience made of philosophers and council of elders asks Paul to explain himself and defend his belief as an orator.

Unlike Stephen, Paul is not accused of anything. Unlike Peter, he has not been asked to speak to an audience specifically interested in Christianity. Rather he is seen as a foreign orator whose rhetorical skills and argumentations are under public scrutiny.

Compared to Peter's speech in Cornelius' home, Paul does not concentrate on the classical kerygma, he does not even mention the name of Jesus in his apologetic speech. Rather, he is explaining his doctrine of God in dialogue with the local philosophers and within the context of the 'marketplace' of gods (Schnabel 2005). Luke plays cleverly with the tradition of Socrates, placing Paul within the classical Hellenistic context of philosophy. He portrays Paul as a kind of second Socrates who has an important message to the free city that the people of Athens do not want to hear (Wason 2017).

Paul demonstrates an acquaintance with the local philosophical streams and literature. He uses language and concepts that are familiar to his listeners; after all, his

hometown Tarsus was an important cultural and educational center and Paul was well informed about the intellectual debates of his day. He even goes as far as to quote a Gentile author Aratus from 3rd century B.C. whose line "We are his offspring" refers to Zeus in a poem that talks about weather signs and constellations (Charles 1995). Paul's open-mindedness and courage to dip into the stream of pagan culture could have been shocking to many Christians, yet he did not shy away from using popular literature as a bridge between himself and his audience. Even in this respect, the apostle Paul stands out as a role model to all preachers aspiring to find common ground between them and their listeners.

Parallels between Paul and the Postmodern world are not difficult to detect. In many cases, witnessing and preaching happen in pluralistic contexts where people are not particularly interested in the message, sometimes they can even be hostile. In such a context it is good to learn from Paul who not only in Athens but in every Roman city conversed with non-Christians. It is also worthwhile to notice that Paul had none of the later Western and colonial contempt for his hearers, he, rather, saw his hearers as people deeply loved and wanted by God.

Paul as an experienced preacher knows that the best way to get the council's attention is to begin with the familiar. In their religious fervor, the Athenians had erected altars to unknown gods. Paul acknowledges their religiosity and claims that he represents and preaches such an unknown god, making a strong connection between the Athenians' life and his own message. To the council, who might have heard such claims before and who might have included new deities to the pantheon in the past, it sounds as if Paul is trying to acquire a piece of land for a shrine or initiate a new cult. For them, it is only a matter of adding one new god and cult to the abundance of gods and cults already present.

Yet, Paul's purposes are different. He has not come to Athens in order to make enough room for the Creator God for him to have an altar among others in the city center. Although he builds a bridge with his audience and uses the common ground as his starting point, he has come to turn their religious beliefs upside down and introduce a whole new worldview to them, one that is shockingly different from their current one. He never loses from sight the uniqueness of the faith he proclaims nor its universal claim.

The first point of Paul's sermon is this—God does not need a shrine nor does he live in man-made temples. He is far above any material dwelling place and geographical location. He is not a god one could pin down. He is not a god who would need the acknowledgment of the Roman empire. Thus, there is no need for a piece of land or a shrine in Athens.

Secondly, Paul obliterates an idea that he has come to Athens to establish a new cult. Creator God does not require a cult nor special religious personnel, since he is not "served by human hands, as though he needed anything" (Acts 17:25).

And thirdly, there is no magic way of evoking his presence or getting his attention because he is already omnipresent and indescribably closer than people think since "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

In short, Paul completely annihilates the categories in which the Athenians are used to think. His end goal is nothing less than a total change of the worldview (and subsequently, the lifestyle) of his audience. As Jennings (2017) puts it so eloquently, it is a "speech that evokes a decision: either laugh at it or listen to it, either leave or draw near to this body [of resurrected Jesus]" (178).

Here, once again, we can draw a parallel to our Postmodern times. The Christian message today has the same radical quality it had in Athens—a preacher in the

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Postmodern times is not asking for a little space for Creator God in people's busy lives and minds. She or he is asking for a complete change in worldview and therefore, life practices. The preacher is asking for a deep re-evaluation of reality. The magnitude of the task can be disheartening at times but it is the only way forward if the preacher wants to stay true to the Gospel message. Stott (1990) is resolute—Christians are called to "do battle with contemporary non-Christian philosophies and ideologies in a way which resonates with thoughtful, modern men and women" (281). It is a war of worldviews we are called to engage in, and the stakes are high.

Let us not forget that representatives of two different philosophical streams—Stoics and Epicureans—were present at the Areopagus. Paul, well aware of their views, addressed both groups in his sermon, and offered both a way forward.

Epicureans were atomists and empiricists, believing in a material world and the knowledge derived from empirical observation. Impersonal chance governed the world; atoms, which were the building blocks of the universe, followed intrinsically the laws of nature without any need for external impulse. For Epicureans, the realm of gods was part of reality (since gods, too, were made of atoms) but gods were infinitely distant and impersonal, and they had no real effect on the world. Epicureans also rejected any idea of an afterlife and looked down on their contemporaries' inclination toward superstition (Schnabel 2005).

To Epicureans, Paul tells with confidence about Creator God who is personally concerned with His creation, who upholds the created world continually, and who is imminently present with his created beings (Pardigon 2008). There is no life outside the will of a personal God, and it is this God who bestows good gifts and directs people's

lives with wisdom and care. There is nothing impersonal in this world, nothing is left to chance. The Epicurean understanding of the world is challenged and shaken to its core.

It is interesting to note that the Modern worldview echoes that of Epicureans. Modernity also valued natural sciences above all else and saw God as somewhat distant; at best God was seen as a watchmaker who had fine-tuned the Universe and then left it to its own device, withdrawing completely. The world was upheld by natural laws, not a God who would be personally interested in and constantly at work in the world. Paul's Areopagus speech challenges the Modern mindset just as much as it challenged Epicureans many centuries ago. The preaching in the Modern context has/had to help people see beyond the natural and coincidental, beyond the mundane and predictable. It is preaching which makes God personal and close again, and it is preaching which does not back down from exposing the modern worldview as arrogant and insufficient. As Willimon (1997) has put it, „The Bible does not want to speak to the modern world; the Bible wants to convert the modern world" (27).

The Stoics, on the other hand, were the "spiritual" ones. For them just as for the Epicureans, gods were a natural part of the universe, but in their understanding the role and nature of gods was completely different. While the Epicureans saw gods as distant, too busy with their own blissful existence to bother with the rest of the universe, Stoic God was immanent and directed the creation to the smallest detail; God was a cosmic heart beat or an active life force, living and directing the universe, permeating the whole of the creation. God could not be separated from creation.

While Paul agrees with Stoics about creation being the natural revelation, he strongly denies the idea of God blending into creation. He sees God as separate from everything he has created, showing himself to humankind through a special revelation as

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the Lord and Judge of all. This, naturally, raises the issue of personal accountability. While Stoics advocated the classical virtues and promoted virtuous living, as long as God remained a corporeal spirit, there was no personal accountability nor a time of judgment somewhere in the future. Paul reminds his Stoic listeners that there is more to God than just his ability to create. He is also deeply interested in the fate of his created beings.

In the Postmodern world where everyone is allowed their own truth and where God is at best dissolved into the fabric of life, where the pluralistic market place of religious ideas is alive and busy, Paul's words maintain their urgency and appeal. The call for repentance has never been popular—and for Stoics might have sounded even ridiculous—but Paul does not back down from it, declaring that this personal and magnificent God "commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). When it comes to this God, everything is personal and everyone is accountable. This accountability has its climax in a "day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). Thus, even the little details of life matter.

Reading Paul's Areopagus sermon, one cannot help but admire his frankness and boldness. He knew his emotional appeal would have a reaction—in most cases a reaction of scoffing and laughing. He knew he preached a radical and inconvenient message, calling people to abandon their gods who live comfortably far or who are safely impersonal. He knew he challenged Roman pluralism. He knew most of his listeners would never consider exchanging their comfortable religious ideas for a life with a Creator God who is also a judge.

Yet, he still preached his sermon. He could not keep quiet in the middle of religious confusion, knowing how much God loved these people. Using every method of

persuasion available to him, employing arguments and concepts accessible to these Gentile philosophers, adapting to the intellectual environment of Athens, he pleaded with them and encouraged them to change the way they perceived the world. As was to be expected, most of them rejected Paul's message. Nevertheless, some were converted.

Summary

Close reading of the sermons found in the book of Acts is a rewarding activity. Often these sermons are upstaged by the narrative which takes the central stage with its adventurous nature and colorful characters. Sermons seem to slow down the story. But when one takes a closer look at these sermons and understands their role in the strategically significant junctions of the narrative, the picture changes.

These sermons do not only become an essential part of the narrative, they also offer valuable insight into the rhetoric and theological thought of the early Christian community and thus, become priceless educational material for any theologian or preacher. Stephen, Peter and Paul become the master preachers who use their theological knowledge and rhetoric skills to persuade people in every possible context. The way they approach their audience, the way they accuse and bless, the way they speak about Christ and salvation, the way they persuade their listeners—there is so much for the Postmodern preachers to learn. When these sermons are given their due, they can give so much encouragement and guidance to any contemporary preacher who is trying her/his best to communicate the Gospel truth in her/his particular context.

Some of the things that emerge from these sermons that are good to pay attention to are as follows. It is important to know the (religious) background of the audience and the shared history with them. Often, inductive preaching method is useful when the

preacher wants to build upon the shared values or history. One's personal encounter with God becomes also a valuable connecting point between the preacher and the audience as personal experiences are valued highly in the Postmodern times. The tone of the sermon depends greatly on the relationship the preacher has with her/his listeners. Sometimes conversational tone is a good choice, at other times persuasion or even strong appeals may be appropriate. In all cases, the preacher must be ready to contextualise her/his message to fit the needs of the particular people.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE RELATED TO POSTMODERNISM AND HOMILETICS

Religion in Europe

Several studies have been conducted about the religious beliefs and convictions in Europe. Despite small differences in percentages, the overall trends are clear—the religion in Europe has declined considerably over the past 60 years. This has resulted in a situation where only about a half of the population of the European Union believe in God ("Religion in Europe" n.d.).

Within this context, the results of individual countries and regions differ dramatically, in the same manner different age groups show different results. Southern European countries have a higher rate of religiosity, for example in Romania, Turkey, Malta, Kosovo, and Georgia more than 80% of the population identify themselves as believers ("Religion in Europe" n.d.). At the same time, in the Western and Northern part of Europe, the situation is very different—this is the only region in the world where Christianity is currently in decline (Coleman 2013).

In Scandinavian countries and in some former Soviet Union countries—including Estonia—the percentage of people claiming to believe in God is 30% or less ("Social Values, Science and Technology" 2005). When age is taken into consideration, the results from the countries with the low rate of religiosity are even starker. 80% of 16–29 year-olds in Estonia identify with no religion, 41% of the same age group in Estonia never attend a religious service and 67% claim they never pray (Bullivant 2018).

The reasons why such a religious landscape has developed are complex. History of any different regions, welfare, privatisation of faith, and reigning worldview all play a part in it. This study is interested in and focuses on the Post-Soviet context of Estonia with the special attention on young adults. In Estonia, two factors seem to play the major role in shaping the mindset of youth. First is the historical heritage of the Soviet Union, especially its atheistic propaganda. The other one is the prevailing Postmodern mindset. Both of them are examined.

Religion and the Soviet Union

After the Revolution of 1917 and the civil war which followed it, atheism was declared the reigning ideology of the Soviet Union. From 1928 onward, anti-religious campaigns were undertaken periodically with the aim of uprooting religious beliefs and replacing religion with the cult of the Communist Party. Both clergy and practicing church members were severely persecuted (Hristova 2015). Organised religion was seen as an enemy of humanity and also as an enemy of the Communist state.

The effects of the totalitarian regime of terror went, naturally, far beyond the religious sphere. The society was affected on all its levels with "profound demoralisation of citizens, learned helplessness, undemocratic thinking, and distrust of institutions" (Macek and Markova 2004, 173) being the most obvious consequences. On many occasions, social contacts in communities weakened since the fear of spies and official complaints made people suspicious of each other. The history was rewritten, the Western contacts and influences were severely limited, free movement outside the borders of the Soviet Union was impossible. Several generations grew up, stripped of their basic democratic rights.

Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1944. From 1945 onward, all church affairs in Estonia were being regulated by government officials according to the Provisional Instruction for the Functioning of Religious Organisations which in turn was based on the instructions received from Moscow (Altnurme 2001). In addition to these instructions which restricted the functioning of Christian churches in the public domain and prohibited the publishing of religious literature, the churches also had to deal with the losses and damage caused by the Second World War.

In 1944, when the Soviet army occupied Estonia after the occupation of Nazi Germany, about 70 000 Estonians fled the country, including a considerable number of pastors and priests from different denominations. Dozens of church buildings had been completely destroyed in war, hundreds had been damaged (Altnurme and Remmel 2009). After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the oppression started to recede and the situation of the churches started to improve slowly. Thousands of people (including clergy) who had been forcefully deported to Siberia in the 1940s and who had survived, were allowed to return to Estonia. In the 1950s, first contacts with churches in the West were established, although they were heavily monitored by the Secret Service (KGB) (R. Altnurme 2006). A few religious publications were allowed.

A second wave of persecutions took place during the reign of Nikita Kruchev. In 1959, instructions were received from Moscow concerning atheistic ideology and its promotion. In the beginning of 1960s, administrative oppression was increased and the official propaganda was strengthened by public lectures.

It was understood by the Soviet regime that "cutting the roots" of religion was necessary—the annihilation of religious rituals and ceremonies which were connected to the most important happenings of life (birth, marriage, death, etc.). The Communist party

promoted non-religious and atheistic alternatives to ecclesiastic ceremonies. Less and less weddings and funerals were conducted in churches, and by the end of 1960s, the church as a cultural and religious phenomenon was removed from the everyday life of most Estonians (Altnurme and Remmel 2009).

The same tendency, although on a smaller scale, continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. According to official statistics (which probably distorted the figure), only 5% of Estonian citizens were Christians in 1988 (Sild and Salo 1995). Even if this percentage is not accurate, it is clear that by and large the Communist party had succeeded in its mission.

A major shift in the religious scene took place in the end of 1980s and in the beginning of 1990s. It was a time of both national and religious awakening. These two were, of course, connected. Going to church was seen as an act of rebellion against the state (which was, by that time, disintegrating and could not sustain the mechanism of persecution and the atmosphere of fear). Furthermore, the Western aid reached Estonia first through religious organisations, giving people an extra motivation to be connected to churches.

The general interest in Christianity subsided in a couple of years when rapid economic growth and the success of the digital society in the mid-1990s changed the focus of the nation and religion as a topic all but disappeared from public discourse again. For many Estonians, liberal market economy has almost become a substitute for religion with 83% of Estonians placing their belief only in themselves and their capabilities (L. Altnurme 2021).

At the same time, Eastern religions and esoteric practices have become increasingly popular (Altnurme and Remmel 2009). As a lingering legacy from the Soviet

times, "distrust, uncertainty and skepticism" (Macek and Markova 2004, 173) toward political and religious institutions has remained high. It is a difficult and time-consuming task to get rid of that legacy in a country where "fear, suspicion, and intolerance dominated public life" (Macek and Markova 2004, 174) for five decades.

This mixture of syncretism, intolerance, suspicion toward institutions and the influence of liberal market economy can be said to shape the current religious situation. Several generations have grown up in the environment of intense atheist propaganda, they have received no religious education and even if they sense religiosity, they do not know how to explain or describe it (Nõmmik and Altnurme 2015). Adding to this the almost religious fervor toward success, the influence of Western and Postmodern ideas that arrived with independence, and it is not difficult to see that the statistics describe the Estonian religious landscape accurately.

Postmodern Worldview

Modernism

Postmodernism as a prevailing Western way of seeing and relating to reality did not appear from a void. It was preceded by the Modern worldview which had its roots in the Enlightenment.

From Augustine to Reformation, the Western civilisation was governed by theologians and theological considerations. The world was seen as a well-ordered and holistic entity with God standing at its center (Grenz 1996). Divine revelation was the source of ultimate knowledge and thus beyond doubt. The existence of absolute truth was not questioned.

This equilibrium was radically disrupted by Enlightenment. Enlightenment era, which started together with the scientific revolution in the 17th century, was the Age of Reason which moved God and revelation to the sidelines and put human reason, intellectual and moral abilities to the center stage. However, the Enlightenment did not only question God's reign and absolute truth in the religious spheres, it also questioned an absolute reign in human spheres. This led to many political upheavals and revolutions, abolishing the rule of absolute monarchs in many countries (Strangway 2004). This major worldview shift manifested itself in different ways.

S. Grenz is one author who has listed the most important characteristics of the Enlightenment. These characteristics have heavily influenced Western thinking ever since.

First, since the Enlightenment human reasoning has been seen as the most important ability and source of knowledge, opposed to divine revelation. This led to the autonomous self as the ultimate authority against which all the external claims to authority would be tested (Grenz 1996).

However, the Enlightenment did not only change the way people perceived themselves and their abilities, it also deeply altered the way they perceived and understood the world around them. Philosopher R. Descartes and scientist I. Newton were the main contributors to this shift. Descartes defined a human being as a rational and independent subject, Newton pictured the world as a machine with its inner dynamics, laws and regularity (Erickson 1998). For them, both the world as well as the universe had an overarching order. Thus, as the world was orderly and knowable, progress was possible (Grenz 1996). Grenz (2001) concludes, stating that "the modern human is Descartes' autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton's mechanistic world"

(79). With the secular science and belief in progress came also optimism and hope that the world would gradually get better. Humans were seen as the controlling agents who would use reason and industrial/technical advancements to make the world more harmonious and prosperous.

The secular optimism was deepened and supported by theological ideas. In the end of the 17th century and in the beginning of the 18th century, the study on biblical prophecies—especially those of Daniel—became increasingly popular. As people saw the historical events happening around them as the fulfillment of Daniel's 1260-day prophecy, their attention then turned to the fulfillment and nature of Daniel's 2300-day prophecy. Most theologians and preachers in the first part of the 19th century believed that Daniel's prophecy pointed to a thousand years of earthly peace and plenty.

G. Knight has done an in-depth study and has shown how the secular optimism paralleled and supported the religious optimism. Social and religious leaders both believed that technological and political breakthroughs set the stage ready for heaven on Earth, with the United States leading the way (Knight 1993). For the Christians, the goal was personal perfection which was supposed to lead to social perfection, and gradually to the perfection of the whole world.

Postmodernism

The shattering of the prevailing optimism through the World Wars and the shock of the realisation that despite the technological advancements people would not attain better moral character led to the shaking of the Modern worldview. What made matters worse for the church was the fact that they had, in many parts of Europe, been complicit with the Nazi ideology, silently or vocally supporting the racial cleansing. For people

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who, after the Second World War, put an equality sign between the Fascism and Christianity, the reputation of organised Christian religion plummeted. Thus emerged a generation which declared the ideals and values of Modernism to have catastrophically failed.

Some scholars see the breaking from the Modern worldview as gradual and not deep nor decisive enough for it to be called Postmodernism. For example, Harvey (1992) has argued that "there is much more continuity than difference between the broad history of modernism and the movement of postmodernism" (116). He adds that it is better to understand the latter "as a particular crisis within the former" (116). Wells (2005) seconds to him. He is of the opinion that "we should not be too hasty in declaring the complete overthrow of the Enlightenment regime" (67). For him, the central idea for both Modernism and Postmodernism is the autonomous self—God as a self in Modernism and human as an antireligious self in Postmodernism—despite all the emphasis which Postmodern people put on community.

However, most of the scholars agree that the breaking from the Modern mindset has been deep and decisive. For example, Grenz (1996) defines Postmodernism in a following way:

> Postmodernism refers to an intellectual mood and an array of cultural expressions that call into question the ideals, principles, and values that lay at the heart of the modern mind-set. Postmodernity, in turn, refers to an emerging epoch, the era in which we are living, the time when the postmodern outlook increasingly shapes our society. Postmodernity is the era in which postmodern ideas, attitudes, and values reign—when postmodernism molds culture. It is the era of the postmodern society. (12)

Greer (2003) sees as the central and defining idea of Modernism the existence of absolute truths. Postmodernism, on the other hand, affirms the opposite: the non-existence

of absolute truths. Thus, concludes Greer, these two ways of understanding the world and life "are polar opposites" (13).

Greer also points out three basic characteristics of Postmodernism which makes it incompatible with Modernism. First, Postmodernism is characterised by plurality. It denies the existence of a single system of thought or belief on which all cultures depend (Greer 2003). Or in Lyotard's (1984) words, Postmodernism means "war on totality" (82). The world is no longer seen as a holistic entity, rather every individual is left to construct and give meaning to it from her/his point of view and through her/his experience.

Secondly, Postmodernism can be characterised by centerlessness where no common standards nor absolute moral values exist (Greer 2003). Grenz (1996) seconds to him, adding:

> Postmodern truth is relative to the community in which a person participates. And since there are many human communities, there are necessarily many different truths. Most postmoderns make the leap of believing that this plurality of truth can exist alongside one another. (14)

And thirdly, Postmodernism connotes subjectivism. There is no way of constructing an objective reality; objective knowledge is also an impossibility (Greer 2003). Reality is something relative and indeterminate, knowledge is personal, relational and always incomplete (Grenz 2001). McDowell and Hostetler (1998) count ten characteristics of Postmodernism which are all connected, the first gradually leading to the tenth:

1. The death of absolute truth
2. The disappearance of virtue
3. The demise of justice

4. The loss of conviction

5. The privatisation of faith

6. The tyranny of the individual

7. The disintegration of human rights

8. The dominance of feeling

9. The exaltation of nature

10. The descent into extremes. (50)

McDowell and Hostetler see and describe the Postmodern mindset through negative aspects which spiral downward toward chaos. To them seconds Oden (1995) who sees the Postmodern era in dark colors, stating that Postmodernism's "fruits are friendlessness, disaffection, divorce, drug abuse, and the despairing substitution of sexual experimentation for intimacy" (116).

Even if one is not prone to see the situation in colors as dark as this, it is clear that in the core of Postmodernism is the deconstructing of and the abandoning of the certainty which the Modern mindset was built upon. Henderson (1998) summarises Postmodernism well, stating: "At bedrock, postmodernism is the affirmation that there are no absolutes. Postmodernism is not so much a new worldview as it is the death of any coherent worldview" (55). The lack of stability, the lack of coherence, the lack of certainty about what is truth and what is not is the reality into which numerous generations of Westerners have been born into.

Metamodernism

Yet, there are some who are convinced that the days of Postmodernism in the Western world are over. As to present, there are a handful of people who claim that the

world is moving beyond Postmodernism to a new mindset which has been called Metamodernism.

The main ideologists of Metamodernism, Vermeulen and Van den Akker (2010), claim that the Western society is abandoning the "postmodern culture of relativism, irony, and pastiche" (59) and is moving toward a post-ideological philosophy which values engagement, affect, and storytelling. It is not seen so much as a coherent and stable worldview, rather, as Levin (2012) points out, 'meta' "implies an oscillation between modernism and Metamodernism and therefore must embrace doubt as well as hope and melancholy, sincerity and irony, affect and apathy, the personal and the political, and technology and techne" (para. 12). The characteristics and ideas which were seen to be incompatible can be compatible within the same individual or a group of people.

It is a mindset which embraces paradox and comes rather close to different religious traditions which have never fully embraced rigid Modernist methods of interpretation. Both Metamoderns as well as different religious traditions embrace paradox without constantly needing Modernist language patterns to explain away the paradoxes (Clasquin-Johnson 2017).

This is interesting as it seems to suggest that while Enlightenment and Modernism broke away from biblical/medieval mindset and rebelled against it, now the Western society has made a full circle and is again coming closer to the biblical worldview. As early as the mid-1980s, Huyssen (1986), when talking about Postmodernism, predicted that there might be a growing interest and fascination with pre-Modern cultures and ideas. Although Metamodernism as a concept has been around for merely ten years and although not all the scholars are convinced of its existence yet, it is a very relevant and intriguing topic for theologians to follow. Is the Western mindset returning, after 400

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years, to the mindset of pre-Enlightenment times? It might be too early to tell the exact characteristics of the Metamodern or post-Postmodern worldview (thus, this study stays within the framework of Postmodernism, using its characteristics and ample literature written on it) but if the direction of Metamodernism is toward biblical worldview, the Scripture and Christian experience may gain a status much more prominent in the future than they ever had during Modern and Postmodern times. The future may hold surprises for Christianity.

One of these areas where the Bible and the Christian life experience could or is supposed to connect with the society at large, is preaching. Thus, we turn to the field of homiletics, still keeping in mind the Postmodern way of understanding the world.

Homiletics and Postmodern People

The Modern and Postmodern times have not been easy on a Christian preacher nor on the status of the pulpit. During the last centuries, believing that the Christian Scriptures still remain the standard and the voice of truth has meant taking a rather unpopular position.

To this we need to add the changes which culture and language have gone through within the last centuries. Loscalzo (1992) points out that "the language we speak is undergoing massive reconstruction; the customs to which we cling no longer seem viable; our worldview is being completely rebuilt. In such a moment, not surprisingly, preaching is also in flux" (9). From a Christian point of view, the situation does not look promising (Boda 2001; Jensen 1996).

Yet, it is primarily through preaching and hearing the Word that a devoted believer can help the people around her/him make sense of the world and their

experience, no matter where these people stand worldview wise. Moreover, the kaleidoscope of worldviews and the Postmodern lack of centeredness also provides an opportunity. Mead (1991) reminds us that having lost the prominent status in society, the contemporary church finds itself in a situation similar to that of apostolic age when different beliefs and worldviews fragmented the society and often confused people. The apostles preached in a pluralistic context which Rome as an imperial power had created. Mead concludes that it is time for us to turn back to the book of Acts and approach Postmodernism as an opportunity, not as a threat, constantly keeping in mind that God is several steps ahead of the church, trying to invite her into increasing openness and inclusiveness.

When speaking specifically about the Postmodern world, there are several points of tension—and of connection—where preaching can create a meaningful encounter between a Postmodern person and the Bible.

1. Both the Bible and preaching value the unique and general human experience. Even if Postmoderns are suspicious of the moral norms and standards of the Bible, they value highly their experiences, however disconnected from the times of the Scripture. By showing biblical characters as real and fallible who had the same joys and sorrows as contemporary people do, the general human experience is uplifted and the bridge is built between the world of the Bible and the world of the listener (Robinson 2001). In this way, it is possible to demonstrate that the Scripture is not a book of ancient past but rather, as Stott (1982) puts it, "it is a living word to a living people from a living God, a contemporary message for the contemporary world" (97).

More than any other type, it is the narrative sermon that can emphasise human experience on personal and collective level. It is important to remember that human

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experience itself is inherently a narrative in form (Tilley 1985). We live a story. Thus, inviting the hearers to embark on a journey and to join the biblical characters can create a high level of involvement in the story and also an emotional connection to the characters. Or as Long (2005b) puts it, "stories 'create a world' and invite the listeners to enter that world and participate in it" (42).

Narrative preaching rejects the tendency of turning biblical stories—so dynamic and full of real tensions—into a number of objective propositions and abstract principles. While the objective and abstract principles may build barriers between the Gospel and a Postmodern hearer, emotionally engaging stories can destroy them. Buttrick (1987) calls this homiletical strategy of hearing and reacting to a story, experiencing both its discrepancies as well as solutions, "preaching in the mode of immediacy" (362).

Narratives are able to catch people in the depth of the tensions and dilemmas of their world, leading them to the redemptive discovery that the Gospel is able to "intersect the specifics of the human mystery and come out on the other side in resolution" (Lowry 2000, 25). This cautions and also invites preachers to take seriously the form of the sermon. It is good to remember Craddock's (1985) weighty words, "The form of the sermon shapes the faith of the listeners" (174).

2. The Bible creates and tells a metanarrative—also called "an inclusive theory of reality" (Erickson 2002, 117)—which everyone can relate to. Although Postmodernism has been described as "a crisis of narratives" (Hemming 2005, 15), narrative as a mode of knowing has witnessed a rebirth of interest in recent times (Schmitt 2014). This can be seen as a Postmodern reaction to the supremacy of traditional science. It takes into consideration the uniqueness of human experience, offering meaning and the sense of

belonging in an anchorless world. The personal narrative is constructed of episodes which are ordered and reordered in a way that they give life its meaning.

This complex art of constructing a life story does not end here—"one's personal story is joined to the stories of others in a shared community" (Schmitt 2014, 105). The story of community, in turn, can be integrated into a master narrative which, for Christians, tells the story from paradise lost to paradise restored, "about the whole world from its very beginning to the very end" (Webber 2008, 25). Master story is something that is able to give all of life meaning (Schmitt 2014).

While Postmoderns can be suspicious of certain parts of the biblical master story, what is attractive about it is the fact that the "Bible's big story offers an understanding of the world that compels participation in it" (Short 2012, 115). Greer (2003) describes the biblical narrative and its attractiveness to a Postmodern person like this:

> The narrative draws the reader into a world that is never fully understood or understandable but is nevertheless irresistible and compelling, precisely because a ring of authenticity. Because of this, it generates its own life—one that draws the reader in, creating a desire to vicariously experience that life. And that is its genius. (43)

While Postmodernism denies the monopoly of congregational or scholarly interpretation of the Bible (Fretheim and Froehlich 1998), through reader-response criticism it offers anyone a chance to interact with the biblical text and thus, to learn about oneself within the context of the biblical narrative (Kysar and Webb 2006). Postmodernism does not see any problem in shifting the attention and weight from the text (and its objectivity) to the reader.

On the contrary, it fits perfectly the individualism and relativism valued so highly by the Postmodern worldview. While in the Modern era and before that, the biblical metanarrative was seen as a 'window' through which one could see objective truths with

the help of historical-critical methods, the Postmodern mindset sees the narrative as a 'mirror' which illuminates the reader and the present moment (Webb 2000). Such reading inevitably results in autobiography: the reader's interpretation of the Bible reveals her or his own history and identity (Kysar and Webb 2006). The biblical story is internalised, giving the reader meaning, value and direction (Downing 2006; Vang and Carter 2006).

3. Preaching offers uncentered people a point of reference in the person of Jesus Christ. Even though the Postmodern people may be highly suspicious of institutionalised religion, it is not overtly difficult for them to sympathise with Jesus Christ. Jesus can be the point of reference for two reasons.

First, Postmoderns—especially the youth—can identify with Jesus' approach to life and with his life circumstances. Tapia (1994) puts it this way:

> Jesus was in his early thirties when he began his public work; he had no career path and no place he could call home. His greatest battles were against the dogmas of his day, and he showed little faith in institutions and rules and regulations. /…/ He spoke against injustice and did not have the stomach for inauthentic people. He thought globally but acted locally. (23)

Not only does this kind of life appeal to Postmoderns, it can and ought to be an example for Postmodern preachers in their quest to return to an authentic preaching style, engaging the controversies of the day, telling stories and shunning the religious clichés (Angle-Young 2014).

Of course, the attempt to make Jesus culturally relevant has its dangers, as Loscalzo (2000) correctly notes. In a Postmodern context where subjective interpretations are highly valued, Jesus can become a means to a subjective end. To feminists, he is like a keynote speaker at their convention, to social activist, he is the divine social activist, "in an attempt to be culturally relevant to the Coca-Cola generation, Jesus becomes "the Real

Thing"" (104). Here the Postmodern preachers do well to remember Gadamer's ([1960]

2004) classic words about the hermeneutical circle and the danger of allowing our

personal preferences, "fancies and popular concepts" (269) to be projected onto a text.

Secondly, in the age that has shunned the idea of an objective, monolithic truth,

Jesus offers another definition of it. He does not see truth as a separate entity nor does he

simply claim some things about him to be true, rather he states, "I am the truth" (Knight

III 1997). While the Modern era defined truth as something collective, unified, consistent

and logical, Jesus talks about it as something entirely relational; the Scripture claims that

all the truth humans need has come to us in the person of Jesus from Nazareth. Willimon

(1996) summarises it:

> For us Christians, all truth is "relative", relative to this Jew named Jesus. We really
> do not know what the world is, much less where it is headed, until we know him.
> Jesus does not start with abstract propositions which are alleged to be universally
> valid, objectively true, or other such external prior conceptions of truth. Rather, he
> begins with the truth which is a person, personal, embodied, and enacted. "*I* am the
> way, the truth and the life," he says. (35)

Of course, the problematic thing for Postmodernism is the claim that Jesus has

universal redemptive significance. Knight III (1997) calls it "a scandal of universality"

(70). The story and the Gospel of Christ can never be fully adjusted to or incorporated in

Postmodern mindset. There will always be tensions—Christ offers a center in a world of

no center, he claims sovereignty over this world, he offers salvation as a divine gift as

something opposed to human efforts (Wells 2005). In Christianity, the focal point around

which everything is centered is Jesus Christ (Webber 1999).

4. Preaching and the congregation—the validity of experiencing the work of the

Spirit through sermons, seeing the act of preaching as an encounter between a

human/congregation and God. The Postmodern homileticians have urged the preachers to

rethink and reorganise the sermon preparation process in a way that the congregation would be moved from the end of the preaching process to the beginning of it. This means that the hearers and their experiences, their longings and troubles are taken seriously enough for them to be moved from the position of passive consumers to that of co-creators (McClain 1994). Preachers are encouraged to use language which creates "an experience in the mind, heart, and lives of the listeners" (Lee 2018, 11).

Some would even go as far as to say that more than conveying content, the Postmodern homiletics is more interested in what a sermon may do or even undo in the in the experience of the congregation (Reid, Bullock, and Fleer 1995). Stern (1994) sums up this approach:

> One implication is a turning from primarily speaking to toward speaking for. It means listening far more carefully to those who are speaking from positions other than our own, as well as listening far more carefully to those within our own camp, those we formally called hearers but who really ought to be perceived as co-creators. These shifts, they believe, are necessary for preaching to address the exigencies of a postmodern situation. (141)

This Postmodern and conversational approach to preaching which takes the congregation seriously needs to embrace the congregation with all its diversity, pluralism, and heterogeneity. This kind of preaching "will be more tentative, inviting, conversational and mutual as we respectfully seek common ground and difference among hearers" (Lee 2018, 60). From the hearers' viewpoint, being a co-creator means that the message is not 'transmitted' but 'transgenerated', it is reassembled in the context of hearer's own story (Nichols 1980). Thus, the preacher provides the basis for what the congregation hears, the preacher guides and leads the process, "but the hearer shapes the finished work" (Long 2005a, 15). This idea of co-artistry is thoroughly Postmodern.

Conclusion

The world is constantly moving; the worldviews shift and blend. Although we do not know what the future holds, we can look backwards and bear witness to interesting—albeit often painful—changes.

The pre-Modern world with its roots deep in community, oral tradition and spirituality gave way to the hopes and disappointments of Modernism. Suddenly, on the wave of Enlightenment, God (or gods) and religious authorities were removed from the center of life, religion was replaced by reason and tribalism by individualism. Modernism, seeing vast technological and industrial progress, was hoping for a golden era of human existence, a hope which was cruelly shattered in the turmoil of World Wars. The world which recovered from the wars was different again—cynical and centerless, having abandoned the certainty and hopefulness of Modernity.

These changes have not been easy on the Christian church. Yet, when one looks further from the lack of institutional authority and shrinking membership lists (in Europe), one can notice many subtle similarities in the mindset of Postmodern people and the nature of biblical faith. There are connecting points in narratives and community, the appreciation of personal experiences and the unconventional life of Jesus Christ, to name a few. The Christian church, even in Postmodern times, may have hope.

CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREACHING MODEL DESIGNED FOR THE

POSTMODERN AUDIENCE

Rationale for the Project

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Postmodern worldview poses a

number of challenges for every preacher who is trying to proclaim the Gospel faithfully

and context-sensitively. In Eastern Europe, to these challenges that the church faces in all

of the Western world, are added the specific challenges and difficulties posed by the long-

haul effects of anti-religious propaganda in the territory of the former Soviet Union. In

these territories, the Post-Soviet past of institutional suspicion mixed with the prevailing

Postmodern worldview results in a unique cultural setting that requires a specific and

culturally sensitive approach to ministry.

Seeing the disheartening statistics of religiosity in my native Estonia and being

among a population almost completely cut off from its Christian roots, it can be difficult

for a minister to maintain a positive outlook. I admit to have often doubted the

effectiveness of my ministry in this post-Christian context, and more specifically, I am

constantly facing the challenge of finding a meaningful and effective way of preaching.

From this personal anguish and concern on one hand and from my never ending

fascination with homiletics on the other hand this study has been developed as I have

been looking for a framework which could support my preaching as well as that of my

colleagues. While a general homiletics course is taught to all seminary students, there is a

lack of a more context-sensitive approach which would take into account the specific cultural aspects of Post-Soviet Europe and therefore would offer practical solutions for this context. I have conducted this study in sincere hope it might offer some theological and practical guidance to other ministers who are working in similar environment and who are constantly looking for ways to improve their preaching.

Another stimulus for conducting this study stems from the fact that although we live in the Postmodern (and in some regions, possibly in the Metamodern) world, the practice of preaching in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has, by and large, remained within the framework of Modernism. For some reason, it has not been easy for us to make the transition from the Modern mindset to the Postmodern one. We still tend to focus on propositions and the truth value of the biblical doctrines (since in the Modernism, the truth is understood as universal, rational and intellectually accessible); the main goal of the preacher is to communicate "theological ideas clearly and persuasively" (Allen 2014, 15).

We also tend to shy away from the surrounding culture, often reinforcing boundaries and deepening, not lessening the notion of the Other. This has created a discrepancy between the secular Postmodern people and the traditional preaching heard in our churches. It is true also about my own preaching. This is why the practical part of this Project includes a preaching series of five sermons, preached in my home church in Tallinn, Estonia. I, too, have needed to look critically at my preaching and change it to meet the needs of the people around me.

Therefore, while conducting this Project, I endeavored to take into account everything I have learnt about the Postmodern culture and Postmodern homiletics in order

to find—first for myself and secondly for my colleagues—a preaching model which would try to close the gap between Postmodern minds and traditional Modern homiletics.

Preaching in the Postmodern World

There is no fixed formula for effective preaching in a Post-Soviet and Postmodern environment. On the contrary, the respect for diversity and plurality is a key characteristic of the Postmodern mindset and therefore, preaching from a Postmodern perspective is also "multifaceted and pluralistic" (Allen 2014, 2). Naturally, the idea of creativity and diversity in preaching is not exclusively Postmodern. On the contrary, in the biblical examples of the pre-Modern world we find a richness and creativity that sets a beautiful pattern for all future times. The examples of Stephen, Paul, and Peter have not lost any significance or freshness; they still challenge preachers to find preaching models that would honor the Word as well as the audience.

Therefore, based on the biblical examples and taking into consideration the pluralistic nature of Postmodernism, it is safe to conclude that there is no need to create one narrow preaching model that would fit all preaching events. This is simply not possible, and neither is it desirable.

At the same time, what one definitely can do is to point to different aspects and subtle nuances that ought to describe Postmodern preaching in all its diversity. These nuances and principles, as they come together in unique combinations, give the preacher a freedom of creativity as she/he ministers to people, all the while taking seriously her/his particular context and the worldview of the audience. Thus, we now turn to these principles and practical recommendations for Postmodern preaching that this Project has sought to put into practice.

The number of principles could be bigger and their nature more elaborate, but taking into account the scope and limitations of this Project and avoiding the trap of becoming too detailed and constraining, four of such general principles are chosen. They are derived from and rely on the biblical basis of Chapter 2 and the theoretical framework of Chapter 3.

Universal and Particular Concerns of Postmodern People

First of all, it is important to take seriously the concerns of the Postmodern people. This demonstrates to the people the genuine interest a preacher has for her/his community and its individual members. Long gone are the days when a preacher could preach *at* people, assuming a prior knowledge of their joys and worries without taking time to hear them.

A Postmodern preacher, on the contrary, ought to be someone characterised by sensitivity and willingness to hear people's joys and worries. Some of these joys and concerns can be individual and specific to a certain era or location but others reflect universal human yearnings. Beville (2010) has listed five needs that bear a special consideration in a postmodern framework: 1) the need for hope, 2) the need for acceptance, 3) the need for ecological awareness, 4) the need for inclusion, 5) the need for a distinctive identity.

Some items on this list, as already mentioned, reflect the universal human nature. While the belief system of Postmodern people may be permeated by divisibility and relativism, even nihilism, people still have the deeply human need for meaningfulness, hope, acceptance, and inclusion. In the earlier times, people found meaning and comfort in the overarching narrative of their community, religion or, later, in modern progress.

The story they told about the world—about where it had come from and where it was heading—supported their individual identities and integrated the latter into the former (Nafzger 2019). Thanks to this narrative, people knew who they were and where they belonged. This was certainly true for people in the biblical times. Whether the metanarrative was about the chosenness of the Jewish nation or the whims of Pantheon gods directing human lives, these stories were assumed and accepted by default. Therefore, the preachers in the New Testament times could address and challenge these narratives—which they certainly did—but they did not have to construct a worldview for a drifting people to be able to locate themselves within it.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, has shattered community and religion as sources of collective/universal meaning and as an anchor for individual lives. In the Estonian context, the anti-religious past is added to the mix. People are not only cut off from the biblical metanarrative but they often view the religious institutions as a tool or a weapon used for political, economic or national goals (Filippova and Kazmina 2005). This makes people suspicious about religion and deepens their alienation from a shared narrative. As stated in Chapter 3, in Postmodern times and in Post-Soviet context the individuals are left with the task of constructing their own sources of hope and meaning in a centerless world. The Postmodern preacher, therefore, is called to bring hope and re-create a space where the deeply embedded human need for acceptance could be fulfilled.

The need for inclusion is another noteworthy characteristic of Postmodern people. Maybe it is rather a Metamodern trait—the oscillation between the quest for autonomy and the longing for community. The desire for autonomy and subjectivism has, in too many cases, led people to live in separate spheres, in emotional and mental seclusion. In

turn, this seclusion often finds its expressions in destructive behavior, "friendlessness, disaffection, divorce, drug abuse" (Oden 1995, 116).

Yet, even though many people have given up hope in marriage or traditional family models, people are increasingly more aware of the benefits of community, networking, and dialoguing. And while the 'new' communities of the digital age may look different from pre-Modern or Modern ones and they may not be measurable by traditional yardsticks, they are still places "where meaning is found and some sense is made of life, where relationship and support and understanding are shared" (Parushev 2003, 43). The Postmodern preacher—and the church in general—does well to remember people's genuine desire for belonging and inclusion in a fractured world.

Beside the universal topics, there are special concerns—like that of ecological awareness—which the Postmoderns care about and which stem from the current crisis of over-consumption and global warming. Young Postmoderns, more than any other group of people, are surprisingly sensitive and very knowledgeable when it comes to the ecological crisis—or catastrophe—the humankind is facing.

A Christian minister in Postmodern times cannot ignore this topic, as controversial as it can sometimes be in our overtly politicised world. It is important for the Postmoderns to know that the biblical narrative encourages a deep responsibility for the Earth, and while committed Christians do not always have to approve of the extreme methods of conservancy, they ought to teach as well as practice care for the environment. Even though the reasons for caring for the Earth may be different for Christians and non-Christians, the message of ecological theology needs to be clear—the message about the Earth and all its components having intrinsic value, the message about nature and all living creatures being mutually dependent (Elvey 2010). The voice against (ecological)

injustice ought to be strong from pulpits, both for the sake of the Earth as well as the Postmodern people.

The list of topics mentioned here about the concerns and needs of the Postmodern people is by no means exhaustive. But they offer some direction as to what a contemporary preacher needs to be attentive to. Therefore, for the implementation of this Project I have chosen to follow Beville's topical list and I have built up my preaching series on the basis of the concerns he mentions.

Out of five sermons preached, the first one concentrates on the person of Jesus as the pinnacle of human hope. The next two sermons deal with the inclusive nature of Christianity and the concept of church as a place of belonging, inclusion and community. The fourth one I have dedicated solely to ecological issues as understood from the biblical perspective. And the fifth sermon, as it concludes the preaching series, deals with questions of identity and the possibilities the biblical metanarrative offers for the formation of personal and communal identities.

<div align="center">The Mediating Role of the Preacher</div>

When Postmoderns approach the Bible (or any other religious core text), the emphasis tends to be on the reader. As explained in Chapter 3, this is to be expected since a Postmodern reader brings with her/him to the text the individualism and relativism of the Postmodern era. Since the reader's experiences and beliefs influence the way she/he understands the meaning of the biblical text, the reader becomes an eiseget of a sort. Thus, the preacher needs to become a balancing element and bring into the equation sound exegesis, helping the listener to understand the author's intentions and the original context of the given biblical passage.

Yet, this exegesis cannot be neutral toward or distanced from the listener's life, on the contrary, it must lead the preacher toward what Barnett (2008) calls Pauline 'dialogical preaching' (28). The preacher, when preparing to speak to a Postmodern congregation, becomes a mediator, reading and studying the Bible "for others", as Pape (2013, 216) puts it. She/he makes an effort to be aware of personal experiences and concerns (some of which have just been discussed) of those sitting in the church pew, all the while knowing that the listeners are influenced by a myriad of narratives, many of them incoherent and conflicting.

Therefore, just like the preachers in the book of Acts demonstrated their sensitivity toward their listeners and their own obligation to balance the listeners' understandings with sound doctrine, also in the Postmodern world a preacher weaves together the delicate threads of the congregation's varied experiences with the biblical narrative. The Pauline task of standing in the middle of a 'marketplace' and proclaiming Christ through intellectual dialogue is still real and relevant, even if the particulars and the context are different.

Another important aspect of dialogical preaching that correlates with the Postmodern mindset is the attitude toward authority. As noted in Chapter 3, the absolutes of Modernity no longer suffice, one result of which is the suspicion toward institutions or vocations claiming inherent authority. While it may look like an unfavorable situation for preachers/ministers who have enjoyed unquestionable authority for most of the Christian history, when seen from another viewpoint, it can turn out to be a constructive and positive opportunity of finding new ways to relate to a Postmodern congregation.

The mediating role does not and should not mean looking down on people from the minister's theological heights, rather it means dialoguing with people on equal terms. It also means living out and embodying the message of one's sermons—the love for one's neighbor, the openness toward the Other, the joy of salvation, the constant struggle for social justice. Rose reflects on her role as a Postmodern and conversational preacher, concluding, "the preacher and the congregation gather symbolically at a round table where there is no head and no foot, where labels like clergy and laity blur, and where believing or wanting to believe is all that matters" (Rose 1995, 27).

Postmodern preaching ought to be non-hierarchical, communal, and embodied; the preacher herself/himself is a part of the faith community, reading the Bible together with and on behalf of the congregation, having her or his life constantly changed, and helping the members of the faith community understand the biblical message and find their place within its redemptive history.

While it is important to understand the role of the preacher in a Postmodern context and how it differs from that of the Modern predecessors, it is not an easy task to list a number of practical suggestions as to how these truths should find an outward expression. In some sense, the way the preacher understands and appreciates her/his role is much more an inner process or an intellectual attitude than an outward behavior.

Therefore, while this aspect of Postmodern preaching can remain somewhat hidden, I have still chosen to include it in my study so that this Project would enable me to understand the two-fold position of a preacher in a clearer way. I believe it is important for me to position myself as a Postmodern preacher between the congregation and the Bible, and therefore learn about the art of dialogical/conversational preaching in a unique way.

For example, the process of and reasoning behind choosing my sermon topics ought to be impacted by this principle. While I have often chosen my sermon topics according to my own interests or fancy, the current Project is helping me to dwell on my congregation's needs in a deeper way and prepare my sermons, putting my hearers' interests above those of my own. The five concerns of the Postmodern people listed by Beville and chosen for my preaching series is one example of this inner process. It is also important for me to take a critical look at my own life and the example I give to others as a Christian, to understand if I live out the messages I preach or not.

Another small element in dialogical preaching is the physical set-up of the church hall and the appearance of the preacher. Both of these can—sometimes unconsciously—stress the special status of the preacher and emphasise the distance between the minister and the laity. But when the preacher embraces the communal and non-hierarchical nature of mediating, it should affect her/his appearance and physical distance from the congregation as well as her/his inner attitudes.

These principles have made me think of the earliest Christian preachers whose sermons are analysed in Chapter 2 in a new way. They, too, must have understood the singularity of their position in between the Gospel and their hearers in the world full of conflicting religious ideas. With this realisation a special sense of responsibility must have occurred which, paired with context-sensitive exegesis, resulted in intellectual dialogue with the audience. Therefore, while the divisibility of existing narratives and truths of the Postmodernism as well as the biblical illiteracy of Post-Soviet context still pose a huge challenge for me, the comprehension of the role of a preacher leads to a more conversational preaching style and more context-sensitive exegesis.

Embracing Interconnectedness and Inclusion

In the wake of the Modern era, the holistic approach to the world—an idea that everything was connected with everything else—was lost. This led to a number of consequences, one of which was the fact that each scientific discipline developed autonomously. Modern universities and medical establishments prized specialisation, the boundaries of academic disciplines clearly defined.

This penchant for establishing borders did not stop there. Moderns often drew (and people whose worldview is Modern still do) boundaries along racial, ethnic, religious, gender lines etc. This mentality of compartmentalisation has enabled people to separate their familiar surroundings and knowledge from the unknown, the Other.

Postmodernism, on the contrary, is an era which Foucault (1984) has described as the era of crossing the boundaries. Postmodern people are willing to cross the boundaries of academic disciplines, they are willing to encounter the Other, a person from a different culture and worldview, they are opened to new possibilities and novel, combined knowledge. This can and should have a number of applications for a Postmodern preacher. Here are mentioned two applications that impact both sermon preparation and delivery:

1. A Postmodern preacher needs not only to accept the presence of the Other but also celebrate them and appreciate the cultural and intellectual richness the Other brings to their context. For too long, churches have been the very pinnacle of segregation, having failed in the attempt of embodying the unifying message of the Gospel. Social boundaries have enforced the notions of safety, power and privilege, and together with prejudice they have shaped (Western) Christianity for centuries.

Postmodern boundary-crossing, on the other hand, offers the church a chance of repentance and shows her a way forward. This, naturally, should start with the preacher and her/his personal example. Generation Y and Generation Z with Postmodern and/or Metamodern mindset are observing the way the Christian community and its leaders treat the people who do not believe or behave like them, and they often form their opinion on Christianity based on their observations. Therefore, from a Postmodern sermon needs to sound a clear message of inclusivity, openness, and grace. The church needs to be able to send a message which Volf (2019) summarises like this, „the one triune God is the God of all humans, each a unique and dynamic creature of a given time, place, and culture, *and* each also fashioned equally as an image of the pleromatic God, each equally a brother or a sister of Christ" (31).

This is not an easy task, especially as we live in an increasingly polarised world. I have felt the weight of this challenge in my own context, but as I try to remain faithful to the Gospel and the Christian task of embracing the Other, I have kept these important topics in mind while writing my sermons for the implementation of this Project.

The importance of this task, as I understand it, is twofold: on one hand it is important to send the Other in my context the message that the church offers a safe and inclusive environment where they are welcome. But the other side of the coin is the realisation that my church—and I together with her—is far from being that safe haven for the Other. Therefore, while preaching the Gospel to unchurched people I am at the same time educating my congregation and inviting them on a journey of boundary-crossing.

The fact that Compass, my home church in Tallinn, is a monocultural church may, for the time being, hide the sinful prejudices and attitudes toward people different from us

but it is inevitable that they will surface sooner or later. The implementation of this Project is an important opportunity for me to help my congregation move toward the vision Volf so beautifully formulates.

2. If and where possible, a Postmodern preacher should cross the historical boundaries between academic disciplines and draw from them. Allen (2014) reminds the Postmodern preacher that it is possible and desirable to turn to "resources such as psychology, sociology, political theory and practice, philosophy and the arts" (109) in order to engage in low-level boundary-crossing. There is nothing objectionable for a preacher to widen her/his horizons and occasionally turn to sources outside the Christian tradition. This prevents the preacher from encapsulating in a world of theology and helps her/him to maintain a healthy contact with the larger world.

Assessing my own preaching, I have to admit that too often I have neglected this advice, mostly due to the limited time resources or lack of interest. It is easy to stay within the familiar realm of theology; this does not require an extra effort from my part. Yet, when leaning toward my Postmodern listeners it is important for me to make that effort, it is desirable that the interconnectedness of the world finds its way to my preaching.

Here the apostle Paul is a role model for Postmodern preachers. Living in pre-Modern times, it was natural for him to absorb knowledge of different disciplines so that he was able to connect with his hearers and find a mutual point of reference when preaching. In my context, the least I can do is to find illustrations from other disciplines and involve visual presentations and arts in my sermon. In this area, my preaching has remained fixedly Modern but this Project gives me an opportunity to step out of my

comfort zone, think about the generations growing up in the world of visual communication and employ the visual arts as a means of connection with them.

The use of Narratives

The fourth element which plays an important role in finding a distinctly Postmodern way of preaching is the form of the sermon. In a sense, this is the most tangible and practical of them all because this is what reaches the hearer directly. A Postmodern person coming to church does not need to meditate upon whether the preacher has thorough knowledge about the worldviews present in the congregation or whether the preacher has made a conscious effort to bridge the gap between the Modern and Postmodern way of thinking. The church goer simply hears a string of words which either make sense or not, either capture her/his interest and imagination or not. Therefore, the form of a sermon and the rationale behind it are important to this study.

The process of turning the face of homiletics toward the Postmodern mind started a long time ago and is still ongoing. As early as in mid 1940s Dietrich Bonhoeffer ([1944] 1971) concluded that "the time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over" (279).

New Homiletic, which started to take shape in the 1950s, emerged before it had a label 'Postmodern' to it, yet many of its core values and practices reflect Postmodernism (Wilson 2014). For example, New Homiletic values imagination above linear ways of thinking, it balances logic and reason with storytelling that helps the hearer not only to understand but to experience truth, it celebrates specific and particular as opposed to universal and abstract truth claims, it values metaphors and imagery. New Homiletic turns

the focus from what the sermon says to what the sermon does or could possibly do in the lives of the hearers.

Wilson (2014) calls Postmodern preaching poetical preaching as it takes "the fragmented nature of daily life and offers, in and through it, glimpses of a coherent and meaningful whole and, even more, the hand of a loving God" (19). So while so much of preaching has stubbornly remained linear, propositional and Modern in its nature—an observation based on years of personal experience—there is a movement within the Christianity which is deliberately trying to synchronise preaching with the prevailing worldview, thus coming closer to people in the pews, taking seriously their background and experience.

One of the most prominent features of Postmodern homiletics is the rise of narrative and the sensitivity toward the original genres of the Bible. So much of the Bible comes to us in the form of stories. It is striking that there is very little moralising in the Bible, very few bullet points or clearly articulated rules. Rather, when faced with a moral dilemma, the ancient Israelites told a story and through the narrative encouraged people to differentiate between right and wrong. In this way, the hearer could not distance herself or himself from the point made but was drawn into the experience and dynamics of the narrative, sharing the feelings of the characters in the story. Robbinson (2001) summarises it well:

> Everyone who loves the Bible must value the story, for whatever else the Bible is, it is a storybook. Old Testament theology comes packaged in narratives of men and women who go running off to set up their handmade gods, and of others who take God seriously enough to bet their lives on Him. (130)

Unfortunately, the Greco-Roman love for abstract ideas meant that in the first centuries A.D., the richness of narratives in the Jewish culture was replaced by

complexity of Greek rhetoric and reasoning. Narratives were reduced to the position of illustrations.

This approach satisfied the needs of Modernism which, as discussed in Chapter 2, viewed human beings as thoroughly rational and the world as knowable, and in such a context stories were not much more than frivolous pastime. Postmodernism, on the other hand, has witnessed the return to narratives as the primary way of understanding and explaining the world. Just like people unconsciously create a narrative of their life, finding meaning and overarching themes in the sequence of seemingly unconnected and 'jumbled' events, so also the Scripture can be interpreted through the lens of narrative hermeneutic which, in turn, leads to preaching that is "guided, formed, and shaped by the character and epistemology of the gospel" (Lee 2015, 23).

The effectiveness of narrative preaching derives from the fact that, as Long (2005) puts it, "the human mind itself is a narrative factory that takes raw, unmediated experience and turns it into story-shaped meanings and memories" (11). Therefore, when narrative-inclined human experience encounters the Scripture, narration is born naturally.

In a narrower sense, narrative preaching refers to a sermon form that moves away from the classical point-by-point exposition and instead follows a structure or a 'plot' of narrative: creating a tension, deepening it, disclosing the clue to resolution, giving the resolution and experiencing its consequences (Lowry 2000).

By and large, this is the structure used by many playwrights, novelists, and movie directors as it is a proven way of catching and holding the attention of the audience. What is more, this structure supports the experiential participation of the listeners, enabling them to feel empathy with the characters and experience relief once the tension is solved.

When used in sermons, the narrative form draws people into the biblical story and helps them *feel* the goodness of the Gospel, not only *know* it.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that narrative preaching does not necessarily mean using stories as illustrations or building the sermon around a biblical narrative or some contemporary story, true or fictional (Watson 2007). All these may be used but more important than using stories for or as sermons is the ability to create a sermon that first, remains faithful to the Scripture, and second, moves people through the emotional and experiential stages of a conflict and solution.

Understanding the role of narratives in the wider world and in individual lives is an important task for a Postmodern preacher. I have to admit that although narratives are all around me and although I view my own life as a story, there is room for improvement when it comes to employing narrative preaching in my ministry. For a long time, I have felt too comfortable with expository preaching. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges for me within the implementation of my Project is the challenge of embracing narrative preaching and its mechanisms of tension and resolution. But while it takes an effort, it is very rewarding to know that narratives are something people respond to universally and that people in the post-Christian world can be touched by them.

Conclusion

There have been many studies written on the topic of preaching in a Postmodern context, giving advice and listing recommendations for preachers to bear in mind. From the biblical examples of the sermons I analysed and from the literature I reviewed, four prominent principles emerged for me which, I believed, could set a useful benchmark for

my quest to find a preaching model fit for my context in a largely secular Eastern European setting. These principles were as follows:

1) The knowledge of the universal and particular concerns of the Postmodern people. This calls for sensitivity and willingness to listen from the preacher's side. It also calls for a deeper understanding of the Postmodern worldview and of the mixture of Postmodern and universal human traits that the Postmoderns care about. Only when the preacher has done her/his homework and knows the joys and sorrows of the listeners can preaching be effective and life-changing.

2) The position of the preacher as a mediator in between the biblical text and congregation. Ever since the apostles stood up in Jerusalem to preach on the day of Pentecost, the preachers have always been in between the divine message and the listening crowd. More often than not, there are tensions between the two sides—the Word and the audience. Yet, as the Biblical examples analysed in Chapter 3 show, this tension does not necessarily mean loss of effectiveness or courage from the preacher's side, on the contrary, it can mean mediating with creativity, context-sensitivity, and a personal example. As a pastor preaching in a post-Christian and Postmodern context of Eastern Europe, the prevailing worldview and the Christian message are in inevitable conflict. This calls for a heightened sense of mediation and context-sensitivity.

3) The aspiration of reaching the next level of interconnectedness and inclusion in an increasingly polarised world. In the Postmodern and digital era where travels and the exchanging of information have become easier than ever before, the old boundaries between cultures, views, lifestyles and academic disciplines are eroding. For a Christian preacher, this poses both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge to face the myriad of different views and cultures, and it requires taking a step out of one's comfort

zone to embrace the new. But opening one's heart and church to the Other who may experience life in a frighteningly different way and by tapping into the pool of knowledge outside the familiar discipline of theology, the preacher can grow personally and maintain a healthy connection to the larger world.

4) The use of narratives as a basic means of creating meaning and conveying doctrinal truths. During the era of Modernism, people could be persuaded by using logic, also linear and propositional discussion. In the Postmodern times, where the world has ceased to be fully rational, people value experience more than logic. Or as Altrock (2004) puts it, "*Give me an experience*. I don't want information about God. I want an encounter with God" (148). In such a context, narratives and personal testimonies are highly valued as they may help the listeners experience the goodness of the Gospel and relate to the personal stories of the preacher.

Based on these principles I developed a preaching model which is sensitive toward the Postmodern mindset, connects with the audience on a deep and egalitarian level and puts into use the narrative technique.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLEMENTATION OF PREACHING MODEL

Introduction

The principles and attitudes at work behind sermon preparation and delivery remain, in most cases, unconscious. Preachers who know their congregations well instinctively know what is needed and how to approach the listeners, just as well as they have a vague, often unarticulated understanding of their own mediating position in between the Bible and the congregation within the larger context of shifting worldviews.

I have preached on this kind of 'autopilot' in my home churches for years, having a good relationship with the people sitting in the pew and yet not having taken time to exegete my own role and the worldview of my listeners on a deeper level. Yet, by being immersed in the study of the different aspects of the multicultural world for some years, the unconscious and unarticulated principles behind my own preaching no longer sufficed. Therefore, it was time for me to embrace on a painful and yet exhilarating journey of becoming more knowledgeable about my preaching in the Postmodern context.

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the preaching series which I conducted in Compass Church at the end of 2021 and to analyse the feedback I received from the congregation.

The chapter is divided into six sections, the first of which gives an overview of the preaching series in general, the next ones concentrating on each sermon and the evaluation of the feedback which I received. By concentrating on each sermon separately,

I am able to indicate how the different nuances of my sermons triggered different opinions from the listeners, and this creates a basis for my practical suggestions in Chapter 6.

As I begin describing and analysing the preaching series and its results, I have to admit to a personal limitation. As a researcher, I try to use the method of "bracketing", of temporarily suspending my judgement and assumptions as I let the collected data speak for itself. The feedback ought to be objective material for me. Nonetheless, I admit that it has proven to be very difficult. In a project like mine, the researcher does not remain outside the study, on the contrary, the researcher puts herself in the limelight, asking from participants for feedback on *her* demeanor and words.

Therefore, as much as I aspire for scientific objectivity, throughout the process of preaching and receiving feedback, of analysing and drawing conclusions, my subjective feelings and self-consciousness have constantly been part of the process. It may not be desirable but it is natural as *I* am the person who wants to become a better preacher at the end of the process. This should be kept in mind, reading the two remaining chapters of this thesis.

Preaching Series *To Believe the Unbelievable*

General Conditions

The preaching series titled *To Believe the Unbelievable* took place from November 20 until December 18, 2021 in Compass Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tallinn, Estonia. Prior to the preaching series, I had used all the media channels available for me to advertise for the series and to invite people to attend. I had written an article to the Estonian Conference's monthly magazine about my studies in general and this

preaching project in particular (it was later published also on their web site), Compass church posted adverts on their Facebook and Instagram pages, I gave an interview about the series to the Estonian Christian radio station and invited my friends to attend via Facebook posts and private conversations.

Unfortunately, the preaching series took place during a time of heavy restrictions put in place by the Estonian government in an attempt to contain the Covid-19 infection rates. The churches were open but the face masks were mandatory and people could fill up to 50% of the seats in church halls. I do not know how many people decided against attending the church out of concerns for their health but despite the less than perfect conditions, I was grateful for open doors, for an opportunity to preach and for people who did attend.

Number of Feedback Forms

Compass church was planted in September 2018, and as the most recent church plant in the Estonian Conference, it had 28 baptised members at the time of the preaching series. I was not able to count the number of attendees during the divine services when I preached, therefore I cannot give the statistics of the percentage of people filling the feedback forms but I received a total of 116 evaluation forms by the end of the series.

Considering the restrictions and health risks on one hand and the size of the church on the other hand, I was pleased with the outcome. I was even surprised by the turn-out, knowing that we probably exceeded the allowed limit of 50% in our small church hall on several occasions during these five weeks.

There was another reason for me to be grateful—on these five Sabbaths, we had new guests visiting our church. Therefore, it was far more than just an academic project;

it was also a much appreciated opportunity for the church to reach out during the time when physical meetings and evangelistic outreach were severely limited in many other places.

On the anonymous feedback form, I had asked about people's connection to the church. 98 people out of 116 (83,7%) stated they were church members and regular church goers, 17 people (14,6%) stated they were not church members but came occasionally, and 2 people (1,7%) identified themselves as non-Christians with barely any connection to the church. It is difficult to predict in hindsight whether the percentage of the guests would have been higher in a Covid-free environment but the combined percentage of 16,3 (the occasional church goers plus non-Christians) is large enough to draw some conclusions from the feedback.

<center>The Age</center>

Compass church was chosen for the preaching series for several reasons. First, I have been a member of this church since its beginning (and before that, during the two years of 'incubation', I was a member of the church planting core group), therefore it was the most natural environment and the most logical choice for me. I know most of the church members and regular guests as I preach in that church on a regular basis. This mutual trust and familiarity hopefully helped people to voice their opinions freely and without reservations, and this was an important goal for me. Feedback loses much of its value and credibility when people do not feel comfortable or safe enough to share their innermost thoughts. This problem, I believe, did not hinder me in Compass.

Compass church also served another purpose. Being a young church made up largely of young adults, it was the ideal place for me to collect the ideas and

recommendations of people with the Postmodern mindset. In the beginning of 2022, the average age of baptised Compass members was 34,0. This makes Compass the youngest church in the Estonian Conference—the average age of church members in the Estonian Conference on 1st of January 2022 was 56,7. Therefore the demographic profile of Compass suited my project the best.

Besides the church member status, the only piece of personal information I asked on the feedback form was age. The statistical figures were predictable: the largest age group to listen to my sermons and to fill the form was between 30 and 40. From this age group I received 44 (38%) feedback forms. 41 feedback forms (35%) came from people younger than 30 (the youngest person to fill it was 14), and 32 feedback forms (27%) were filled by attendees older than 40 years (the oldest being 85 years old). Knowing that more than 70% of feedback forms were filled by Postmodern people younger than 40 I could approach my task of creating a preaching model for a Postmodern context with confidence.

<center>Topics</center>

When it comes to sermon topics, there are different suggestions and propositions made in the literature concentrating on Postmodern hearers. I decided to take the suggestions of Beville as the starting point for my preaching series. As already mentioned in previous chapters, Beville (2010) points out five needs that describe the inner world of a Postmodern person and that should be taken note of when preaching in a Postmodern setting. These needs are as follows: 1) the need for hope, 2) the need for acceptance, 3) the need for ecological awareness, 4) the need for inclusion, 5) the need for a distinctive identity. As I prepared for my sermons, I kept these topics constantly in mind.

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In Chapter 4 I have listed a specific order of sermons I planned to preach during the series. In hindsight I can say that both the order of topics as well as the sermon topics differed slightly from those stated in Chapter 4. There were several reasons for it.

First, the series took place during the five weeks leading up to Christmas so it was reasonable to change the order of sermons in a way that they would build up and lead to a culmination. Therefore, I did not start the series with the topic of Jesus as the pinnacle of human hope as I had planned, but instead I finished with this topic.

The second reason behind some changes in the topics is more elusive and more difficult to describe. I would like to believe that it had to do with the leading of the Holy Spirit as I was, for weeks and months, contemplating these 5 Postmodern needs listed earlier. As I was writing those sermons, I realised that I needed God's spirit to guide and teach me even within the parameters and restrictions of an academic project. I did the best I could—I tried to follow the topics listed as closely as possible and on the other hand, I tried to remain open to the promptings of God's spirit. Hence some smaller changes compared to my original plan.

Here is the list of the titles and topics of my sermons and the dates of preaching.

1. *Alone and Together*, topic: community, acceptance and church, November 20, 2021

2. *Goodness and God,* topic: the universal nature of goodness and the inclusiveness of God, November 27, 2021

3. *Beginnings and Endings,* topic: God as the source of all hope, December 4, 2021

4. *Nature and Man,* topic: ecological awareness, December 11, 2021

5. *Looking God in the Eye,* topic: Jesus as the incarnate God, December 18, 2021

Statistical Overview

       The collected feedback and the significant differences between given sermons are analysed in more detail in the following sections. In these sections, attention is given to each sermon individually. However, for a reader who is more interested in a general overview rather than details, in Figure 1 are given the numeric values of the most important aspects of the feedback: the rating of introduction and conclusion of each sermon, the clarity of the central idea, sermon's relevancy to the hearer, the appropriateness of illustrations, and inclusiveness toward people with different views. Although the differences may not seem significant, there are interesting tendencies and differences to pay attention to.
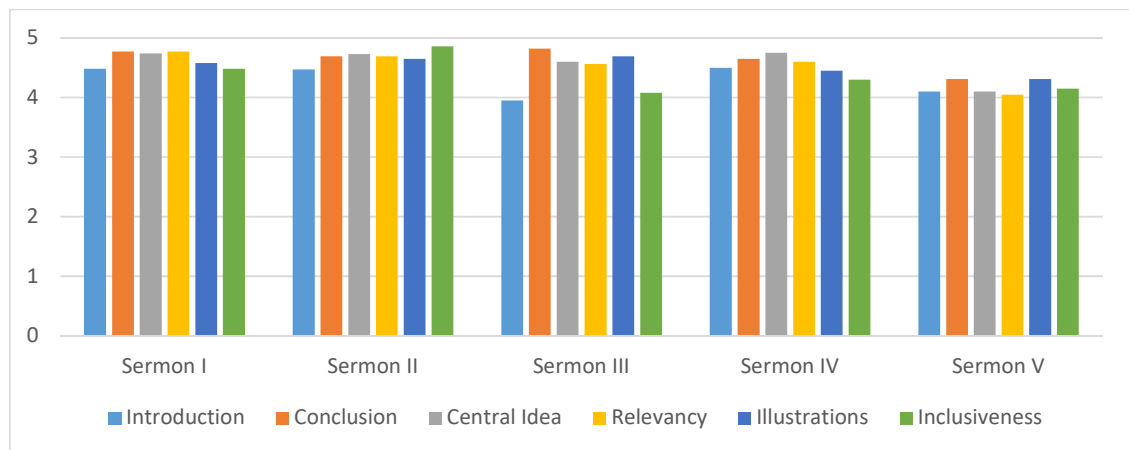
Figure 1. Statistical overview of the feedback of the most important aspects of sermons.

Sermon No 1 Titled *Alone and Together*

       The first sermon of the series, titled *Alone and Together*, was preached in Compass Seventh-day Adventist Church on November 20, 2021.

       This sermon dealt with the topic of church as a community that embraces people from all walks of life and that fights the modern epidemic of loneliness. The central Bible text was 1 Corinthians 12, verses 12–17 and 27, and different stories were used to

illustrate the inclusive nature of the church and the human need to be accepted in a community.

For myself, the stress was on narratives as I started and finished with an overarching story of a documentary film titled *The Swedish Theory of Love* which describes graphically the breaking down of close human connections in the highly individualistic Scandinavia. Within this narrative, another contrasting central story was told of a small church that welcomes new members by listing all the people in the church who can help the newcomer in some practical way, welcoming the new person into the community of mutual care and responsibility. These stories laid bare the conflicting courses of Postmodern society and the Christian community. One values and prioritises individuality, the other tries to connect and bind people together.

The length of the sermon was 16 minutes. This is significantly shorter than my usual sermons—I normally preach for 22–25 minutes. My goal was to keep the 'threshold' as low as possible for the potential visitors as I assumed people would appreciate shorter sermons. As I learnt later from the feedback, the recurring comment was that the sermons could have been longer. This was an interesting and somewhat surprising outcome. It turns out even young Postmoderns who are used to 140-character Twitter messages and 60-second TikTok videos are capable and willing to listen to sermons longer than 15–18 minutes.

After preaching *Alone and Together*, I received 31 feedback forms, 28 of them (90%) from regular church goers and/or church members and 3 of them (10%) from visiting guests. In the comparison with the other four sermons, the average scores for this one were the highest. I think it reflects the mindset of both the preacher and the listeners and has both the objective and the subjective reasons behind it. On one hand, I had more

energy and freshness, preparing and preaching this sermon, and on the other hand, the congregation was not yet tired of filling in long feedback forms and listening to the same preacher week after week.

In Appendix C, there are all the scores and answers to specific questions asked in the questionnaire. Here I briefly summarise the feedback, dividing it into four sections that follow the topics of Chapter 4 and the structure of the feedback form: topic, structure, the role of the preacher, inclusiveness.

<div align="center">Topic</div>

The topic of loneliness and togetherness seems to truly resonate with the Postmodern audience. 81% of the people filling the feedback form claimed that this topic was very relevant to them. This relevance also shows in the attention level of the listeners: in the feedback form I asked the participants to summarise the topic of the sermon in one sentence and it was obvious from the responses that all of the listeners had paid attention carefully. The most recurring sentences were: "The church is a medicine against the disease of loneliness", "The church is a family where we can all belong", "Community is important", "The church is a community of caring" etc. In slightly different wording, they all summarised the narrow dominant thought of my sermon.

When asked about the language of the preacher, 84% of the listeners (26 people) said the language was easily accessible and there were no words or concepts unfamiliar to them. I was happy to note that all three guests who filled the feedback form gave 5 points out of 5 for the simplicity of the language, meaning that my choice of words was for them accessible and easy to understand. But this also means that these 16% (5 people) who gave a slightly lower score of 4 were church members. It is difficult to tell the reason but

it reminds me never to take any knowledge for granted, even in the context of baptised church members (some of whom are in their late teens or early twenties).

When asked about topics on which they would like to hear sermons in the church, the variety of responses was great. As a preacher who has never asked directly from my congregations about their sermon topic preferences or wishes, I found these responses very interesting and enlightening. They ranged from general ("Topics that would bring about change in people", "Topics that would help put the biblical teachings into practice", "Anxieties of the modern world", etc.) to specific ("Relationships within the church", "The nature of God", "Holy Spirit", "The choice of spouse", "Family relationships", "Leadership", "Life of Jesus", etc.).

Reading these responses, I realised how little ministers ask their congregations about their interests and struggles that they would like to hear addressed in sermons. In this sense, the answers to this question remain one of the most valuable sources of information and insight collected during my project.

Structure

The questions concerning the structure of the sermon dealt with the introduction, the narrow dominant thought of the sermon, illustrations, summary, the logicality of the train of thoughts, and the duration. People were also asked an open question about what the preacher did well or could have done differently.

As already mentioned, the scores for this sermon were the highest of the five, the different aspects of this sermon were constantly scoring higher than the average result of all five sermons. For example, the introduction was rated at 4,6 points out of 5 (the average of five sermons being 4,4), the summary at 4,8 (the average being 4,7).

The sermon, laden with stories about loneliness and community, seemed to be easy to follow and resonated with the congregation. When asked about the positive sides of the sermon, the listeners were quite unanimous: "Interesting topic", "The preacher was easy to follow", "There was a connection with the reality", "Well-chosen illustrations", "A simple message fit for both church members and visitors", "The emotions of the preacher", "The train of thought from the beginning to culmination", "Catchy and clear message", etc. Also the three visitors were very positive about this sermon, they liked the clarity, the connection to real life, and the warmth of delivery.

When asked about things that could have been done differently, one of the visitors stated that the sermon could have been a little longer and the other one stated that the language was a little too neat and could have been stronger. The church members added: "The preacher could have been more relaxed", "There could have been an appeal for the church to strive to be that perfect community in this world", "The sermon felt very short", "The preacher could have used more variations of intonation and tempo", "The choice of worship song following the sermon could have been better" (a very interesting and relevant comment as I do not usually pay enough attention to songs that follow my sermons), "She could have given the congregation more time to find the passage from their Bibles". I found all of these comments very enlightening as they reminded me that a sermon is so much more than a well-written and coherent text. It is a whole complex of different aspects of thought and delivery, personality and church service, all of which add up to a subjective experience of the churchgoer.

The Role of the Preacher

In this section, people were asked about their first connotations with the word 'pastor', about the way the preacher connected to the church, about her emotions and whether it was easy to listen to her or not. And once again people were asked if the preacher could have done something to make the message more effective.

The emotional appropriateness and the accessibility of the sermon were again rated highly: both of these questions scored 4,8 out of 5. Some of the people who did not give the top score for these questions gave their explanation: "The foreign words could have been pronounced slower", "In some places the preacher was almost whispering and was difficult to hear", "The emotions of a sermon should be different from the emotions of a regular conversation".

The question about the word 'preacher' gave a number of interesting replies. The majority of connotations were traditional: "A person sharing a good news of the Gospel", "The Word of God", "A worship service", "A nicely dressed and smiling person", "A pastor", "A priest", "Someone who tells Bible stories", "A teacher'. A few replies were even somewhat amusing: "A boring speech with a lot of repetitions", "A man with the Bible". The most intriguing replies came from the guests: "Someone who speaks to people" (a specific word difficult to translate into English), "An interpreter", "A guide", "Someone who keeps people's attention". It seems to me that young Postmodern church members have inherited a very traditional and modernist view of the preacher as someone with a special status or authority. But these people who have not had the Christian upbringing seem to perceive preachers in a different way—"an interpreter" and "a guide" still signify the position of leadership but not necessarily in a hierarchical way, rather they perceive a preacher to be someone who walks *with* people and helps them understand

certain truths. It is a significant and an interesting shift that the church ought to pay attention to.

Inclusiveness

In the section on inclusiveness people were asked whether that day's sermon was inclusive towards people with different worldviews. This section also included questions about the importance of inclusion and the different ways the church can make people feel welcome. It was important for me to see how the Postmodern people perceive church and how much need for inclusion they feel.

When looking at the results, I was surprised to find out that inclusiveness scored relatively low. Out of 116 evaluation forms, the average score for the need of inclusion was 4,2 points out of 5. On the first Sabbath when I collected 31 feedback forms, 14 people answered this question with a score of 4 or lower. It tells me that the relationship between Postmodern youth (even the ones having grown up in church) and church as an institution are complicated and nuanced; not everyone feels they need to belong to the faith community in an old-fashioned way.

On the other hand, the answers to the question about what the church can do to make them feel welcome were quite traditional and showed the need to be seen and heard as individuals. The most common replies were as follows: "To care about each other more", "To notice", "To have more small groups", "To include people in mission projects", "To really listen to me", "To be more open", "To spend more time outside the church walls". Even here one can detect a tension between independence and interdependence, between autonomy and community.

The question about the inclusiveness of the sermon scored 4,6 out of 5. In 8 feedback forms (26%) the score was lower than the maximum. I wish there had been a clarifying, open-ended question following it as I do not know what made them choose these scores. But as I preached about the church as Christian community that can help people in the fight against loneliness, I can only suppose they felt it might have been too Christianity-centered.

Narratives

The last section of the feedback form concentrated on narratives, not in a sense of illustrative stories but as an overarching story of redemption. The participants were asked to formulate the central idea of the Christian metanarrative and to share their opinion on whether the sermon helped them understand this metanarrative better or not.

For the latter question, this sermon received a score of 4,4 out of 5 (the average of the whole preaching series being 4,3). As I had not made a special effort to connect the topic of community to the larger biblical story, the result was as I had expected. The answers to the question about the central idea were also rather expectable. In slightly different wording, most of them concentrated on the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus, God's love toward humankind and the need of sharing Jesus' love with others. One of the guests replied that the central message of Christianity is "living in goodness". From this I could conclude that people in my home church have sufficient knowledge of the biblical metanarrative.

Sermon No 2 Titled *Goodness and God*

The second sermon of the series *To Believe the Unbelievable* was titled *Goodness and God* and I preached it in Compass church on November 27, 2021.

My main objective was to portray God as a universal and unlimited source of goodness who does not discriminate between believers and unbelievers. On one hand, all the charitable work and good deeds done in the name of Jesus point to God, but on the other hand, God is in no way limited by them. He shows his goodness in all the world, through all kinds of people and situations. Wherever goodness, kindness and grace are manifested, there is God. There is no limit to God's goodness or his presence.

The central biblical text for this sermon was Isaiah 6:3, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory". The central illustration for this sermon was taken from Humans of New York. I showed the congregation a slideshow with photos of different people who have told their story to HONY author Brandon Stanton and who have shared their experience with life-changing goodness.

The sermon structure was simple and very similar to the first sermon, the main difference between these sermons was in the use of visual materials in the latter one. I was interested to see whether the audience rate my sermon differently if the visual supported the verbal message. I could not detect any difference in reactions when preaching but the visual aid did come up later in the feedback forms.

This sermon lasted for 17,5 minutes.

I received 23 feedback forms after preaching this sermon, 19 of them (83%) were from regular church goers and/or church members, 4 of them (17%) from occasional visitors. Here is a short overview of the feedback.

Topic

The question about the relevance of this topic received a slightly slower score compared to the first sermon (average 4,7 out of 5) but it was still higher than the general

average of five sermons (which was 4,6). 17 people out of 23 claimed this topic was very relevant for them, 5 of them gave the score of 4, but this sermon also received one score of 3 from a 14-year-old church visitor. This is a good reminder for me about how different can expectations and interests be and how carefully I need to listen to teenagers in order to understand their cares and their reality. It is a pity that this particular church visitor did not reply to the question about topics that concern them the most in the current world as it would have been a much-appreciated insight for me.

The central idea of this sermon was again well understood as the listeners summarised the sermon in similar ways: "God is good", "God is love", "We can experience God's goodness through different people", "Learning to see God's goodness all around us", "God's goodness does not have to have the Christian label on it", etc.

The clarity of the message seemed to be supported by my choice of words as this sermon received the perfect score of 5 for the question about my use of words/language. No-one claimed there were any words difficult to understand in this sermon. This is also an important insight for me as it reminds me of the necessity of simplicity. Less is more. The clarity of the message matters to Postmodern churchgoers, and the effort put into finding the simplest and clearest expressions pays off.

When asked about topics they would like to hear sermons about, the common thread seemed to be practicality. Postmodern people are not particularly interested in hearing theoretical sermons that would be difficult to connect to their everyday life. What is relevant for them is the area of intersection of their experience and faith. Some of the replies to this question were as follows: "Everyday life topics like in today's sermon", "All sorts of topics about living with God", "How to become fully human through God's love", "Topics that would bring hope", "Topics that would bring about positive change in

everyday life", "Testimonies and practical advice", etc. A visitor added: "Stories about how God intervenes in people's lives". This last comment may be the best summary of Postmodern people's yearning when it comes to listening to sermons. Objective truth has little value if it does not translate into (subjective) stories of real people experiencing God and his goodness.

<center>Structure</center>

In general, the structure of this sermon was similar to that of the first sermon. It started with a longer introductory story which led to the central Bible text and its application in the practical lives of the hearers.

As mentioned above, the main difference between this sermon and the first one was the use of a slideshow in the beginning of the introduction. The slideshow with colorful characters from Humans of New York seemed to achieve its purpose. Out of all five introductions, this one scored the highest—4,7 points out of 5 (the average of five sermons being 4,4). 74% of the people said this introduction caught their attention very well. Several people added in the open-ended question that the slides and the introduction were interesting and catchy. "There could have been more pictures" added someone. One occasional visitor, when asked to summarise the sermon in one sentence, wrote simply "Humans of New York".

Here is a lesson for me to learn—well-chosen visual materials can strengthen the impact of a sermon and catch the congregation's attention. In my preaching methods, I have remained stubbornly Modern, believing that the words are or should be enough. But this preaching series has shown me that stepping out of my comfort zone in order to use multimedia opportunities is beneficial for both the preacher and the congregation.

In the other aspects of sermon structure, this sermon received very similar scores to the first sermon of the series. A couple of differences worth mentioning came from the questions concerning illustrations and the logicality of the train of thought. Both of these received a higher score than in the first sermon and in the average of the whole series.

The question about whether the train of thought was logical and clear scored a very high 4,9 points out of 5 (the average of the whole preaching series being 4,7) and the question about suitability of illustrations scored also 4,9 out of 5 (the average again being 4,7). As this sermon had the most positive feedback in this area, it is worth noticing. People seem to appreciate a simple structure of introductory illustration that would lead up to the central Bible text and its application. The introductory narrative, when also used in the conclusion and summary, can shape the sermon in a way that the congregation will remember it as a holistic entity, as a story.

The Role of the Preacher

I am a keen follower of Humans in New York on social media and my enthusiasm must have shown. The question whether the preacher was easy to follow received a score of 4,9 out of 5 and the question about the suitability and relevance of the preacher's emotions received a maximum score of 5.

When asked what the preacher could have done differently, a church visitor said, "Maybe she could have told a joke". Some church members added, "There could have been some illustrations also from the Estonian society", "Another story from the Bible", "More stories", "She could have asked questions and dialogued".

The recurrent emphasis of narratives is not surprising but it is noteworthy. Narratives hold a prominent place in the Postmodern mind. And although my sermon did

not have a classical narrative form, the prominence of the central illustration and the congregation's reaction to it served as a valuable reminder about the longing for stories that would connect with emotions as well as the mind.

Likewise, the last comment about dialogue and questions caught my attention. It reminded me of the term 'dialogical preaching' used to describe the apostolic preaching. Just like the apostles with their extraordinary sensitivity to their hearers, I am likewise called to stand in the gap between the congregation and the biblical text. This mediating role does not always have to be realised through direct questions to the congregation but some sort of intellectual, theological and emotional dialogue must take place during a sermon in the Postmodern context.

Inclusiveness

As pointed out in Chapter 4, Postmodernism is the era of inclusiveness and interconnectedness where people are increasingly more willing to cross boundaries and embrace the Other. This sermon on the topic of God's universal love and care was designed specifically for the purpose of celebrating this kind of inclusiveness.

On one hand, it was important for me to widen the church members' horizon as we too often limit God with the boundaries of what is 'Christian'. But on the other hand, it was equally important for me to lead the church visitors toward the more universal understanding of God's presence and goodness which they can experience in their life in practical ways.

This desire to increase inclusiveness was reflected in the feedback. As the average of five sermons, the question about the inclusive nature of sermons received a score of 4,5 out of 5. But the sermon *Goodness and God* differed notably from the rest as it received a

score of 4,9. 91% of the people (21 out of 23) claimed this particular sermon was very inclusive toward people with different worldviews. This proved to me that the young Postmoderns are sensitive to these issues and notice if some groups of people are excluded. This is both a positive sign, but as my analysis of the final sermon *Looking God in the Eye* shows, it can also be a troubling sign that calls for a forethoughtful and well-advised approach to the proclamation of Gospel.

<div align="center">Narratives</div>

The topic of God's never-ending love plays a prominent part in the biblical metanarrative, or more precisely, this is the only lens through which the story of humankind as the Bible portrays it makes any sense. Therefore, I had hoped this sermon would help the hearers understand the biblical narrative better.

Yet, *God and Goodness* received a score of only 4,4 for the question about whether this sermon helped them understand the biblical narrative in a better way. The average score of five sermons for this question was 4,3. Out of 23 people who filled the feedback form, 12 people claimed this sermon helped them very much to understand the biblical metanarrative, 9 people said it did not help so much, and 2 people did not answer this question.

I am not certain why the biblical narrative did not come through this sermon in a clearer way but maybe it is a sign of me as a theologian understanding the biblical narrative differently compared to the young Postmodern churchgoers. If this is what these replies signify, it is another context where it is important for me not to assume anything concerning the knowledge and views of the people I see in my home church.

Sermon No 3 Titled *Beginnings and Endings*

The third sermon of the preaching series was titled *Beginnings and Endings*, I preached it in Compass church on December 4, 2021.

The main theme of this sermon was hope. Through the story of Israel and her unfaithfulness to God, the sermon had its culmination in the message of hope which the prophets proclaimed. When the 'tree' of the kingdom of Judah was cut down and the national independence was lost, when there was no king from the line of David left to sit on the throne, when the nation faced an end, God gave a promise, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1). In a place where only a stump was standing, in a place where there was nothing left of a tree but roots, a new shoot was to grow one day. This means that where people see endings and stumps, God sees the potential of new beginnings and fresh shoots. Endings are never finite for or with God, they are only promises of new beginnings and new creation.

The length of this sermon was 19 minutes.

Although there is an unwritten principle about all sermons of a preaching series having to be new, I decided to go against this principle. I realised this series would give me a priceless opportunity to receive feedback also on my 'usual' sermons. Therefore, I decided to use one old sermon manuscript and rewrite it to fit the series. I was interested to find out whether the feedback to this sermon (which I had first preached even before starting my doctoral studies) would differ from the feedback to my other sermons which I had created solely for this series and which were the result of my in-depth study on homiletics in Postmodern setting.

As the feedback and its statistics revealed, there was a difference in how people perceived this sermon compared to the other ones in the series. This justified my decision

to add an already existing sermon to the series and gave me valuable insight into my own practices and developments.

I received 23 feedback forms for this sermon after the church service, 21 of them (91%) were filled in by church members, and 2 of them (9%) were filled in by occasional visitors. The more detailed feedback can be found in the following subsections.

Topic

The narrow dominant thought of the sermon was clearly perceived, as the feedback forms summarised my intended message clearly. The listeners summarised the sermon as follows: "Live in hope—every ending is nothing but a new beginning", "God gives hope even if things do not go according to our plan", "New beginnings are always possible", "God can make new shoots grow from every stump", "Endings are difficult for us but God plans new things", "No ending is finite", etc.

As to the relevance of this topic, there could be detected a slight decrease in scores compared to the earlier topics/sermons. The average score for this sermon was 4,6 out of 5; 14 of the listeners (61%) claimed it was a very relevant topic for them, 9 people (39%) gave it a lower score of 4 or 3. Also the choice of language of the preacher received a slightly lower score with 17 people (74%) saying the language was very clear and 6 people (26%) giving it a score of 4. A couple of comments were added in the area of language use, "The preacher could have avoided the use of foreign words", "I understood everything but there might have been some words difficult for the visitors to understand".

I wonder if I had received similar comments from the churches where I preached this sermon several years ago. Until recently, I always had church members in mind while preparing for sermons, therefore it is possible my choice of words and expressions could

have raised questions for the visitors. In this sense, the feedback on my 'old' way of preaching through this sermon is extra valuable.

When asked about topics and problems in the surrounding world that concerns people the most, the recurring themes were emotions and mental health. People mentioned such topics as follows: apathy, mental health problems, the lack of responsibility, relationships, evil, anger, revenge, intolerance toward people with different views, schisms in society, antagonism. From this I understand that the Postmoderns are very sensitive to the emotional environment around them and suffer from the perpetual presence of unhealthy emotions and conflict around them. Therefore, these are the topics that should come up in Postmodern preaching again and again.

<div align="center">Structure</div>

The most interesting area of feedback in the context of this sermon concerned the structure. As already mentioned, I used an old sermon manuscript and by this I gained valuable insight into my usual patterns of preaching and sermon structure. In short, this sermon scored persistently lower than the other ones in the area of structure.

The introduction was a lengthy description of the failings of Israel to the point of losing national independence and the royal succession. This introduction had seemed unnecessarily long even when I first preached this sermon and now it was in stark contrast with the earlier sermons of the series where I made sure the beginning would be captivating, intriguing and easy to follow. The result of this change was that the introduction of this sermon received the lowest score of 4 out of all five sermons (the average of the series being 4,6). Here, for the first time during the series, two people rated the introduction by the score of 2.

Also the question about how well the different parts of the sermon connected to the main idea received a lower score (4,5) compared to the total average of the series (4,6). The questions about the logicality of the train of thought and how easy it was to follow the preacher continued in the same pattern, receiving a lower score than the average. This affirmed to me that in order to appeal to the young Postmoderns, I need to break from the old (Modern) patterns of preaching and simplify the structure so that the congregation would not get lost in lengthy introductions or difficult language.

Interestingly enough, the question about the clarity of the culmination of the sermon received a score noticeably higher than the average. The culmination of this sermon was rated by the score of 4,9 out of 5 (the average of the series being 4,7). I attribute this to the fact that the contrast between the dire situation of Israel and the hopeful prophecy of a new shoot was very clear. Therefore, even though the sermon structure was out of balance, it did deliver the main distinction between hope and hopelessness in a way that was easy to understand.

<center>The Role of the Preacher</center>

The 'old' sermon structure and use of language mounted up to a general feeling that the preacher was not so easy to follow this time. The answers to this question differed notably from the last two sermons as it received the score of 4,6 compared to 4,8 and 5 of the first two sermons of the series.

When it comes to things people appreciated about the preacher or what she could have done better, they mentioned emotions, context-sensitivity and a personal illustration as positive things (I had told a story about a fresh stump in my own life and how I had lost my best friend to cancer half a year ago). The general feeling I got from this feedback

was that the churchgoers appreciated my openness and vulnerability as the journey from hopelessness to finding hope in God was personal and I stood together with everyone else, looking for God to restore what has been destroyed. I was no different from the others but stood with them in the middle of their stumps and painful endings.

The recommendations as to what I could have done better were as follows: "She could have started with a personal story, too", "She could have spoken a little faster", "The topic was complicated today so it was not easy to follow the sermon today", "The Bible texts could have been displayed on the screen", "She could have started with a story closer to us and our reality". And one church member added that he/she had found the story about my loss a little too morbid. Although the Postmoderns appreciate emotional honesty and real-life examples, some of the examples can be distressing.

<center>Inclusiveness</center>

The story about ancient Israel and God's promises to bring about new beginnings represents my traditional sermons also in the sense that I had not made a specific attempt to be inclusive toward people who are not Christians themselves or who do not know the biblical narrative so well.

As the feedback revealed, a number of people felt disconnected from the ancient story and longed for more contemporary or personal stories. When asked whether the sermon was inclusive toward people with different worldviews, the answer was clear—the score was 4,4.

There are two conclusions for me to draw from this. Firstly, inclusiveness matters and people notice it (or the absence of it). Secondly, although I live in a Postmodern society where inclusiveness is valued highly, the traditional Adventist upbringing and

somewhat cloistered environment of the church has resulted in preaching where I have to make a conscious effort to welcome and include the Other. Therefore, this feedback and critique helps me reassess my preaching and adjust it to the needs of my contemporaries.

<center>Narratives</center>

The sermon *Stumps and Shoots* had a structure of a narrative sermon with building and releasing the tension. "What do you do when all that is left are stumps?" question was answered by a hopeful message of new shoots and new beginnings. And although the tension could have been built better (in a way that would not have felt like an overlong introduction), the release of it had a hoped-for effect. In an open question about what was done well, several people wrote that they appreciated the hopefulness and the uplifting spirit of the message. This is exactly what a narrative sermon hopes to achieve—it tries to help people *feel* the message, not only hear it.

Out of the five sermons in this series, this sermon belonged to the category of biblical theology the most. It depicted God's actions in history in a way that makes better sense of the whole of the biblical story. Yet, the score for the question about whether this sermon helped the audience understand the biblical story better received a relatively low score of 4,2 (the average of the series being 4,3) with one of the two church visitors answering this question by a 3. It was a surprising outcome for me and indicates that using a historical narrative from the Old Testament does not necessarily result in Postmodern people grasping the holistic entity of the story of humankind better.

<center>**Sermon No 4 Titled *Nature and Man***</center>

The fourth sermon titled *Nature and Man* was preached in Compass Church on December 11, 2021.

The title is self-explanatory; this sermon was dedicated to environmental issues. To preach a sermon on the environment two weeks before Christmas is not a usual practice and I felt rather worried about whether it would connect with the listeners. Yet, I was able to find a connection between these two topics—I talked about Christmas as a peak of consumerism, I showed sobering statistics about the amount of waste created in December, and I emphasised the long-reaching effects of our personal choices over the holiday season.

The main biblical reference which I used was Romans 8:21 which, on one hand, acknowledges the effects of the fall and the sorry state of the natural world, but on other hand, looks ahead with optimism and hope to the day when "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay". I set our personal choices into the larger biblical narrative of fall and redemption, but also into the context of a responsibility to look after and take care of this Earth as our only home. This is a responsibility given to mankind in Eden and even the fall and subsequent changes in the natural world have not cancelled this divine decree.

The length of the sermon was 18,5 minutes.

Although I had spoken about the environment in the context of biblical theology before, I had never dedicated a whole sermon to these issues. Out of five sermons of this series, *Nature and Man* was the most difficult one for me to write and preach. The reasons behind this difficulty are quite complex.

For one, it is a polemical issue which verges on the political debates and worldviews, and I am aware of opinions spreading also in the Adventist church about global warming and the approaching climate catastrophe being fake news. Secondly, people—at least in my context—are not used to hearing sermons on this topic and I felt

somewhat uncertain as to how to approach the listeners and how personal such sermons ought to be. At the same time, I knew I had to overcome my doubts and concerns because environmental issues are close to young people's hearts and it is necessary to address the escalating climate crisis gracefully and biblically.

I received 20 feedback forms after preaching this sermon. 16 of them (80%) were filled by regular church members, 3 of them (15%) were filled by occasional visitors, and 1 feedback form (5%) was given by a visitor who identified themselves as a non-believer who has no connection to any church. Here is a short overview of the feedback I received.

Topic

The congregation seemed very engaged during this sermon. It may have been the first time some of these people heard environmental issues addressed in a sermon in such a straight manner. However, the feedback showed that this topic was not perceived as more relevant than the others. The average score for the question about the topic's relevance was 4,6 (which was also the average of the whole series). 14 people (70%) said this topic was very relevant for them, 6 people (30%) said it was less so. Yet, it is interesting to note that all four visitors we had in church on this Sabbath gave this question the maximum score of 5, for all of them it was very important as a sermon topic. This gives me courage to keep my mind open for preaching the 'green gospel' also in the future.

Judging by the one-sentence summaries of the sermon, the message was understood well. There were no summaries that did not touch on the central message. They were as follows: "Reasonable consumption", "Waste", "Caring for the Earth", "God invites us to take care of the world", "The nature is suffering", "Even today we have the

responsibility to look after the Earth", "To be a good master to the nature", "Frugality", etc. The language of the preacher was perceived as easy to understand (the score was 4,8 out of 5) with only one word pointed out as unfamiliar.

As to desired sermon topics, by the fourth sermon the answers started to repeat the earlier ones which was normal as most of the feedback forms were filled by the same regular church members. However, the topics that were mentioned again and again were practical everyday life and current crises in the world. The church members do not live in isolation and are longing for sermons that would address and analyse the frightening things happening around us and that would give these things a new meaning through the prism of the Gospel.

One specific answer which I found very encouraging and which I would like to point out stated that there could be more sermons on similar topics to those that have been preached during the preaching series. Although I do not want to give disproportionate weight to this answer by a 23-year-old church member, I still find it reassuring that the sermons were perceived as meaningful and that it was a good decision for me to follow Beville's list of topics.

<center>Structure</center>

The structure of this sermon resembled that of the first two sermons of the series. It began with a practical illustration from the real world—in this case with stark statistics about waste created over the holiday season in the United Kingdom—which led to the central biblical passage, the exegesis and application of the passage in our own context, and an appeal to care for the Earth and consume sensibly during Christmas in the light of the initial story.

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The similar structure led to the similar feedback, compared with the first two sermons. The introduction was perceived as slightly less captivating (4,5 points out of 5 compared to 4,6 and 4,7 points of the first two sermons) and the clarity of the culmination was also rated a little lower (4,6 compared to 4,7 of the first sermons) but in the other aspects this sermon was rated equally or slightly better than the first ones. The church goers rated the logicality of the train of thought at 4,9 (the average of the whole series being 4,7), and the question about the existence of a narrow central thought of the sermon received the highest score of all five sermons—4,8.

This feedback confirmed again the benefits of a simple structure that would lead the congregation through a sermon in a way that is easy to understand and follow. The only aspect where this sermon received a significantly lower score was the aspect of the relevancy of illustration (4,5 compared to 4,7 and 4,9 of the first two sermons). This was expected as I had not found any official statistics about the amount of waste created in Estonia and used the statistics of the United Kingdom instead. One person commented in the feedback form that the statistics of the UK were not so easy to relate to and they were expecting to hear numbers from closer to home.

When asked about the things which they appreciated about the sermon and which could have done better, the respondents mentioned a number of different things. From the positive side, the recurring reply was that the actual and up-do-date nature of the topic was appreciated. So even though in the earlier question about the relevancy of this topic the numeric score did not show a difference compared to other sermons, here in the open question it became clear that this unusual sermon topic during Christmas time was received well. Some other replies were as follows, "The illustrations", "The appeal for forming better habits", "The simplicity of the message", "It is a topic that is not often

spoken about", "A topic that touches us all", "Interesting statistics", "The fact that we can all make practical changes right away". These thoughts are relevant and encouraging, calling on Postmodern preachers to dare and speak up on that topic.

As to the things that could have been done differently, a couple of people stated the sermon could have been longer ("A sermon of 30 minutes would be ok"), others said that the transition from statistics to the biblical text could have been smoother, the introduction felt too long and the topic felt too politicised and would have required a more neutral viewpoint. In this last comment I heard the echo of my own fears as I was writing this sermon, feeling that I was approaching an area of cemented political views. But the overwhelming amount of positive comments assure me that although some people may think their political views are being challenged through this topic, it is still an important topic through which the redemptive Gospel can change our everyday life.

<div align="center">The Role of the Preacher</div>

By the fourth sermon of the series, I was beginning to feel overstrained. However, judging by the feedback, it did not yet show. The majority of people, when asked how I connected to the congregation, said that I did it very well. Someone noted that the connection was maybe not as strong as previously, but a couple of other people pointed out that I looked people in the eye, smiled and asked them questions.

This is one area where, during this preaching series, I made an extra effort. My studies in the area of Postmodern preaching has shown me that the mediating role of the preacher is important in different ways. It is not only an intellectual or theological position in between the Scripture and the congregation but it also means the preacher should come as close to the congregation emotionally as possible, having a dialogue with

them on an emotional level. As the feedback shows, people notice and appreciate this effort to be as close to the congregation as possible. The question about my emotions being fitting and relevant received a score of 4,8 with only 3 people out of 20 giving it a score less than 5. All of our visitors answered this question with a 5.

The question about the connotations that come to mind when hearing the word 'preacher' received the same answers as on previous Sabbaths. But I would like to point out the answer of the only non-Christian (age 28) who filled the feedback form on this particular day. They said that the first thing that came to their mind was 'good stories'. If good stories are what unchurched youth look for and long for, Christian preachers need to take it seriously. The art of storytelling, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is increasingly important in a Postmodern and Metamodern world and it would be our great loss if we did not take it as seriously as we should.

Inclusiveness

For me, the sermon on the necessity of caring for the Earth and acting responsibly in our everyday life was the most universal one which did not require a specifically religious worldview in order to be relevant. However, the question about inclusiveness did not receive as high a score as I had expected. It received a score of 4,5 with 12 people (60%) claiming it was very inclusive toward people with other worldviews and 8 people (40%) saying it was less so.

I suppose the concern for the environment is universal but the Christian viewpoint with its belief in divine restoration and the New Earth is so specific that the churchgoers felt it was exclusive toward other views. Yet, it is also interesting to note that out of four visitors, two of them (including the non-Christian visitor) gave a 5 for this question, one

gave a 3 and one left it unanswered. So the Christian viewpoint may seem different to different people as to its inclusiveness or exclusiveness.

The other aspect of inclusiveness as discussed in Chapter 4 is the willingness to cross boundaries of different scientific disciplines in order to be better informed about certain topics. The areas of environment and conservation are definitely one of those topics where Christian preachers ought to search for reliable data and statistics which would demonstrate the seriousness of the global situation. Politically charged viewpoints can be set aside but it is crucial that the fear for political correctness would not erase or mute the voices of environmental scientists. This kind of boundary crossing and research is something I also need increasingly in my preaching practice.

Narratives

The story of creation and its present state under the curse of sin is a large and fundamental part of the biblical narrative of the history of humankind. Therefore, understanding this narrative can have a significant impact on how each of us individually sees her/his responsibility toward the Earth.

Yet throughout years, I have seen this topic being ignored by many Adventist pastors or even when spoken about, the escapist view has prevailed which means that the sole focus has been on the return of Jesus and the restoration of the Earth and the current responsibility to treat the Earth well has been neglected. I believe it will take time for the attitudes and theological understandings to change but I remain hopeful about the Postmodern youth's interest in the topic and about their willingness to make personal changes in consumption.

As to the feedback of this sermon, it reflects clearly the current situation in the Adventist church. Out of all 5 sermons, this one received the lowest score for the question whether this sermon helped the hearers understand the biblical narrative better. It received a score of 4,1 out of 5 with 9 people claiming this sermon helped them a lot (score 5), and 10 people saying it did not help that much (one person gave it a 1, meaning it did not help them at all). One respondent had not answered this question.

What I take from this feedback is that there is much room for improvement but as stated earlier, I remain hopeful and I am satisfied I found courage to speak on this particular topic.

Sermon No 5 Titled *Looking God in the Eye*

I finished my preaching series *To Believe the Unbelievable* on December 18, 2021 with a sermon titled *Looking God in the Eye*.

I wanted to think of this sermon as the culmination of the series. After speaking on different cares and needs that in some universal way touch the Postmodern people, I felt I needed to summarise with a picture of Jesus as the incarnate God through whom we understand what God is like. I used a rather amusing analogy by an American Christian author D. Miller to explain why God needed to become human in order for us to understand him. Miller (2003) says, "I can no more understand the totality of God than the pancake I made for breakfast understands the complexity of me" (202). Therefore, the only way we could look God in the eye and understand his character and his attitude toward the fallen humankind, he had to become a 'pancake' himself.

The central Bible text for this sermon was John 1:1 and 1:14 which I translated into Estonian from The Message Bible where Eugene Peterson states, "The Word became

flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood". With God living in our

neighborhood, we could finally see what he was truly like.

I finished this sermon with a video as I wanted to employ another visual means to

enrich my sermons and I also was interested to see what kind of reactions it would create

in the feedback. I asked the congregation to reflect on the message of the sermon while

watching a moving video of people's reactions to seeing Leonardo da Vinci's painting of

Jesus, Salvator Mundi.[2] "What would you feel if you could look Jesus in the eye?" was

my closing question.

The length of the sermon was 14 minutes, to this was added the video which

lasted for 4 minutes.

I received 19 feedback forms after preaching *Looking God in the Eye*. Although

the congregation seemed to be roughly the same size throughout the preaching series, less

and less feedback forms were returned to me every time. Compared to the first sermon of

the series when I received 31 forms, 19 is a noticeably poorer result. Although I made the

same appeal to the listeners before every sermon and explained how their feedback would

help me in my academic research, I could sense their weariness as the series progressed.

It is difficult to keep people motivated week after week when the end goal of the

study remains somewhat abstract to them. I also realised that while a 4-page-long

feedback form gives me much needed details, it is too long for the churchgoers to fill in

regularly. Therefore, if I ever need to conduct a similar survey and ask for feedback, I

would make the feedback form shorter and less detailed. But these 19 feedback forms

could be divided into three categories as follows: 13 of them (68%) were filled by regular

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[2] The video titled *The Last da Vinci: The World is Watching* can be seen on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7omwQLuGJQ.

church members, 5 forms (26%) were filled by occasional visitors, and 1 of them (6%) was filled by a non-Christian.

<div align="center">Topic</div>

My idea of the preaching series culminating in the portrait of Jesus Christ and an appeal to get to know God through Jesus seemed not to realise as I had hoped for. The ratings for this sermon were the poorest out of all five sermons so from the churchgoers' viewpoint, the ending of the series seemed to be an anticlimax rather than a climax.

For example, the question about the actuality and meaningfulness of the topic received a score of 4,1 (the average of the series being 4,6) with only 9 people out of 19 (47%) giving it a 5 and claiming this topic was very relevant for them. Another 9 people (47%) gave it a score of 4 or 3 and one person (6%) rated the actuality of this topic by 2 which was the lowest score given to this particular question during the whole series. Not surprisingly, this 2 was given by the only non-Christian who filled the feedback form.

Another church visitor gave oral feedback after the service which was not recorded by the feedback form but which still was relevant for me to hear. This person expressed their feelings of bafflement as it was incomprehensible for them why I would dedicate a whole sermon solely to Jesus. At first, I was taken aback by this opinion but later I realised it was crucial for me to hear this feedback as it seemed to mark an abrupt distinction between this sermon and the rest of the series. I did not get such emotionally charged feedback after any other sermon. What I can conclude from this is that there is something deeply divisive about the person of Jesus and this fact is also an integral part of a Postmodern preacher's reality.

The desire to be context-sensitive and inclusive toward all churchgoers is positive and desirable but there seems to be a moment when they come up against a barrier and can go no further. This was also the first Christian preachers' experience. As seen in Chapter 3, Stephen's sermon in a Jewish context and Paul's sermon in a pagan context of Athens, both superbly audience-sensitive, brought about strong emotions and dividing opinions. Seen from this point of view, I am grateful for the similar experience which enriches my understanding of preaching and of possible reactions.

Whatever the reactions, the topic of the sermon was quite clearly understood. When asked to summarise the sermon in one sentence, I received such replies, "Who has seen Jesus has seen God", "We know what God is like because he came and lived among us", "God became human so that we could understand him", etc. A couple of the replies were a little further away from my intended message, "One day we will be able to look God in the eye", "Let us live every day in a way that we would dare to look God in the eye".

Since the topic was slightly more theological than in the previous sermons, my language was also perceived as more complicated. Although I avoided theological expressions that might have been unfamiliar and used the 'pancake' metaphor throughout my sermon, the language was still rated as not so easy to understand. The question about language received a score of 4,4 (the average of the series being 4,8) with 10 people (53%) claiming the language was very easy to understand (the score 5 out of 5) and 9 people (47%) saying it was less so (scores 3 or 4). In the open-ended question about the language, no-one pointed out any theological language but two people said they did not know the artwork I spoke about in connection to the video.

The answers to the question about topics that people find troublesome and would like to hear sermons on were by now repeating the earlier feedback forms. But as there were 6 church visitors visiting Compass church that particular Sabbath, it is worth pointing out their replies. The visitors mentioned the following topics: extremism, the power of capitalism that alienates people, managing one's livelihood, anger and ill blood between people, the excessive garbage, everyday life. There must be a way of addressing these serious matters through the redemptive prism of the Gospel.

<center>Structure</center>

The structure of *Looking God in the Eye* was different from the rest of the sermons. I built it up in a way that the tension would gradually grow and the culmination would be in the end where the video would give the congregation an opportunity to reflect on their own relationship with Jesus.

I began with a personal story of a time I saw something I had longed to see for some time. I moved on with the idea of general longing in humans' hearts to see and encounter God in a personal way. Then the central biblical text from the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John was read and the idea of seeing God in the person of Jesus was explained. In the end, an appeal was made to think about the relationship with Jesus and how it would feel like to look God in the eye one day. And then, in the very end, the video was shown.

The feedback shows that my plan of a different sermon structure did not appeal to the congregation. The introduction was rated at 4,3 (the second lowest score of the series) with 8 people (42%) stating the introduction caught their attention very well and 10 people (58%) stating it did not catch their attention so well. The question about a clear

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central message received the lowest score of the series—4,3 (the average of the series being 4,7). Also the questions about whether the different parts of the sermon were connected to its central idea and whether the conclusion was conclusive received the lowest score—4,4 out of 5 (the average of the series being 4,6) and 4,6 out of 5 (the average being 4,7). The sermon was also rated as being too short.

The feedback showed continuously that this sermon was not as clear and comprehensible as the earlier ones. As an exercise that allowed me to experiment with different sermon structures, this sermon series gave me much valuable insight into what seems logical for the listeners and what is harder to follow.

To the open question about what was good and enjoyable about this sermon, seven people replied that they appreciated the video and the fact that the message was supported by a visual, interactive illustration. This underscores the continuous necessity of 'boundary-crossing' in the area of multimedia and the fact that the Postmodern youth are more engaged when visual tools support the verbal message. As it was the first video I had ever used during my sermon, I found the feedback encouraging.

The open question about what could have been done better received only seven replies which I took as a sign of general exhaustion of feedback giving rather than a sign of the quality of my sermon. Three people mentioned the length of the sermon and the fact that it could have been longer. One said the central message could have been stressed more clearly, another person suggested the video could have been shown in the beginning rather than in the end of the sermon, and one person said the meaning of the video may not have been clear to everyone. All the feedback in this area affirms the need to keep experimenting with supporting materials and looking for the best sermon structure and it

also encourages me to employ all available tools to enhance the Gospel message and uplift the person of Jesus Christ.

The Role of the Preacher

In all areas of feedback, this sermon received the lowest scores. This includes the area of the role of the preacher. I tried to stay emotionally as close to the congregation as possible and connect with them as well as earlier but my tiredness must have shown and it reflected in the feedback.

The other aspect of connection is that *Looking God in the Eye* was slightly more theological than the other sermons and therefore required a higher attention level from the congregation. Therefore, the results were not surprising. The question about whether the preacher was easy to listen to received the lowest score of the series—4,6 (the average of the series being 4,8). The question about the appropriateness of the preacher's emotions followed the same pattern—it received a score of 4,7 (the average of the series being 4,8). This makes me wonder about the capacity of young people to pay attention to more complex and theoretical trains of thought. It seems easier to 'lose' them in such a case.

Inclusiveness

When it comes to being inclusive toward different disciplines outside theology, I tried as much as possible to cross boundaries and find useful data and illustrative materials from different areas of science and arts for different sermons. As I understood the feedback, the congregation appreciated these attempts and enjoyed the inclusiveness of my sermons.

The other aspect of inclusiveness is the openness toward different worldviews and in this area the feedback for this sermon was quite fascinating. So far I had detected great

sensitivity from the congregation's side toward this question as the sermons which I had purposefully made more inclusive toward non-Christians rated distinctly higher than the sermons where I had not made such an attempt. The last sermon of the series was the most 'Christian' of them all as it went straight to the core of Christianity and dealt with the concept of incarnation (although I did not mention that word in my sermon).

The congregation's feedback amazed me—the question whether the sermon had been sensitive toward people with different worldview received a significantly lower score compared to other sermons—it received a score of 4,2 (in comparison, the sermon about the universal goodness of God received a 4,9). Only 8 people said it was fully inclusive toward non-Christians, the other 11 had rated this sermon by a lower grade. One church visitor had also written a comment, saying that the preacher "should pressurise people less into believing".

This feedback demonstrates that inclusiveness can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it is something to aspire after in a pluralistic context where different worldviews are present. We want the church doors to be open to all. On the other hand, there remains a border after which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is so distinctly different from any other belief system or worldview that it can be perceived as non-inclusive.

The message about the person of Jesus Christ was perceived as non-inclusive also when Stephen and Paul preached. As context-sensitive and dialogical they were, their message could still be viewed as exclusive and even hostile because it invited the listeners to abandon their old worldviews and adopt a new one. The same tension will always be present also in Postmodern preaching. The message about Jesus is divisive and will remain as such. The appeal of looking God in the eye can be perceived as pressurising.

Narratives

The sermon *Looking God in the Eye* concentrated on Jesus as the pinnacle of the biblical narrative. My hope was that this sermon would help both the church members and visitors have a clearer understanding of the importance of the birth and life of Jesus in the context of the biblical story.

This hope did not realise as the feedback showed. The question whether this sermon helped them understand the biblical narrative better, received a score of 4,2 (the average of the series being 4,3). At the same time, I was glad to see that two church visitors had given this question a score of 5. The visitor who identified themselves as a non-Christian wrote a rather amusing comment, "The church services I have visited before have been boring but this one was a pleasant exception".

What I take from the feedback about the narrative nature of the Bible and how people perceive my sermons is that I will have to continually learn how to explain the different aspects of Christian faith and practice in a way that would illuminate the whole story of the Bible. At the same time, I also have to give time to my congregation to learn to see the Bible as a story. As so much of the preaching in the Adventist church has remained Modern, many church members, including the younger ones, still see the Bible as a long list of propositional truths that are disconnected from the story of the Bible. The average score of 4,3 in the area of the biblical narrative shows that we all have room for improvement.

Conclusion

The 116 evaluation forms collected during my preaching series *To Believe the Unbelievable* gave me a myriad of feedback to learn from and reflect upon. Some of what

the church members and visitors wrote was expected, some of it was enlightening in a surprising, unexpected way. As it was the first time I had asked for systematic reflections on my sermons from a larger number of people, I felt rather overwhelmed by the amount of it.

However, analysing the different aspects of my sermons in the light of what the Compass Church members and visitors had said and working my way through the feedback, I started seeing interesting patterns and enlightening nuances that shed light on the Postmodern mindset and that will help me preach the Gospel in a better and more effective way in the Post-Soviet context of Estonia. Some of these patterns that emerged from the feedback are summarised in Chapter 6 in the hope that the list of recommendations found in that chapter will also support and enlighten the preaching practices of my colleagues who work in a similar setting.

CHAPTER 6

FINDING MY VOICE: CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM FEEDBACK

Introduction

The preaching series *To Believe the Unbelievable* has offered me a valuable opportunity to step out of my preaching comfort zone, concentrate on and connect with my Postmodern listeners on a deeper level and receive valuable feedback from them. It is one thing to do academic research on Postmodernism and Metamodernism in the silence of a library, it is an entirely different thing to try and understand the deep—and often unconscious—currencies of the Postmodern mind in an actual presence of young churchgoers and in the sermon preparation process.

The truth is that the whole process of preparing and preaching, of interacting with church members and visitors, of reading and analysing their feedback posed a real challenge to me. By doing a project like this, one puts oneself in a vulnerable position, admitting the need to grow and develop, to receive criticism and advice. But only from this position of vulnerability can personal growth happen and new knowledge take root. Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude for all the church members and visitors who have supported me during this project and who have shared with me their honest thoughts and suggestions.

There were a number of assumptions behind this project. For one, the biblical illiteracy and religious lukewarmness—to put it mildly—of Post-Soviet and Postmodern Estonia are undeniable. It is a nation cut off from its Christian roots by systematic Soviet

propaganda. And although in Estonia, as well as in other Eastern-European countries, democracy was restored more than 30 years ago (Estonia officially regained its independence in 1991), the consequences of the Soviet ideology are still present. This fact leads to another realisation—a preacher addressing the Postmodern youth in the Post-Soviet context cannot assume any previous knowledge of the Bible. Therefore, if shared knowledge and the worldview are not the common denominator between the preacher and the congregation, the common ground must be sought after elsewhere.

This is where careful and sensitive work is needed from the preacher—she/he needs to be the one building a bridge across worldviews and lack of knowledge, reaching out to uncentered and individualistic Postmoderns who, despite everything, are longing for stability and certainty in life. It is also the task and privilege of a preacher to find and cultivate the points of connection between the lives of the Postmoderns and that of the Bible.

As pointed out in Chapter 4, both the Bible and the Postmoderns value human experience and gripping stories highly, both of them are realistic about the brokenness of human condition and the need for hope. The Bible, if one puts aside narrowmindedness often created by Modernist theology, offers a metanarrative, "an inclusive theory of reality" (Erickson 2002, 117) anyone can relate to. The biblical story is wide and gracious enough to let every person find her/his place in it.

The last assumption behind my preaching project was that the congregation does not need to remain at the end of the preaching process as a passive receiver but the hearers and their cares can be brought to the very front and can be embraced in ways that create a dialogue between the preacher and the congregation.

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Working in line with these assumptions, following the principles of preaching in the Postmodern world (as described and analysed in Chapter 4) and taking into account the feedback received, I have created a tentative preaching model for preaching in Postmodern and Post-Soviet context. As the principles pointed out in Chapter 4 have served as useful landmarks for my project, I also use them in the current chapter and structure the chapter according to them.

These principles form the crux of my preaching model but they are not designed to give very detailed or technical advice about sermon structure and delivery. As noted in the beginning of Chapter 4 about Postmodern preaching and as seen from the richness and creativity of the preaching examples of Peter, Stephen and Paul, one rigid preaching model is not desirable nor needed. Rather, these principles can be seen as markers which highlight the areas that a preacher needs to be mindful of in the Postmodern and Post-Soviet setting.

The four principles of preaching to the Postmoderns are as follows:

1. Universal and particular concerns of the Postmodern people

2. Mediating role of the pastor

3. Interconnectedness and inclusion

4. Narratives

In the following part of the chapter, these four principles are analysed through the prism of my preaching series and its feedback, and some general and practical advice is given to preachers working in Postmodern and Post-Soviet setting. My sincere hope is that this advice is useful to preachers ministering in the similar context to mine.

Universal and Particular Concerns of the Postmodern People

When teaching homiletics to future pastors or active church members, I have always emphasised the need to listen to the congregation prior to preaching to them. New (2017) is straightforward when it comes to this need, "The first skill preachers need is listening" (4). This kind of focused listening and noticing of different concerns can take place in many places: private conversations, prayer meetings, social media, etc. In all of these contexts, when people feel safe and heard, they can reveal their innermost thoughts about what is most important to them.

However, while I had listened to the members of my home church and also my unchurched friends, I had never directly asked them about what things concern them the most and what topics they would like to hear sermons on. This kind of question can and does add valuable contribution to the above-mentioned task of listening as it gives an opportunity for people to voice their opinion openly and directly. (At the same time, it is important to remember that the topics people *want* to hear may not coincide with the topics they may *need* to hear.) For a Postmodern preacher, this kind of catalogue of concerns makes an interesting check-list to see how many of her/his actual sermon topics overlap with the list of concerns voiced.

On the whole, young Postmodern people are clear about one thing—they do not want to hear abstract, 'pie-in-the-sky' type of sermons that would have little impact on and meaning for their daily life. Postmoderns are pragmatic (Altrock 2004)—they are practical and are interested in things that have direct connection to their everyday cares and choices. The young Postmoderns, who are Christians, value sermons that would help them experience God in their daily life and remain faithful in the face of temptations and

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tensions. As one 35-year-old participant put it, "I want to hear sermons that would bring about a change in my life and in others' lives".

This confirms the idea that young Postmoderns value practical spirituality and spiritual experiences highly. Christianity for them is not a set of propositional ideas that one needs to agree with rationally, it is rather a constant quest for experience of closeness of God. The young Postmoderns are more open to "a dynamic, growing faith than to a static, fixed system" (Jones 2001, 38). Therefore, my suggestion is that if a preacher cannot make a doctrine, for example that of the heavenly sanctuary or Trinity, touch young Postmoderns' lives in some practical manner and help them embrace faith in a dynamic way, it is maybe better not to preach it at all.

"Does my sermon give the listeners an opportunity to put a certain truth into practice the next day?" or "Is my sermon going to help my listeners face their daily challenges and cares?" are valuable questions to ask during the sermon preparation process. Equally valuable is a question, "Does my sermon take into consideration the complexity of my listeners' lives?" The real, hard choices people have to make, the complexity of the world around us, the long-term consequences of our choices—recognition of these things needs to find its way to Postmodern preaching. Boyd-MacMillan (2006) warns, "The preacher must develop a nose for how complex and ambiguous lived life actually is" (113). Simplified solutions and theoretical treatises do not satisfy the young listeners.

Another area of interest for Postmodern youth, as the feedback shows, is stories and experiences. This is summarised well by a 22-year-old church visitor who wrote in their feedback, "I would like to hear sermons on topics that are connected to experiences or stories which tell about God intervening in people's lives". This is closely connected to

the previous paragraph and to the fact that the Postmodern youth rate the individual and relative higher than the objective and logical. What one has *experienced* has a higher truth value—and therefore a potential to have an impact—than what one *thinks* rationally.

The use of narratives is analysed in more detail below in subsection titled *The use of narratives* but here it is worth mentioning that this Postmodern trait offers a preacher many opportunities to use both biblical and personal stories in order to communicate effectively with the Postmodern youth. The personal stories create an atmosphere of honesty, openness and vulnerability that matters greatly to the Postmoderns. "Use of (personal) stories" was a reply that was repeated many times in the feedback as people reflected on the positive sides of my sermons. Testimonies and narratives are especially valuable in the Post-Soviet context where the majority of young people do not know the basic biblical narratives. If the biblical world is too far or too unfamiliar, personal stories may be the right way of connecting with the youth and bridging the gap between the Bible and their lives. In this way, the connection is made on the universal human level and not on the more specific level of beliefs or religious knowledge.

Young Postmodern people live in a world of constant media consumption, surrounded by a feed of instant news from all over the world and an opportunity to reach out to people with similar interests and views. It has a deep impact on the minds of the youth, offering them countless opportunities to learn, connect and create their own identity as they are the most technically sophisticated generation in history.

At the same time, they are inheriting "a social world that is increasingly deteriorating and a natural world that is ever more savaged by industrial forces" (Best and Kellner 2003, 75). Many young people are deeply concerned about the state of the social,

political and natural world as discouraging news from the crisis-ridden world reaches them on a daily basis.

Therefore, it is important for a preacher who proclaims the Gospel in the Postmodern context not to ignore the state of affairs in the political and natural world but to find a way to address these concerns through the prism of Gospel and hope. Wars, terrorism, climate catastrophe, the cost of living crisis, mental health issues, the instability of politics—these are the news that constantly reach Postmodern people. If the Gospel cannot shed light to these dark areas, it has failed in the eyes of the Postmodern youth.

The feedback for my preaching series confirms this—"actual and current problems" was one of the most recurring answers given to the question about desired sermon topics. It takes courage from a preacher to address these issues as it also takes trust in the power of the Gospel to offer solutions to these problems. "What was the main news in the evening news or in the biggest national newspaper today and how does the Bible shed light to this issue?" would be another control question to ask during a sermon preparation in Postmodern context.

As the world is increasingly unstable—even hostile—it has an impact on young people's minds and their mental health. One specific concern which was not mentioned by Beville in his list of concerns but which was clearly brought forth and highlighted in the feedback was emotional and mental health.

When asked what worried them the most in the current world, I received the following replies: "mental instability", "exhaustion", "despair and loneliness", "hatred", "carelessness", "mental health", "depression", "how media promotes violence", "how people live in loneliness and fear", "mental brokenness", etc. Whether these replies reflect the personal reality of those giving the feedback or it is their observation of the

world, it is clear that mental instability is a serious concern in the Postmodern context and has a serious effect on the well-being of youth. Many young Postmoderns—myself included—have first-hand experiences with mental health issues.

It is estimated that depression will become the leading cause of disability in technologically developed countries by 2030 (Mathers and Loncar 2006), therefore it is a topic that cannot be ignored by preachers in the Postmodern context. I would even say that mental health is just an important an issue in the Postmodern setting as environment. In both cases some kind of unhealthy imbalance has created a crisis that brings suffering and hopelessness to the parties involved.

The question how to address this major problem belongs to the sphere of pastoral care. Whether it is crisis intervention or supportive care that is needed in any particular case, it requires sensitivity and wisdom from the minister. Preaching can also be a supportive element in such context as many Bible characters have suffered from mental problems and anguish. Therefore, a Postmodern preacher does well to ask herself/himself occasionally, "If there is someone in the church who is suffering from loneliness and hopelessness or is battling depression, how do the words I speak bring them relief or guide them to seek medical and spiritual help?"

In summary, life has always been complicated, full of dilemmas and ambiguities. The desire to find stability, hope and meaning in the middle of these complexities of life are universal. But while so many aspects of human nature have remained unchanged over time, some have also changed significantly. The world has vastly changed over the past century both technologically, religiously, and philosophically, and these changes have given rise to particular topics of interest/concern. Therefore, a preacher in a Postmodern world does well to address, among more universal topics, those of political instability,

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ecological crisis, emotional and mental health, loneliness and insecurity, hostility and extremism.

The best way to do it is through the biblical stories which intersect with the life of the preacher and that of the listeners in a practical and honest way, offering hope and security. The suspicions the Postmodern youth may have toward religion and claims of absolute truth lessen when they witness changed lives and encounter preachers who are able to "stretch the canvas of reality back out to its full theological frame, and connect human life to God" (Boyd-MacMillan 2006, 116).

Mediating Role of the Pastor

Postmodernity is the era where people have rejected the Modern notion of authority—mainly that of the church—and demand the individual be given the highest position. Out of Modern times emerged "a newly self-conscious and autonomous being, skeptical of orthodoxies, rebellious against authorities, responsible for his own beliefs and actions" (Tarnas 1991, 29).

As any institution losing its prestige and position, the church has generally not adapted well to this change. It is one thing to enjoy a special status and historical authority, it is a very different thing to manage and survive without it. The role of the minister/preacher has changed together with the broader changes brought about by Postmodernism. No longer are the words heard from the pulpit authoritative *per se*, instead the effectiveness of the words depend on the preacher's willingness to connect with the audience and to be context-sensitive.

In this area, the biblical examples analysed in Chapter 3 offer a valuable example which should encourage any preacher proclaiming the Gospel in a Postmodern age.

Neither Stephen in front of the Jewish high council, Peter in the house of Cornelius nor Paul in Athens had a special status or authority in the eyes of their audience to speak from. On the contrary, they were in a situation where the effectiveness of their message could only come by their Spirit-given ability to adapt to the worldview and knowledge of their listeners and use the concepts that were familiar to them. The listeners were (somewhat) skeptical about their message. The apostles were the underdogs.

As a minister in a Postmodern and post-Christian setting who mostly preaches to young adults, I know the lack of institutional authority all too well. People do not listen to me because they have to, they only listen to me because/if they want to. However, instead of lamenting the loss of such institutional authority, this has given me an opportunity to reflect on the ways I can position myself in between the Postmodern congregation and the Gospel. The preaching series in general and the feedback received in particular have helped me understand the role of the preacher better. In the following paragraphs, I will underline the most important lessons and principles learnt from this project. I would like to point out four of them.

First, the 'dialogical preaching' in the Postmodern context requires careful consideration of words and expressions. A dialogue, by default, can only happen when both parties are able to use words meaningful to the partner and therefore understand each other. If one party uses consistently expressions that are unfamiliar and unclear to the other, a dialogue will inevitably turn into a monologue.

The feedback I received for my sermons underlines this truth and reminds me of how sensitive people are to the preacher's choice of words. I was relieved to see from the feedback that in general, people rated the clarity of my words and expressions very highly.

On the other hand, there was also a clear correlation between the complexity of the topic and perceived complexity of my expressions. In other words, the more theological the topic, the more the audience had a feeling I had used complicated words. There might be some truth in it but I suspect there is also a subjective element to it. Topics that are difficult for us to grasp on a conceptual level often make us feel that the reason might be found in the complicated words the speaker used.

Therefore, it is important for a Postmodern preacher to navigate in between expectations and reality. On one hand, it is positive and commendable to strive for simplicity of thought, on the other hand it is crucial for the preacher to remember that the audience receives her/his words from their own level of knowledge. This is also illustrated well in Paul's sermon on the Areopagus. His words and concepts fit well into the context of philosophical debate, yet some people, upon hearing about the resurrection, scoffed at him (Acts 17:32). Therefore, the mediation between the Scripture and the audience is a balancing act which cannot always have a positive result for all parties.

The other element of mediating concerns emotions. Dialoguing with people on equal terms, being sensitive to their joys and sorrows, seeing the preacher's role as that of empathy not adversity—these Postmodern traits inevitably lead to questions about the preacher's emotional openness, even vulnerability. I did not expect it; therefore, I was surprised that emotions were mentioned in the feedback forms on a number of occasions.

In hindsight, I should not have been surprised—there is an emphasis on emotions in Postmodernism. In the world of individual truths the governing principle becomes "If it feels good it is good", giving emotions the status that once used to belong to rational acceptance of an objective truth. Therefore, as Pitt-Watson (1978) points out, it is a grave mistake to underestimate the emotional nature of people:

Unless there is some measure of emotional involvement on the part of the preacher and on the part of his hearers the *kerygma* cannot be heard in its fullness for the *kerygma* speaks to the whole man, emotions and all, and simply does not make sense to the intellect and the will alone. (47–48)

The emotions of the preacher connect to those of listeners and pave the way to the message. It is important not to manipulate emotions or show them in an inappropriate way but there must be an emotional level on which the preacher and the audience are capable of connecting.

The third aspect of the role of the pastor connects with the topic of authority as mentioned above. A meaningful dialogue requires both parties to be on the same level of authority. Yet, for the majority of Christian history, the preacher has been 'above' the congregation, a notion which now, during the Postmodern times, is disagreeable or even completely unacceptable. In the eyes of young Postmodern churchgoers, the preacher does not have a special inherit authority and they can be very sensitive to every sign of such perceived 'superiority'.

This notion was made very clear to me through a comment made after my fourth sermon which was dedicated to ecological issues and overconsumption during the Christmas time. I had told the congregation that I tried to live as eco-friendly as possible and encouraged everyone in the light of the biblical narrative to take a critical look at their spendings and their environmental footprint. To this, a 30-year-old church member replied in the feedback form, "The majority of today's sermon sounded like virtue signaling".

At first, I was taken aback by this comment because I had not intended to portray myself as a model citizen or draw people's attention to my own choices. However, as I reflected on it in the context of Postmodernist denial of institutional authority, this

comment started making more sense. As much as young people appreciate emotional openness and value personal experiences (which, from my feedback, is clear), when they sense the preacher may be looking down on them or patronising them—even if it is not objectively true—they can react with suspicion and rejection. This puts the preacher in a conflicting situation because even though there may be no authority in the person or position of a preacher, there is still the authority of the Scriptures which the preacher claims. At times, the listeners can confuse these two and perceive the preacher as arrogant or superior.

Putting aside this negative comment which may have been triggered by my unfortunate choice of words about my own priorities, the Postmodern listeners yearn for the preacher to be authentic and open. They need to see someone whose life has been changed for the better through the Gospel, they want to see someone whose choices, words and actions are in sync with their words. In the preacher, they long to see someone who has put a biblical text into practice in her/his own life and who then can explain its meaning from a personal perspective. "Personal stories" and "openness" were replies that were mentioned again and again in the feedback when asked about the positive aspects of my sermons. When the anti-institutional and pragmatic Postmodern person comes to church, she/he wants to know how our personal encounters with God "affects our character and integrity and thus brings about positive changes in our daily lives" (Altrock 2004, 72).

The fourth and last aspect of dialogical preaching and the act of positioning oneself in between the Biblical text and the congregation concerns physical space and the preacher's ability to connect with the audience. Fortunately, Compass Church gathers in a neutral meeting hall which has not been built to be specifically a church. This means there

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is no platform nor fixed pulpit, and the preacher can come as close to the congregation as she/he wishes. It also means that there are no visible symbols of Christianity on display. Having preached in more traditional church halls where the platform and pulpit create significant distance between the preacher and the congregation, Compass Church's physical set-up fits into the Postmodern context the best. The physical space does not separate nor give special authority to the speaker, instead the preacher can feel like she/he is one of the congregation.

During the preaching series, I also made a special effort to know my sermon manuscripts by heart so that I would be able to have constant eye-contact with the listeners, to have time to smile and communicate with them as directly as possible. According to the replies I received, this preparation and effort was noticed and well appreciated. People mentioned catchy introductions, eye-contact, direct questions, communication on an emotional level, and silence during the sermons as positive aspects of connection. While good communication skills are not a specifically Postmodern trait and have been important and appreciated regardless of time and place, it is still necessary to stress that young Postmodern churchgoers value highly the non-hierarchical and communal nature of communicating. The smaller the distance, the greater the impact.

To summarise the importance of the role of the preacher as a mediating agent in a Postmodern church setting, four things can be emphasised.

First, the choice of words and expressions needs to be thought through, especially in the Eastern European context where no previous religious knowledge can be assumed.

Secondly, the appropriate emotions of the preacher and her/his openness can play a big role, connecting the biblical teaching and the listeners through her/him. The

preacher is the exeget but in the Postmodern world she/he is so much more—she/he is the person whose own life can lead the listeners to daily experience the presence of God.

Thirdly, as one may expect, all references to any kind of superiority from the preacher's side are met with distrust.

And fourthly, the smaller the physical distance and the finer the communication skills, the better. Direct questions, nodding, smiles and eye-contact create an atmosphere of trust and equality which matters greatly to Postmoderns. In Postmodern context, churchgoers are longing for preachers who are 'one of us' and can therefore speak to and for everyone.

Interconnectedness and Inclusion

The Postmodern era can be described as a time when boundaries and borders between academic disciplines, worldviews and beliefs have started to lessen and people feel free to choose their individual set of beliefs. This means openness and tolerance toward novel ideas and experiences, and belief in individual truth that may differ from other people's truths.

On the other hand, the world is becoming increasingly polarised with political convictions and opinions becoming so rigid they turn difference of opinion into hostility. The Other, in many cases, has turned into the Enemy. In such a complicated environment the Postmodern preacher faces a challenge of preaching the open and welcoming nature of the Gospel and therefore the church community, and at the same time proclaiming the uniqueness of the Gospel in the midst of the Postmodern pluralism.

When it comes to tensions between openness, exclusiveness and the way people experience them, I was somewhat surprised by the responses. Living in the Eastern

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European context (which until the Ukrainian war was relatively peaceful and calm), I had not anticipated the intensity the people in my home church experience the polarisation and hostility of the world. Approximately half of the participants, when asked about what worries them the most, mentioned freedom of speech or choice and hostility toward different worldviews; others pointed out political upheaval, financial instability, hatred, selfishness, intolerance and increasing violence. This means the young Postmoderns care deeply about the state of the world and worry about its developments.

On the other hand, political and societal awareness can manifest itself as heightened sensitivity to any topic which has potential to divide opinions. For example, a 34-year-old church member, after listening to my sermon on ecological crisis and our Christian duty to care for the Earth, commented on the feedback form, saying that maybe I "could have chosen a topic less politically charged". As the existence and truthfulness of the ecological crisis and global warming have become a weapon in political arguments, this person may have felt I was choosing political sides.

In this environment of heightened concerns and fixed opinions, it is difficult to give Postmodern preachers specific advice as to what they ought to do. Maybe a good start would be for preachers to be aware of these tensions and worries, and to take them seriously. It does not mean constantly preaching on topics that make the newspaper headlines—this is not what people come to church for—but it does mean having respect for these worries and approaching people from the standpoint of empathy and pastoral care. The world can get overwhelming at times. The task of a Postmodern preacher is to remind people of the metanarrative of the Bible—the narrative of fall, redemption and new creation—and to "connect the reality of God's reign to the messy reality of life" (Boyd-MacMillan 2006, 116).

One more specific way of helping people navigate the world full of tension and conflict and to overcome anti-institutional bias is to preach "messages designed to reveal the benefits of belonging to a faith community" (Altrock 2004, 11). This, I have come to believe during my doctoral project, is one of the best ways to put the inclusive and connecting nature of the Gospel to practice.

As is clear from the feedback, young people are longing for community, and they deeply care about how the church receives them. As the replies to the question about how people feel in church reveal, around half of the respondents are longing for more informal gatherings outside the church service hours and outside the church hall. To feel more welcomed, people want to be "listened to without criticism", "asked what I am good at and where I could contribute", and to be "cared for".

The Postmodern experience, for many young people, is that of aloneness and broken relationships where one's life "is filled with nothing but the clutter and busyness and, all too often, the painful memories of one's own past" (Mahedy and Bernardy 1994, 32). In this context, when one is able to look beyond the skepticism or even cynicism of the youth toward organised religion, a preacher and an evangelically oriented church can create a community of connection and inclusion. And once they have first-hand experience of the benefits of such a community, "it might be easier for them to embrace the community's hard message concerning pluralism" (Altrock 2004, 78).

Another aspect why it is so important to preach about and mould an inclusive church community where people feel seen and heard, is that this community is a unique gathering of people where its members are on a journey of becoming more loving and inclusive. Being a Christian or a church member does not take away (often conflicting) political views but it does set people on the course of discovering the all-encompassing

and gracious kingdom of God. Therefore, my advice for preachers in a highly polarised and emotionally charged environment is to keep preaching the biblical message of the kingdom of God and the beauty and benefits of a church community. These messages give real relief to people who live in the middle of political anxiety and constant conflict.

A small practical—or technical—goal I had set to myself before the preaching series was to engage in low-level boundary crossing and make an extra effort finding supportive material for my sermons from different disciplines and also to implement visual aids, which I had rarely done prior to the series. The illustrative material I found from the disciplines of psychology, art history and contemporary art, cinematography and statistics meant that my sermon preparation time increased but so did the interest and attention level of the listeners. The photos and the video I showed during the preaching series got an overwhelmingly positive response. Even though the use of multimedia presentations and visual aids can be a double-edged sword, taking away the attention from the preacher, using them occasionally can increase the interest level.

One more practical advice—which I learnt from the feedback—is to write Bible texts on slides and not to expect people to find them in their Bibles or on phones. This is inclusive toward people who do not know the order of books in the Bible and struggle finding the important passages.

Inclusion has many facets which often contain contradictions. Openness versus polarisation, inclusiveness of the church versus exclusiveness of the Christian message, carelessness about the Other versus chronic anxiety about the world—Postmodern youth live in the middle of these tensions. The task and privilege of a Postmodern preacher in such a context is to be knowledgeable about these tensions, to keep upholding the Gospel about the empathy of God, to keep preaching about inclusiveness of church community,

to repent of internal biases about the Other in word and deed, and to pray about the power of Gospel to be stronger than the spirit of discord and anxiety so prevalent in society. Behind the political opinions and worldview differences, young people are longing for peace of mind and a community to belong to.

Narratives

The fourth and last aspect of my preaching model concentrates on stories and the narrative form of preaching. Beville (2016) summarises well the meaning and position of narratives in the Postmodern setting:

> In the Postmodern world there is an emphasis on Narrative. Everyone has a story, and that story conveys beliefs, values, and passions. Truth is conveyed not in a propositional manner, but through narrative. Because of this mindset, there is a great openness to stories. This generation will not listen to dogmatic discourse, but they will listen to any good story. (142)

The feedback which I received during my preaching series confirms the prominence of narratives and emphasises the listeners' sensitivity toward sermon structure. The young Postmoderns appreciate when the sermon starts with an illustration, image or visual material that catches their attention and when the conclusion of the sermon makes a full circle and ends with the same story or a similar image. Using this simple structure, the preacher stays within the borders of a single storyline which assures that the sermon has one dominant and narrow focus. Judging by one-sentence summaries of my sermons which were written down approximately 15–20 minutes after the end of the church service, the narrow focus helps the listeners significantly to recall and remember the sermon.

Another aspect of the same principle is as follows—the less topical changes, the better. In some of my sermons, I only used one central biblical passage through which I

explained the biblical view on a certain subject. The feedback also revealed that when some part of a sermon—especially the introduction—was perceived as too long or not interesting enough, the sermon received a lower score and people admitted later that they could not keep the attention level.

Yet another thing the audience is sensitive toward is the logicality of the train of thought. Stories, by default, have a logical structure where people are able to connect the different parts of the story without much of an effort. This is also important in sermons—if the different parts of the sermon do not connect in a natural and comprehensible way, people's minds go wandering and it is difficult for them to keep the attention level high. Therefore, when it comes to overall structuring of sermons, simplicity and logicality are the key concepts. When openness and appropriate emotions are added to them from the preacher's side, a simple sermon does not have to be perceived as simplistic. On the contrary, it is perceived as easily accessible and engaging.

When it comes to the narrower definition of a narrative sermon—a sermon which is built on concepts of deepening tension, resolution and relief—although it is not always possible nor desirable to build one's sermon precisely to fit this structure, these elements greatly help with attention level. There ought to be some kind of tension, a question, certain discrepancy or quandary that requires answer or resolution. As life is full of tensions and unanswered questions, the building of tension in the sermon lets people experience the solutions of the Gospel in a tangible and emotional way.

Therefore, it is not enough to preach a sermon that offers just solutions or answers, first the sermon needs to pose and articulate a question. The more practical this question is and the more it touches on the Postmoderns' existential worries and everyday cares, the more engaged the audience will be.

One specific area of feedback which I found surprising had to do with the sermon length. The Postmodern youth are natives in social media where video and photo sharing platforms (i.e. TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram etc.) have become the most common pastime; all of these platforms implement and offer quick visual changes to uphold attention. The video and picture dominated culture is a step further from the culture of radio and television which relied heavily on verbal communication.

The listening habits of the Postmodern youth, therefore, ought to be different from that of the earlier generations. Yet, media expert Mitchell claims there is little empirical data to support the claims of shortened attention span. Rather, he says, the differences between current and pre-social media times are to do with the variety of voices and ideas available and the erosion of the preacher's traditional authority (Mitchell 1999). In other words, if the preacher has a meaningful and engaging message, the younger generation is capable and willing to listen just as aptly as the older generations.

My presupposition before the preaching series was 'the shorter the better', believing that sermons lasting less than 20 minutes would appeal to my audience and help them keep their attention. Later, I was surprised to read from the feedback that several people would have liked the sermons to have been longer. This comment was made about three of my sermons out of five, both by regular church members and visitors. A 37-year-old church member wrote, "The sermon could have been longer. Up to 30 minutes would be okay".

This kind of feedback (and the fact that no-one expressed their desire for the sermons to have been shorter in feedback forms) challenges my presupposition and invites me to rethink my regular audience's ability to concentrate and listen. Shorter is not necessarily better when the time is used well and engagingly. This gives me confidence to

preach longer sermons to the youth, all the while remembering that my sermon structure and choice of words greatly influence the attention they are willing to give to my sermons.

The interest in and inclination toward narratives is plain from my feedback. As narratives have an inner logic of discrepancy and solutions and as they usually stay within the borders of one dominant train of thought, they offer Postmodern preachers a valuable example for sermon structure. The young Postmoderns do not extravagance or complexity in sermon structure, on the contrary they appreciate simplicity and clarity.

Conclusion and Final Observations

The preaching series *To Believe the Unbelievable* was a source of important insight for me as it was the first time I asked my home church to evaluate my sermons and share their thoughts about preaching and the current state of the world. What I learnt during the series and from the feedback was as simple as it was profound. Use simple and accessible words, put your own life and experience with God into the sermon, share your honest emotions, keep the distance with the listeners as small as possible, keep the structure simple, use narratives and narrative form, take people's concerns seriously and never look down on your Postmodern congregation—these principles function as road signs as I try and continue developing as a preacher. My sincere hope is that these principles also challenge and help my colleagues who, week after week, face the challenges of the Postmodern world as they proclaim the Gospel.

Another, equally important outcome of this journey is a deepening sense of slowness with which the church is keeping up with God in his work of salvation and inclusion. Just like the first Christian community in the book of Acts, we also drag

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behind, not being easily willing to cross boundaries and build intimacy with the Other. We feel comfortable where we are, among the people who are already there. This observation is far less a critique of the church in general and much more a conviction of my own personal need to continue on the road of bridge-building and wall-destroying. This project has helped me to become conscious of this and for that I am very grateful.

I would like to end on a personal note. While writing this concluding chapter, I was asked to preach at the Swedish Union's teenagers' weekend. To face 50+ teenagers is something that propels me far out of my comfort zone. Thankfully, I had been on the journey of understanding better my young audiences and that gave me both confidence and hope. As I was preaching to them, keeping in mind all the feedback I had received during this Project, I was amazed by their ability and willingness to sit very quietly (keeping their phones in their pockets) and listen carefully. I used my words to paint pictures of biblical teenagers who stayed faithful to God, who had enormous impact on people around them and changed the course of history; I added my own stories and experiences to those of the biblical heroes; I let my emotions show and looked the teenagers in the eye.

The feedback I received later from the Swedish Union's youth ministry leaders was very positive but more than that, it was the silence and alertness I experienced during preaching that renewed my faith in the power of the Gospel. There is hope, even in the most secular corners of the world. God is still active. Preaching is still alive.

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH APPROVAL

Andrews University
Office of Research & Creative Scholarship

August 24, 2021

Mervi Kalmus
Tel.+372-5665-2373
Email: mervi@andrews.edu

RE: APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS
IRB Protocol #:21-103 **Application Type:** Original **Dept.:** Doctor of Ministry
Review Category: Exempt **Action Taken:** Approved **Advisor:** David Penno
Title: A preaching strategy to address postmodern young adults in the post-Soviet context of Estonia.

Your IRB application for approval of research involving human subjects entitled: "*A preaching strategy to address postmodern young adults in the post-Soviet context of Estonia*" IRB protocol # 21-103 has been evaluated and determined Exempt from IRB review under regulation CFR 46.104 (4)(2)(i): Research that includes preaching and evaluation procedures in which the information obtained is recorded by the investigators in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and the investigator does not contact the subjects or re-identify subjects. You may now proceed with your research.
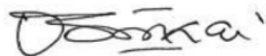
Please note that any future changes made to the study design and/or informed consent form require prior approval from the IRB before such changes can be implemented. Incase you need to make changes please use the attached report form.

While there appears to be no more than minimum risks with your study, should an incidence occur that results in a research-related adverse reaction and/or physical injury, this must be reported immediately in writing to the IRB. Any research-related physical injury must also be reported immediately to the University Physician, Dr. Katherine, by calling (269) 473-2222.

We ask that you reference the protocol number in any future correspondence regarding this study for easy retrieval of information.

Best wishes in your research.

Sincerely,

Mordekai Ongo, PhD.
Research Integrity & Compliance Office

APPENDIX B

SERMON EVALUATION FORM

SERMON EVALUATION

Date:_____

My age:_____

My connection to church: [ ] church member, attending regularly; [   ] not a church member, coming occasionally; [ ] not a Christian

1. Topic

Please summarise the topic of today's sermon in one sentence.

_____

Was today's sermon relevant to your life?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Very relevant

What kind of language did the preacher use?

1	2	3	4	5
Difficult to understand				Easy to understand

Where there any concepts or words used that were not familiar to you?

_____

What topics would you like to hear preached about in a church?

_____
_____

What are the topics that most concern you when you look at the current world?

_____
_____

Do you think the church still has a relevant message to the current world?

_____

2. Organisation

Did the introduction of the sermon catch your attention?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

Did the sermon have a clear central idea?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

Were all the points of the sermon connected to the central idea?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

Were the transitions within the sermon logical and clear?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

Did the sermon build up to a culmination?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

Was the conclusion an adequate summary of ideas?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

Were the illustrations adequate and appropriate?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

How do you rate the length of the sermon?

1	2	3	4	5
Too short				Too long

What did you like about this sermon?

_____

_____

What could the preacher have done differently?

_____

_____

3. The role of the preacher

What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'preacher'?

_____

_____

How did the preacher relate/connect to the congregation today?

_____

_____

Was the preacher easy to listen to?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

Were the preacher's emotions adequate and appropriate?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

What could the preacher have done differently?

_____

_____

4. Inclusiveness

Do you think today's sermon was inclusive toward people with different worldviews?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

How important it is for you to feel included when coming to church?

1	2	3	4	5
Not important				Very important

Did the preacher use enough illustrations from other (academic) fields?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

What could the church do to make you feel more welcomed/included?

_____

_____

5. Narratives

What do you think is the main narrative of Christianity?

_____

_____

Can you see yourself within the framework of that Christian narrative?

_____

_____

Did the preacher help you understand some aspect of the Christian/biblical narrative today?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all				Yes, very much

What kind of thought and emotions are you taking home from today?

_____

_____

APPENDIX C

EVALUATION STATISTICS

General information

	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
Number of feedback forms	31	23	23	20	19
Average age of feedback givers	38,5	39,4	37,9	35,7	31,5

The profile of feedback givers

	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
Church member, attending regularly	28	19	21	16	13
Not a church member, coming occasionally	3	4	2	3	5
Not a Christian	0	0	0	1	1

Answers to questions with numeric value

Was today's sermon relevant to your life?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	1
3	1	1	1	2	6
4	5	5	8	4	3
5	25	17	14	14	9

What kind of language did the preacher use?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	0	0	1	0	2
4	5	0	5	4	7
5	26	23	17	16	10

Did the introduction of the sermon catch your attention?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	2	1	0
3	1	2	5	1	2
4	9	3	8	5	8
5	20	17	8	13	8

Did the sermon have a clear central idea?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	1
3	2	1	3	1	1
4	4	4	3	3	7
5	25	18	17	16	9

Were all the points of the sermon connected to the central idea?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	1	0	2	2	3
4	5	6	7	3	5
5	25	16	14	15	10

Were the transitions within the sermon logical and clear?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	1	0	2	0	3
4	4	2	7	3	4
5	26	21	14	17	11

Did the sermon build up to a culmination?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	1	0	0	3	1
4	8	7	3	1	5
5	21	15	20	15	12

Was the conclusion an adequate summary of ideas?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	1	0	0	1	2
4	5	7	4	2	4
5	25	16	19	17	12

Were the illustrations adequate and appropriate?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	2	0	1	3	1
4	4	3	5	5	6
5	24	19	17	12	11

How do you rate the length of the sermon?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	9	2	3	4	4
3	22	20	20	16	14
4	0	0	0	0	0
5	0	0	0	0	0

Was the preacher easy to listen to?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	0	0	3	2	1
4	6	1	2	2	5
5	25	22	17	15	13

Were the preacher's emotions adequate and appropriate?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	0	0	0	1	1
4	7	1	5	2	3
5	24	22	17	16	15

Do you think today's sermon was inclusive toward people with different worldviews?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	1	0	0
3	3	1	3	2	5
4	5	1	5	5	6
5	22	21	13	12	8

How important it is for you to feel included when coming to church?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	2	0	0	1
2	2	0	0	1	0
3	2	1	3	4	1
4	10	7	7	4	5
5	17	12	12	10	12

Did the preacher use enough illustrations from other (academic) fields?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	0	0	1	1	1
4	4	4	3	3	6
5	26	19	18	15	12

Did the preacher help you understand some aspect of the Christian/biblical narrative

today?

Value	Sermon I	Sermon II	Sermon III	Sermon IV	Sermon V
1	0	0	0	1	0
2	0	0	0	0	0
3	3	3	6	4	6
4	12	6	6	5	3
5	13	12	11	9	9

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2004-2007   BA in Estonian and Finno-Ugric Languages, *cum laude*, University
                of Tartu, Estonia

Experience:

2022-Present Pastor, Ekebyolm, Swedish Union

2016-2022   Departmental Leader (Sabbath School, Personal Ministries,
                Education), Assistant Coordinator of Church Planting, Estonian
                Conference

2017-2018   Contract Lecturer (New Testament Greek, Homiletics) for Baltic
                Cohort, Newbold College of Higher Education, Riga, Latvia

2013-2016	Intern Pastor, Tartu and Tallinn, Estonian Conference
2013	Contract Lecturer (New Testament Greek), Newbold College of Higher Education, United Kingdom
2009-2010	Contract Lecturer (Estonian for Beginners, Basics of Academic Writing), University of Tartu, Estonia
2009-2012	Specialist of Estonian Dialects, University of Tartu, Estonia
2007-2010	Editor of Morning Program in Christian Family Radio, Tartu, Estonia