

“Back to the Future: Preaching in a Postmodern World”

By Joel R. Breidenbaugh

Pastor, CornerStone Baptist Church, Panama City Beach, Florida
Adjunct Professor of Preaching, Liberty Theological Seminary; New Orleans Baptist
Theological Seminary; The Baptist College of Florida

This paper covers the relationship between evangelical, doctrinal preaching and significant postmodern issues. This study begins with the difficulties of preaching truth in a truth-less society and notes the challenges of preaching to an entertainment-driven culture. This article also cites postmodernism’s problems concerning language, image, and story, while offering proposals on ways to apply evangelical doctrine in preaching to post-moderns. Observations of valuable doctrines for contemporary evangelicalism end this work.

Postmodernism consists of pluralism, multiplying ideologies, and an “anything goes” morality. Such a way of life is not too different than what the New Testament believers encountered as they carried the gospel into new territory. Loaded with a message saturated with doctrine, the apostolic witness expounded God’s Word in a way that addressed people where they were (and where they needed to be!). Because much lies within the pages of the Bible—a theological book by its nature—that speaks to postmodern issues, it is necessary to look to the past while forming a message for the immediate future, or a “Back to the Future” approach in preaching to a postmodern world.

Even if the reader agrees with the need for a kind of biblical preaching that is rich in doctrine, sound in exposition, and aimed toward application, the postmodern culture makes its implementation difficult, to say the least. With this implementation in mind, this paper’s goal is to show how doctrinal exposition can be done in a postmodern setting. Issues such as truth, entertainment, language, imaging, and story are all significant for contemporary preaching. Further, the practical value of doctrine comes through its actual application. Finally, this work notes several individual doctrines for their valuable contributions to conservative evangelicalism.

Truth in a Truth-less Society

American society currently consists of technological advancements like never before—automobiles, household appliances, and the Internet, to name a few. These advances and others like them allow people to accomplish more activities within a given timeframe, providing the time to pursue matters of special interest—web browsing, reading, or watching television. In a previous era, it seems that people with so much “free time” would pursue life’s most ultimate questions, such as God, truth, and eternity.

In this postmodern era, however, issues pertaining to truth are virtually moot, since many consider it to be relative to each and every individual. Therefore, few define truth objectively but, rather, subjectively. One even says that in postmodernism, “truth is up for grabs” (Johnston, 2001, p. 30). Anyone in search of truth must look inward toward personal experience and

feeling. Within the last few years, a survey showed that fifty-four percent of Americans believe that “truth can be discovered only through logic, human reasoning, and personal experience” (Barna, 2003, p. 9). These people resist those who are dogmatic about truth, and this resistance has had its effects on the church. People “almost expect the minister, if he is to be politically correct, to say, ‘Well maybe it is this and maybe it is that,’ because [they] don’t want the minister to offend anybody by a proclamation that communicates too much certainty or authority” (Sproul in Kistler, 2002, pp. 138-39).

Taking a Stand on Truth

At the same time the postmodern climate bends truth to fit its fancy, today’s American culture is becoming ripe for truth and theological thinking. The events of 9-11 and the ongoing war in Iraq have resulted in an increase in sales among Islam literature as people, both Christian and non-Christian, are wondering what the Muslim world believes. Likewise, the postmodern culture consists of openness to spirituality, a renewed interest in some matters of faith, and a certain admiration of Jesus (Johnston, 2001, pp. 17, 97, 120). Thus, now that some people are once again asking life’s most ultimate questions, Christians can and must champion truth, and there are no better persons than solid expositors of God’s Word to accept this challenge.

This stand on truth is where preaching, even doctrinal exposition, remains of utmost importance. Living in a world that despises preaching and dogmatism, preachers “must determine to let [their] convictions be shaped by the unchanging Word of God and not by the shifting currents of modern culture” (Ascol, 1996, p. 2). Moreover, when people mock expositors for their insistence on truth, preachers can take comfort in the preaching of Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Commenting on the former, Samuel Logan, Jr. writes, “What Jesus preached was anchored in the propositional bedrock of historical accuracy, and that is why recognition and proclamation of the inerrancy of all biblical affirmations is so crucial in the church today” (Logan, 1986, p. 143). Furthermore, Paul’s “insistence that truth is given objectively in Christ, not subjectively through private intuition as the pagans thought, would make him sound strangely out of touch. . . . [and even though] his preaching would be judged hopelessly irrelevant because its theological focus would put it out of step with modern habits” (Wells, 1993, pp. 290-91), he remained faithful to the truth (2 Tim 4:6-8).

Additionally, upholding objective truth is vital now more than ever, for without any solid, unchanging view of truth, meaning has no value. A reason the deconstructionist movement within postmodernism will never prevail is because its main contention is that there is no such thing as original meaning, leaving everything, including the purpose of life itself, in a state of meaninglessness. Johnston notes, however, that even among postmodernists, “deep down, people want life to make sense. Absurdity is all right in small doses, but nobody wants to live in it” (Johnston, p. 141). Doctrinal exposition’s high regard for truth can help these people make sense of life.

In order for truth to confront this postmodern world, preachers, more than anyone, must have a *passion* for the truth. They must live it, love it, and preach it as though it really *matters*, because it most certainly *does*! John Armstrong’s earlier pen offered several thoughts on preaching’s emphasis of the truth, four of which follow: 1) both the manner and matter of preaching should show “that God is truth;” 2) the failure to love the truth leads to “spiritual destruction,” for the

only way to know God is to know Him “in truth;” 3) truth is absolutely necessary for salvation; and 4) Christian living must always rest on “obedience to the truth” (Armstrong in Kistler, 2002, pp. 175-83). Clearly, one could claim, “Not only does truth *matter*, but it matters for all *eternity!*”

Preaching Truth Is Not As Easy As It Used to Be

Of course, expounding truth in a truth-less society is a formidable task. With brevity and clarity, Kent Hughes describes the problem of preaching truth today:

To be fair, preaching is far more difficult today than in past decades. There was a time across America when Sunday’s sermon was the most stimulating event of the week. Then came the wireless and ABC and NBC in megadecibels. With this came the advent of the notorious “shortened attention span.” Media-sotted people simply cannot listen as well or as long as their grandparents. And now we have a postliterate culture that does not read and has difficulty following reasoned discourse apart from visual simulation. Toss into this mix a loose set of attitudes known as postmodernity, which enthrones subjectivity and self-focus, and today becomes as challenging a time to preach the Word as has ever existed in Western culture. Nevertheless, God has chosen to speak through His written Word and its verbal proclamation (Hughes in Armstrong, 1996, p. 92).

Erickson and Heflin, likewise, list twenty-seven possible factors which make preaching doctrine in today’s world difficult. Such factors include naturalism, relativism, secularism, pluralism, ministerial pragmatism, anti-denominationalism, and anti-education-ism (see Erickson and Heflin, 1997, pp. 39-57). These factors, while challenging to doctrinal exposition, are not insurmountable to the one equipped with the Word of the omnipotent God.

God’s Word is not the only tool the expositor needs to carry with him, however, in this postmodern world. Understanding his hearers will aid the preacher in knowing how to handle God’s Word more effectively. Carson sees the need for preachers to think like missionaries by studying their culture. He writes,

The better seminaries have long included courses in the missions curriculum to help prospective missionaries “read” the culture they are about to enter. . . . But such courses are rarely required of students in the pastoral track. The assumption is that these students are returning to their *own* culture, so they do not need such assistance. But the rising empirical pluralism and the pressures from globalization ensure that the assumption is usually misplaced. Apart from isolated pockets, Western culture is changing so quickly that the church now struggles to understand what is going on. Indeed, it is less and less easy to speak of “Western culture” in such a monolithic fashion: there is a plethora of competing cultures in most Western nations, and many pastors will minister to several of them during their ministry. Indeed, in many metropolitan areas, pastors may find themselves ministering to several of them at once (Carson, 1996, pp. 549-50).

Ultimately, doctrinal exposition faces the ever-changing world with the never-changing truth of God. Preachers need a sure certainty in God’s Word, a solid dedication to learning this culture,

and a strong resolve to engage the culture with the Word. With such commitments God can use preachers to liberate those enslaved in sin with the truth of Christ.

An Entertainment-Driven Culture

Another factor in the postmodern climate is the television and entertainment industry. Few would disagree that today's American culture is largely entertainment-driven. People have a mentality that they need to feel good and enjoy whatever they do. Even some Christians are guilty of "hopping" churches in search of one which entertains them, meets their needs, and gives them a better worship experience. It seems as though the television industry has contributed much to this entertainment frenzy, for

the visual imagery of television has aided and abetted the rise of postmodern culture, at least at the popular level of experience. While many argue over television content, the television experience is by far the most defining influence with regard to the development of popular postmodern thinking (Brown in Dockery, 2001, p. 159).

This craving for entertainment is nothing new to the church. Sproul observes that Martin Luther had to fight this problem, for Luther believed

that the people in the parishes came to be entertained. Even in the 16th century, the pastors, during the middle of the Reformation, were struggling with the demands of their congregations that they entertain them with their preaching. Luther claimed that it is not the task of the pastor to entertain, but to nurture, to feed, and to be faithful to the Word of God (Sproul in Kistler, 2002, pp. 143-44).

Perhaps no one from a Christian worldview has addressed the advancement of the entertainment industry and its effects on the spoken word as much as Neil Postman in his work, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman describes the history of public discourse in America, labeling 1600-1900 as the "Age of Exposition" and the twentieth century as the "Age of Show Business." These two ages represent two different cultures: a word-centered culture, where reading is for comprehension, and an image-centered culture, where reading is for leisure (Postman, 1986, p. 63). Postman points to several factors which have led to the current state. First, Samuel Morse's invention of the telegraph transformed the way people obtained information—by the ear rather than the eye. Second, around the 1830s, newspapers began printing irrelevant information, subjecting their readers to junk. Third, the development of photography placed information in isolation from language, no longer requiring a context for interpretation and understanding. Finally, the progress of television has moved discourse toward entertainment. Postman observes, "The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining" (Postman, 1986, p. 87; see also pp. 64-80).

Leith summarizes Postman's position, claiming that the entertainment industry

has two consequences. (1) It induces people to find the meaning of life in being entertained. Entertainment (soap operas, athletic events, even anchor news which turns great events into spectacles) relieves us of uniquely human responsibilities to think for ourselves, to set goals and to accomplish them. (2) Entertainment distracts our attention from the critical issues of life, and finally our heroes become not persons of substance and achievement so much as

celebrities who attract our attention. Form takes priority over substance. In sum, entertainment whether it is soap operas or political spectacles or athletic events, is not simply entertainment but also an escape from the hard realities of life and from the questions for which Christian faith is the answer (Leith, 1990, p. 94).

Therefore, “in a practical sense, the thinking involved in watching television is radically different from that which is necessary in verbal communication (reading, speaking, listening)” (Brown in Dockery, 2001, p. 162). Children and adults who spend hour after hour in front of the television end up being deficient “in the ability to read intelligently, communicate clearly, and reason morally” (Ibid.). The impact of television and the entertainment industry has led to a “dumb-ing down” effect on each new generation—kids do not really need to learn how to do basic arithmetic or spell when calculators and spell-check programs will do it for them. Moreover, these types of training models rarely force kids to think critically about important issues, allowing television programs, music lyrics, and the like to help form their views.

All of this does not mean that preaching cannot learn something from the entertainment business. As discussed below, preachers must continually assess the factor of visual communication in their sermons. In this postmodern world, a solution exists for people “accustomed to television, movies, and entertainers. . . . The solution is not, as some have suggested, to turn worship services into entertainment—or even infotainment; the answer lies in passionate preaching of *propositional truth*” (York and Decker, 2003, pg. 5).

The Roles of Language, Image, and Story in Doctrinal Exposition

A recent trend among preachers of the New Homiletic and some church growth specialists is explaining and applying doctrine vis-à-vis re-language and re-image (see Craddock, 1971). The core of the biblical message, they contend, should be told in new ways. Thus, the trend in contemporary preaching employs story in preaching so that preaching becomes less-propositional and more narrative-oriented. Language, image, and story most certainly are significant for preaching today, but preachers should carefully evaluate each.

The Need for New Language?

Obviously, language is a necessary element in any type of communication, especially oral communication. In preaching language must provide a link between the ancient Scriptures’ theological message and contemporary anthropological reception. Tucker writes, “The task of theology is to determine what God has said through the Word. The task of the messenger is to proclaim this discovery in *language* that today’s hearer can understand. The key to this task is the congregation of believers” (emphasis mine) (Tucker, 1991, pp. 26-27).

Problem. In a book on how to preach doctrine, Robert Hughes and Robert Kysar argue that theological preaching should reformulate experience and abstraction through language, even to the point of translating tradition via re-language and re-image (Hughes and Kysar, 1997, pp. 27-29). They go so far as to say that today’s preaching on the atonement might want to underscore the correcting of “injustice through self-sacrificial love” (Ibid., p. 30). This focus, however, does not do justice to the biblical teaching of the atonement, even though their view is much more

politically correct today. If only Paul had stressed this teaching in the atonement, then maybe he could have avoided some of the problems he faced.

At the same time, readers should use caution toward certain church growth advocates, even those who label themselves as evangelical. On the one hand, Peter Wagner gives little more than lip service to the value of solid preaching, saying that “if you can serve a diet of positive sermons focused on the real, felt needs of the people you will be preaching for growth” (Wagner, 1984, p. 218). Elsewhere, discussing whether the gift of prophecy and good preaching are synonymous, Wagner claims, “I have not yet found a correlation between one or the other and church growth” (Wagner, 1979, p. 229). While not fully denying the value of solid preaching, Wagner never explains the substance of “good preaching.” With these assertions in view, doctrinal exposition, no matter how extensive, matters little in reaching people for Christ in American culture.

On the other hand, George Barna rightly recommends the contextualization principle in communicating to different audiences (Barna, 1988, p. 51). In the end, nevertheless, his largely secular approach to “marketing” the church offers little biblical content while, at the same time, provides a felt-needs message aimed at “satisfying the needs of the consumer” and preaching on locally “hot” issues (Ibid., p. 76). Elsewhere, Barna asserts, “Language which is theological, judgmental, or incessantly paternalistic creates problems for many younger listeners” (Barna, 1997, pp. 11-12). One wonders if preaching a *gospel* about *Christ*, His *sacrifice* for *sins*, and God’s *holiness* is too theological and overly expectant of such listeners.

Proposal. The more faithful approach to Scripture is to explain clearly the nature of the biblical terminology. The pre-emergent Armstrong vehemently argued for definitional clarity in preaching. Against Barna’s approach at re-language, Armstrong states,

When the preacher must change his language or excise it of theological and biblical content, he finds himself positioned to be more of an inspirational speaker and motivator than a preacher of God’s truth. . . . Barna indeed shows us the problem. But his solution is to avoid the absolutes, to go light on Scripture, not to explain the doctrines of the Word, but rather to be ‘practical’ (Armstrong in Kistler, 2000, pp. 184-85).

When being practical supersedes and replaces faithful explanation, then application has stepped out of place in expository preaching. The preacher must explain the content of the biblical text in order for there to be substantial application, i.e., effective and solid application always rests upon clear doctrinal exposition.

John Leith says that sound

preaching requires the acquisition of a language that is precise and clear, that has the quality of reality, and that is appropriate to communicate the Christian gospel. As long as English is spoken, this must build upon the remarkable literary and theological achievement of the Puritans. Language appropriate to the faith cannot be finally learned in academic communities but only as those learned in the tradition engage a broad range of people, learned and unlearned, in theological conversation. The scientific, technological, secular character of our culture makes the problem of language all the more important. As Calvin

put the traditional theology of the church in the language of ordinary discourse, so that is our task today (Leith, 1990, p. 114).

Thus, preaching must retain its theological roots to be effective, and the language in preaching, while not technical, will need to be faithful to the Bible. It seems that “today the fear of ‘turning people off’ with having to ‘think’ through doctrinal truths has led the pulpits overall to a shallowness that has dulled the cutting edge of soul-saving truth” (Selph, 1996, p. 14).

Kaiser clearly argues for maintaining theological-biblical teaching in the sermon. Surely the issue of language plays an important role in his analysis:

It is no secret that Christ’s Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, “junk food”; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church (Kaiser, 1981, pp. 7-8).

In order to speak with theological depth without going over people’s heads, the preacher “must build upon values *already held* by the intended audience” (Wogaman, 1998, p. 46). Without trying to belittle people’s intelligence, a preacher usually

needs to define even basic theological terms, and always in an engaging way. . . .
 . . . With respect to theological terms, a minister can take nothing for granted. The sermon should define even basic terms (such as Holy Spirit, sin, faith, righteousness) so that preacher and congregation communicate on the same channel (Allen, 2002, pp. 85-86).

Christians will always have a need for theology preached in their own language (Reymond, 1993, p. 37).

At the same time, however, preachers must guard against going *too* deep in the sermon, as if they were lecturing students on theology. Employing technical language most certainly deadens interest (Coffin, 1926, p. 55). The average church-goer does not need to hear such theological phrases as “hypostatic union,” “supralapsarianism,” or the “teleological argument for God’s existence.” Moreover, although the preacher in his study should investigate Hebrew and Greek terms, his sermon should leave them out.

Finally, with regard to language, expositors need not worry so much about sermon length and boredom with doctrinal issues. Allen writes, “Theology is boring only if the preacher presents it in a boring way” (Allen, 2002, p. 61). Moreover, studies show

that congregations have a remarkable capacity to follow long and complex sermons when the content makes a vital connection with the experience of the congregation, when the language of the sermon is vivid, when the message moves so that the congregation can

easily follow it, and when the preacher embodies the sermon in an engaging way (Schaller, 1994, p. 20).

Of course, anyone reading through the Bible catches a glimpse of its own vivid language with its use of poetry, metaphor, stories, and such.

The Need for Imagery

When speaking of preaching in a postmodern world, many agree that “one of the ripest fields is in the postmodern appetite for image” (Glodo, 2001, p. 110). Roof adds, “Perhaps the most important impact of television was that it replaced the *word* with the *image*” (Roof, 1993, p. 54). How a preacher should use images, however, is a much-debated matter.

Problem. Advocates of the New Homiletic not only argue for a new language in preaching, but they are also leading the way in promoting the roles of imagery and story in doctrinal preaching. Hughes and Kysar contend that more needs to be made of images and stories in preaching. One value of these models is that they “gain their power through ambiguity. When the image is ambiguous . . . or the story ends without a clear resolution, each takes on a new dimension. The story or image has many possible and different meanings” (Hughes and Kysar, 1997, p. 57). Although these writers have something to bring to the table in their discussion of using the imagination in conveying doctrine (discussed below), they ultimately leave the authority of textual meaning in the hands of the listeners, resulting in numerous possible meanings rather than the author’s intended meaning. This leads, therefore, to more language *confusion* rather than *clarity* in understanding and applying biblical doctrine.

Additionally, any kind of enduring theological reflection in twenty-first century preaching will most certainly “take the form of imaginative discourse,” contend Hughes and Kysar (Ibid., pp. 13, 55). Further, these writers speak of “doctrinal framing” which helps hold the listeners’ lives together,

but such framing requires imagination. Humans are able to conceive their lives holistically only by imagining a holistic perspective. This means that imaginative preaching will be required, for the preacher must image anew how God language can unify the listener’s experience. But, further, such preaching will invite the listeners themselves to imagine their lives within a theological image (Ibid., p. 11).

That which Hughes and Kysar offer ends up being utterly senseless. Of course, anyone conceiving life holistically needs a holistic perspective, but how imagery and re-language seriously aids such a quest remains to be seen. It seems that they want to communicate theological language through the filter of imagination so that all that is left is little more than word-pictures which may or may not adequately convey the theological message.

Proposal. Today’s preachers might as well concede that much of their preaching could use more imagination and creativity. Conceding such a point, however, does not mean that imagination drives the sermon or that theological communication cannot occur without it. Rather, doctrinal exposition can, and should, benefit from the use of imagery in several ways.

First, in light of the contemporary culture's proneness to learn better from visual effects, doctrinal expositors would do well to become masters of visual communication (see York and Decker, 2003, pp. 200-13). One approach to this could be through multimedia presentations in preaching. Whether the presentation reveals sermon outlines and key definitions, relevant maps, or even short video clips showing events such as Jesus' crucifixion or ascension, doctrinal exposition can benefit from modern technology's use of visual images. On the other hand, if the preacher cannot use multimedia presentations, because of location or inadequate facilities, preachers can still employ body movement and gestures for visual effectiveness.

On a side note, many in the New Testament Church came to believe in Jesus Christ because they "saw" His power at work in the ministry of the Apostles (see Acts 3:9-4:4; 5:12-16; 8:6-7; 9:33-35; 13:8-12). What they *viewed* was consistent with what they *heard*. This same phenomenon obviously had an impact on the repentant thief and the centurion (Luke 23:40-42, 47).

Expecting criticism to this kind of approach, Johnston hears others ask, "Must the church become pictorial in order to live?" He answers,

I can appreciate, and even hear, the resistance some might have to such a question: "Well, the church has survived for centuries without all this nonsense—art, drama, mime, role plays, documentaries, dance, and a vast number of other types of audiovisual presentation." True, the early church flourished in the absence of many things that are now used regularly: electricity, facilities, Sunday schools, biblical commentaries, seminaries, even Willow Creek formats. The use of audio-visuals is, without question, a cultural expression of our time and it too may pass.

Keep in mind, however, that how you communicate God's timeless message will constantly be changing and, yet, God's Word won't (Johnston, 2001, p. 163).

Preachers should not view the use of modern technology for visual communication as a *substitute* for the message but as an *enhancement* of it. Rowell notes, "If I'm not passionate about God's Word, no amount of technology can correct that deficiency" (Rowell, 1997, p. 97). Many conservative evangelicals remain skeptical of certain methodologies largely because of their abuse. They often see "*the radical inconsistency that exists between the message of the bloody cross and the slick, sophisticated, Spielberg-like methods of communicating it*" (Azurdia in Armstrong, 1998, p. 190). It does not have to be an either-or, however, for imagination does not mean imaginary or fanciful. In the end video technology can help audiences to visualize and understand the biblical message better.

Second, preachers will need to spend more time in preparation, thinking creatively and imaginatively. Warren Wiersbe asserts, "Biblical preaching means declaring God's truth *the way He declared it*, and that means *with imagination*" (Wiersbe, 1994, p. 9).¹ He defines imagination as "the image-making faculty in your mind, the picture gallery in which you are constantly painting, sculpting, designing, and sometimes erasing" (Wiersbe, 1994, p. 25). Larsen, likewise, notes, "Imagination is an aspect of creativity. Imagination nurtures impulses, flashes of insight and excitement over ideas; creativity is the result" (Larsen, 1989, p. 109). Further, "creative delivery enables the listeners to discover the truth for themselves as opposed to having ideas dropped in their lap" (Johnston, 2001, p. 75). A creative, yet biblically-focused, imagination helps reach people in this image-saturated culture.

No matter how many preachers and theologians lament the contemporary image-culture, each must face-up to reality. To expound doctrine effectively in this postmodern world does not require “a choice of word over symbol nor of symbol over word, but rather the proper relation of the two” (Glodo in Dockery, 2001, p. 118—for the relationship between image and word in worship, see appendix). Michael Glodo adds,

The “word” (i.e., propositional, didactic) forms of Scripture must be enriched and vivified by the “image” forms as well as the latter being controlled and organized by the former. What makes an image-driven culture arcane or cabalistic (a la Postman) is not its image-drivenness, but the disconnection of image from word. Images become contentless or, worse, connected to propositions to which they bear no relation. An unrestrained dive into the image-character of the Bible without the proper dialogue with word could result in the same arcaneness. *But word uninformed by image will bear the marks of the modernist who proclaims it* (Ibid., pp. 120-21).

One way of employing creativity and imagery in doctrinal exposition might be to dramatize the biblical text or even the preaching event. While drama should never replace the preached Word, it can most certainly enhance an audience’s understanding of Scripture. Mini-dramas on Ruth, Jacob and Esau before Isaac, or Abraham and Isaac prior to preaching the sermon can enable visualization of the biblical narrative. On the other hand, a preacher portraying the Apostle Paul in dramatic monologue could recount his conversion and service to Christ, highlighting the doctrinal elements in Paul’s own message. The point of such dramatization is not to bring Hollywood to the church but to bridge the distance between the ancient Scriptures and the contemporary world. Commenting on dramatized exposition, Johnston says, “Sermons can become like *Rocky* pictures, if the inevitable victory becomes boring and predictable. So to best intrigue and inform, invite listeners along as you investigate the spiritual journey of Bible characters” (Johnston, 2001, p. 111).

Third, preachers must work harder at translating

the abstract, Transcendent Word from scripture and doctrine into the concrete experience of human existence. Preaching is frequently too abstract, using language and images with which the listeners have no corresponding concrete identification” (Carder, 1992, p. 105).

Referring to Jonathan Edwards’s use of images in preaching, John Piper similarly writes, “Experience and Scripture teach that the heart is most powerfully touched, not when the mind is entertaining abstract ideas, but when it is filled with vivid images of amazing reality” (Piper, 1990, p. 88). Thus, when employing images in preaching, the images will need to be explanatory and/or practically applicable (Mathewson, 2002, pp. 142-43).

The Use of Story in Doctrinal Exposition

Since mankind’s beginning storytelling has been an important part of life as people passed on different accounts to each generation. Even today, stories make for best-sellers, whether they are biographies of famous people or novels of make-believe characters and events. The bottom line is that everyone loves a good story. Storytelling in preaching is gaining ground everyday,

perhaps as never before in the history of preaching. Its popularity alone demands the attention of homiletics.

Problem. In addition to re-language and re-imaging in twenty-first century preaching, proponents of the New Homiletic centralize their discussion on the use of story. In fact, they claim that “the role[s] of story and imagery. . . are themselves the substance of the sermon and are what impacts and changes listeners’ consciousness” (Hughes and Kysar, 1997, p. 12). The substance they speak of is a misnomer, for they attest that images and stories may be ambiguous. In this case “each takes on a new dimension. The story or image has many possible and different meanings” (Ibid., p. 57). If image and story as the heart of preaching can have a multitude of meanings, then the substance they offer must be about as filling as cotton candy—though it can come in different flavors, it does not satisfy hunger pains.

Furthermore, the New Homiletic pushes story so far as to insist that it is fundamental, even pointing to Jesus’ parabolic preaching as the model (see Buttrick, 1987; idem, 2000; Craddock, 1985; Lowry, 2001). Larsen warns that “when the story is primary and the parables paradigmatic we have, in effect, a new canon” (Larsen, 1989, p. 146). Similarly, Wiersbe cautions,

The metaphor is not the subject of the sermon. If handled properly, the metaphor expands the subject, illumines it and helps to make it vivid and personal to our listeners; but the metaphor is not the message. To turn a metaphor into an allegory is a dangerous step for the biblical preacher to take. . . .

[Furthermore], metaphor must never replace precise definition of doctrine. . . . our pictures must not be substituted for theological precepts (Wiersbe, 1994, pp. 82-83).

Story, while important, must not shape the sermon but rather supplement it.

Proposal. With all of the problems that Hughes’s and Kysar’s work raises, they provide some helpful advice. One of their suggestions for using story in preaching is “that story may bridge the gap between literate and post-literate mentalities” (Hughes and Kysar, 1997, p. 66). Herein lies an important point: the older the group, the more likely it is to learn through *reading*; the younger the group, the more likely it is to learn through *watching*; both groups, however, are accustomed to stories (see Edwards, 2007, pp. 4-16). Moreover, a reason storytelling is essential today is because “the climate is right. Storytelling thrives in times and places where imagination, intuition and affect assert themselves” (Fackre, 1984, pp. 5-6). At the same time, “The rediscovery of the story can bring us healthy variation and greater balance as well as grip our people anew with the power and appeal of the gospel” (Larsen, 1989, p. 150).

Because of the high probability of ambiguity through story, contemporary preaching must avoid strict narrative preaching. While some people may very well get the main point of a biblical text through narrative preaching, its inductive approach often leaves too many people guessing. Sermons on narrative texts represent the Bible best through re-telling the story, but something of an inductive-deductive approach will make certain that the audience does not miss the point of the story.

Hughes and Kysar adamantly disagree with this approach:

Reflecting on a story is not the same as telling the hearers what the story *means*. To do so violates the power of the story to mean something on its own without reducing it to some moral. Reflecting on story does not close the tale. It does not limit what the hearer can find in the story for themselves (Hughes and Kysar, 1997, p. 70).

Fred Craddock defends this approach, arguing that preaching is best done as “overhearing the gospel.” He favors indirect application, letting the listeners decide what to do with the message (Craddock, 1978). Advocates of this position often point to the preaching of Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles for their support.

Evidently, the preaching of the prophets, apostles, and Jesus were not as open-ended as New Homileticians like to think. In Nathan’s story-telling, inductive approach to King David concerning his sin against Uriah and his wife Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:1-6), Nathan had to tell David the meaning—“thou art the man!”—in order for him to acknowledge his sin and repent. Simply ending the message without applied meaning would have left David angry but *unrepentant*. Moreover, Stephen’s defense before the Sanhedrin seems to be a retelling of OT narrative (Acts 7:1-50). The Sanhedrin did not really understand the message until Stephen switched from an inductive analysis of the OT to a clear explanation of their own sinfulness (7:51-54). Of course, repentance did not take place in this situation, but God motivated the church to carry out her mission through this event (8:1-3).

Jesus may be the only occasional practitioner of the inductive method, but it most certainly was *occasional*. Today’s preachers should not emulate everything in Jesus’ preaching. Speaking of Jesus’ preaching in parables, York and Decker write,

First of all, Jesus had no single methodology of preaching parables. Sometimes they were short, other times more extended. Sometimes he clearly explained them, and other times he offered no explanation at all, simply an admonition that whoever had ears to hear, let them hear. We might wonder why Jesus did that, but the Bible provides us with the answer. After preaching the parable of the sower, Jesus concluded with, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:9). But then, afterward, his closest disciples asked him about the meaning of the parable. He answered them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; *otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!*’” (Mark 4:11-12). It might give us pause, but the text clearly states that Jesus’ sovereign purpose was to keep some of his listeners in the dark. It was all part of God’s plan to culminate in Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection (York and Decker, 2003, p. 16).

These three examples indicate that, with the exception of some of Jesus’ preaching, the inductive preaching in the Scriptures almost always ends deductively. Thus, doctrinal exposition of narrative texts will be most biblical when they include both inductive story and deductive doctrinal explanation and application.

All of this is not to say that story has little value, for preaching profits greatly from it. Story is so valuable for preaching today that a good rule of thumb would be the more theologically loaded a

sermon is, the more important it is to communicate a real-life story. In a discussion about preaching stories, Robinson writes,

You can deal abstractly with a great principle—God is sovereign—in a way that gets boring. Such a sermon reminds me of a hovercraft that floats eight feet above the ground but never lands into life. Without the human element, you lose the specific, the historical narrative, the emotional interaction (Robinson, 1997, p. 27).

Likewise, Charles Duey claims, “Theology is only stuffy when made stuffy, and only obscure when preached in erudite terms *ad nauseum*, without illustrations” (Duey, 1963, p. 17). A sermon’s use of story also helps the audience experience the text, leading to a greater understanding of it (Deuel, 1991, p. 54).

As should be evident by now, preaching must continue to use theological terms, especially those found in the Scriptures. At the same time, definitional clarity needs to be at the forefront of doctrinal exposition, so that today’s listeners can better comprehend the message of the Bible. Imagery and story are significant factors in this discussion, and preachers will want to strike a proper balance between word-pictures and story on the one hand and biblical fidelity and theological substance on the other hand. Doctrinal exposition for the twenty-first century certainly must deal with the theology of each text, taking time to explain the doctrine in its passage in a way that the audience understands.

Application in Doctrinal Expository Preaching

Application in expository preaching should be a given. In order for application to be as effective as possible, it needs to be both doctrinally sound and practically useful. Evangelical preachers should regret that many of the biblical doctrines of the Reformation are foreign to their contemporary listeners. Doctrines associated with such terms as justification, atonement, original sin, imputed righteousness, and even repentance need clarification so that today’s church can both understand the nature of the good news and appropriate it by faith.

Knowing the Audience

William Perkins speaks of applying doctrine as “the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from the Scriptures is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and time and to the people in the congregation” (Perkins, 1996, p. 54). Touching on the congregational focus of application, Klaas Runia writes, “A sermon is like an *ellipse with two foci: the text of the Bible and the situation of the hearers*. And preparing and delivering a sermon means that these two foci have to be interrelated in a process of continual reciprocity” (Runia, 1978, p. 41). Similarly, Johnston says that preachers have

two burdens: Reach the listener, a fellow human being, with the message of Christ, and at the same time uphold the Word of God, faithfully and with integrity. The best biblical communicators will not sacrifice either burden but will allow these dual desires to fuel one another (Johnston, 2001, pp. 18-19).

These statements underscore the importance of people to preaching, for “if the people are forgotten, then preaching is not preaching; and the sermon is no sermon, but merely an essay

which is a very different type of thing—the consideration of some subject in the abstract” (Gossip, 1947, 332). Indeed, “the pew craves clarity from the pulpit. It wants to know particulars. It wants applications. It wants to know how a truth has impact. It wants the descent from theory into practice, from ideas into life” (Yurs, 2000, p. 42). In order to apply doctrine effectively, preachers must know both the text and the audience.

Showing the Relevance

Knowing the audience to whom one is preaching will aid him in focusing the application on relevance. In this age of pragmatism, people often wonder about the “so what?” of biblical preaching. Thus, application in doctrinal exposition must portray both meaning and *relevance*. Lloyd-Jones states,

This question of relevance must never be forgotten. As I have said, you are not lecturing, you are not reading an essay; you are setting out to do something definite and particular, to influence these people and the whole of their lives and outlook. Obviously, therefore, you have got to show the relevance of all this. You are not an antiquary lecturing on ancient history or on ancient civilisations, or something like that. The preacher is a man who is speaking to people who are alive today and confronted by the problems of life; and therefore you have to show that this is not some academic or theoretical matter which may be of interest to people who take up that particular hobby, as others take up crossword puzzles or something of that type. You are to show that this message is vitally important to them, and that they must listen with the whole of their being, because this really is going to help them to live (Lloyd-Jones, 1971, p. 76).

These aspects of meaning and relevance center on doctrine, for “to be always relevant, you have to say things which are eternal” (Guinness, 1992, p. 169).

Along with relevance comes the issue of practicality. As is often the case, “the cry has been: ‘Give us practical sermons, not theology.’ But nothing is so practical as doctrine of the right kind” (Coffin, 1926, p. 47). Therefore, doctrinal exposition “should be related as closely as possible to the problems of daily life in our modern world” (Ballie, 1957, p. 151). Tim Keller points readers toward the larger issue within practicality:

This is a critical and difficult balance for the Christian preacher. Every message and point must demonstrate relevance or the listener will mentally “channel surf.” But once you have drawn in people with the amazing relevance and practical wisdom of the gospel, you must confront them with the most pragmatic issue of all—the claim of Christ to be absolute Lord of life (Keller, 1996, p. 113).

Finally, relevance in application will likely affect how the listener has experienced the doctrine. Some describe the application and experience of Christian doctrine through preaching as “experiential or experimental preaching,” because

experimental preaching seeks to explain in terms of biblical truth how matters ought to go, how they do go, and what is the goal of the Christian life. It aims to apply divine truth to the whole range of the believer’s personal experience as well as in his relationships with family, the church, and the world around him (Beeke in Kistler, 2000, pp. 95-96).

So, applied doctrine touches relevant, practical, and experiential elements of the audience.

Features of Applying Doctrine

Once the preacher accepts the necessity of application in doctrinal exposition, he can begin to appreciate some of the features of applying doctrine. First, the application of doctrine is extremely important, for one's doctrine affects his duty, even as situations change. That is, Christian living rests on Christian doctrine. Much of the Great Commission involves teaching (doctrine) to observe (duty). Thus, doctrine and application go together. Ephesians 4 is a good example of theology applied, for Paul deals with individual problems from the basis of doctrinal truth.

Furthermore, in this experience-as-truth world, one needs to teach that Christian living "involves more than experience. Biblical Christian living is grounded in sound doctrine, sound experience, and sound practice" (Ibid., p. 125). Additionally, "theology is meant to be *lived* and *prayed* and *sung*! All of the great doctrinal writings of the Bible (such as Paul's epistle to the Romans) are full of praise to God and personal application to life" (Grudem, 1994, pp. 16-17).

Second, doctrinal exposition, while presenting the great doctrines of the faith from its numerous heroes of the past, focuses on the here-and-now. Ferguson notes,

Those preaching helps must rather be thoroughly digested by us, made our own, and applied to people today in today's language. . . .

In this sense, biblical exposition must speak to the people sitting today in the pews, not to those who sat in them hundred [sic] of years ago (Ferguson, 2000, p. 205)!

Finally, expositors must apply "doctrine in a hortatory and practical way. . . . [driving] the doctrine home to the individual" (Macleod, 1986, p. 265). While discussing 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Perkins says,

Practical application has to do with life-style and behaviour and involves instruction and correction.

Instruction is the application of doctrine to enable us to live well in the context of the family, the state, and the church. It involves both encouragement and exhortation (*Rom.* 15:4).

Correction is the application of doctrine in a way that transforms lives marked by ungodliness and unrighteousness. This involves admonition.

Though correction is unpopular in a "judge not lest ye be judged" mindset of many of today's people, the application of doctrine upholds the truth and encourages change in accordance with that truth.

Valuable Doctrines for Evangelicalism Today

Many preachers need little persuasion when it comes to the need for doctrinal preaching today. What doctrines are important for conservative evangelicalism, however, is a matter of debate. Though disagreement will most likely occur with at least some of the following issues, several valuable doctrines for evangelicalism remain.

Distinguishing between Primary and Secondary

Since some might question how one is to know what is significant enough for all evangelicals and what can be left out, they will most certainly need to begin by distinguishing between primary and secondary doctrines. Hagner writes,

Another way of expressing the distinction is through the terms core and periphery. Some matters of scripture are obviously of central importance while others are of relatively little importance. The tabernacle furniture is clearly subordinate in importance to the Sinai covenant. Whether or not women veil their heads in public worship is obviously peripheral to their behavior as disciples of Christ (Hagner, 1985, p. 138).

Likewise, Macleod says, “All revealed doctrines are important. But some are absolutely fundamental and primary” (Macleod in Logan, 1986, pp. 257-258). He gives four criteria to determine the primary:

1. Those things which “are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation” (“The Westminster Confession of Faith,” 1.7).
2. Certain doctrines “are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them” (Ibid.).
3. Any doctrine “on which equally devout, equally humble, equally Bible-believing and Bible-studying Christians or churches reach different conclusions must be considered secondary, not primary, peripheral not central” (Stott, 1970, p. 44).
4. Most importantly, Scripture places the greatest emphasis on the most fundamental doctrines (see, for example, Deut 6:4-5; Matt 22:37-40; John 3:1-21; 1 Cor 15:3ff; Gal 1:8-9; 1 John 4:2; etc.).

Furthermore, Grudem discusses the difference between major and minor doctrines:

A major doctrine is one that has a significant impact on our thinking about other doctrines, or that has a significant impact on how we live the Christian life. A minor doctrine is one that has very little impact on how we think about other doctrines, and very little impact on how we live the Christian life (Grudem, 1994, p. 29).

Doctrines concerning biblical authority, the Trinity, Christ’s deity, and justification by faith are all major doctrines within historical evangelicalism. At the same time, issues over church government, details about communion, and views over some last things are not as significant for evangelicalism.

Preaching Primary Doctrines

A good starting place for determining primary doctrine is the doctrines of the Early Church, for people have used them throughout history to determine orthodoxy. The Apostles’ Creed (ca. A.D. 150-215) and the creeds at Nicea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (A.D. 381), Ephesus (A.D. 431), and Chalcedon (A.D. 451) stress the Church’s basic views concerning the Trinity and Jesus Christ. Irenaeus’s “Rule of Faith” (second century) possibly precedes even the Apostles’ Creed and declares belief in the Trinity:

. . . this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all the things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who made known through the prophets the plan of salvation, and the coming, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise anew all flesh of the whole human race. . . (Irenaeus, p. 6).

Moreover, the Chalcedonian Creed confesses Jesus Christ to be Lord, fully God, fully man, sinless, and eternal (see “Definition of Chalcedon,” p. 12). Therefore, evangelical doctrine must begin with orthodoxy.

Besides being orthodox, doctrinal exposition must be distinctly evangelical. Tom Nettles correctly claims, “While great openness characterizes evangelicalism, definite parameters must exist” (Nettles, 1986, p. 20). Several theological issues—both biblical and systematic—remain fundamental to evangelicalism today. As to biblical theology,

here are some themes that may be useful: covenants, the kingdom of God, the gospel, the temple, promise and fulfillment, the people of God, the land and the inheritance, the promise of the Messiah, the promises to Abraham, atonement, resurrection, creation and new creation (Adam in Alexander et al, 2000, p. 109).

Such themes will certainly provide a Christ-centered focus for both doctrine and preaching.

Concerning systematic theology, expositors must, first, teach theology proper. Such teaching should deal with God’s Trinitarian nature and His various attributes, including His holiness, sovereignty, omnipotence, omniscience, justice, grace, mercy, and love. Second, biblical anthropology remains an important issue. The Bible presents man as a sinner in need of salvation by His Creator. Sin’s origin is with Adam and its penalty is eternal death.

Third, doctrinal expositors must consistently declare Christology and soteriology. Both the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ are essential, as well as the exclusivity of faith in Him and His atoning work on the cross for sin. Leon Morris speaks of the latter as the “key doctrine. The atonement is the crucial doctrine of the faith. Unless we are right here it matters little, or so it seems to me, what we are like elsewhere” (Morris, 1965, p. 5). Moreover, Christ’s glorious resurrection proves He is the Messiah and is the foundation for the future resurrection of believers.

Fourth, evangelical preaching must retain the Spirit’s work in sanctification as well as human responsibility. Issues of personal holiness, obedience, faith, repentance, and service focus more on practical doctrine, but it is biblical doctrine nonetheless. Preachers must uphold the church as the body of Christ and speak of it in terms of its gospel mission. Finally, doctrinal exposition must not forget matters of eternity. Heaven and hell are real, Christ will soon return to judge the living and the dead, and everyone begins life on the road to hell, spared only by receiving God’s glorious gospel of grace by faith (Beeke, 2000, pp. 125-28).

Individual preachers will most surely want to emphasize certain denominational doctrines, and they should by all means do so. Even though evangelicals cannot agree on every minor doctrine,

doctrinal expository preaching must herald these primary doctrines. Evangelicals would do well to listen to Ernest Reisinger on this issue, who claims,

Let us . . . return to those doctrines which

- give *all* the glory of saving sinners to God and do not divide it between God and the sinner.
- see the Creator as the source and the end of everything both in nature and in grace.
- set forth the God who was sovereign in creation, sovereign in redemption (both in planning it and perfecting it), and sovereign in providence—both historically and right now.
- reveal a Redeemer who actually redeems; a God who saves by purpose and by power; the Trinity working together for the salvation of sinners (the Father plans it, the Son achieves it, and the Holy Spirit communicates and effectually applies it).
- proclaim a God who saves, keeps, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners—and loses none in the process (Reisinger, 1996, Internet).

When expositors focus on such doctrines, they will declare that

1. All are sinners—not sick and in need help [sic] but dead and in need life [sic].
2. Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is the only perfect, able, and willing Savior of sinners (even the worst).
3. The Father and the Son have promised that all who know themselves to be such sinners and put their faith in Christ as Savior shall be received into favor, and none will be cast out.
4. God has made repentance and faith a duty, requiring of every man who hears the gospel a serious and full casting of the soul upon Christ as the all-sufficient Savior, ready, able, and willing to save *all* that come to God by Him (Ibid.).

Such evangelical doctrines uphold the full authority of God’s Word and stress the Bible’s central message about the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

This work has shown how doctrinal expository preaching can be done in a postmodern setting. Using principles and practices from Scripture, this paper proposes going “back to (face) the future” in preaching in a postmodern world. The postmodern culture demands that preachers deal seriously with the elements of truth, language, imaging, and story in contemporary preaching. Further, the pragmatic attitude of postmodernism makes applying doctrine crucially important. This study has noted several individual doctrines as primary within conservative evangelicalism and today’s doctrinal expository preaching must retain these doctrines. May evangelical preachers engage the present, shifting, postmodern culture with the sure message of truth from the One True God!

APPENDIX

IMAGE AND WORD IN WORSHIP

Doctrinal expository preaching in a postmodern culture needs to employ both image and word. Figure A portrays how these two elements might interact in the worship setting.

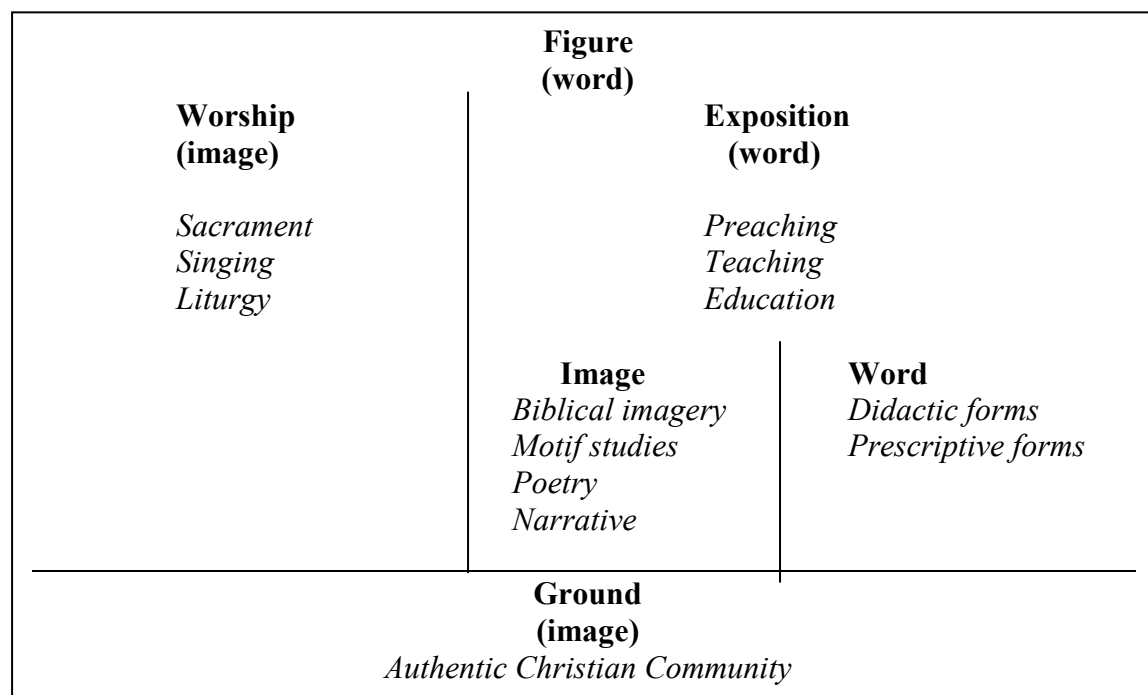


Figure A. The Relationship of Image and Word in Doctrinal Exposition²

¹For suggestions on stimulating and sustaining imagination and creativity in the sermon, see David L. Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1995), 248-54

²Taken from Michael J. Glodo, "The Bible in Stereo: New Opportunities for Biblical Interpretation in an A-Rational Age," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2nd ed., ed. David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 125.

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