

Preaching must change to communicate with culture

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DALLAS—Culture is changing and, consequently, preaching must change as well, pulpiteer Joel Gregory told a Texas Baptist gathering.

Gregory, [professor of preaching](#) at Baylor University's [Truett Seminary](#), reminded participants at his workshop during the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting that they had a tool never available to preachers before this generation.

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He urged them to use Internet search engines as they strive to preach life-changing sermons amid a “seismic cultural shift” from the rational and linear modern age to the postmodern era.

“Nobody seems to be able to agree on a single definition of what

postmodernism is, but overwhelmingly there is consensus that we are past the modern age where there were rules that applied to everybody," Gregory pointed out.

"The way people think and process information and evaluate truth claims has changed. For the first time in 1,600 years, every level of authority in culture is under challenge—and that includes the authority of the pastor."

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-Joel Gregory**

Preaching to younger generations requires pastors to take a different approach than they may have in the past, Gregory said.

"People who study such things say that the typical adult today cannot follow a sustained thought or argument for more than three or four minutes, and I concur from my own experiences," he said.

"When I preach, the over-40 crowds pretty much stay with me. But the 20-somethings tune out pretty quickly. They are text messaging each other there in the pews.

"Most of us come to the pulpit to get something said, but the reality today is that we must concentrate on getting something heard. And those are two different things. We can wind up throwing theological Frisbees over the heads of the congregation.

"If we don't connect with them emotionally, as well as intellectually, we won't be heard."

Gregory insisted the solution is not, as some suggest, to abandon preaching “truth directly related to specific biblical themes” or deny that “a great number of things have changed dramatically in the lives of the people we preach to that makes the former methods of preaching unsuccessful.”

That’s where Internet search engines come in.

“At the touch of a computer keyboard, you have millions of pieces of lived experiences at your command that you can use to point out how the scriptural truth makes sense today,” Gregory said.

“Learn to use it, and if you don’t know how, announce that you want someone to teach you, and you’ll get plenty of volunteers.”

Gregory said for most of his 42-year career as a preacher, he agreed with John Stott’s position that “the proclaimer” should stand precisely halfway between the “then-ness of the text and the relevance of that text to those hearing it.”

But now he is convinced preaching must be much closer to the present—near to how the truth of Scripture is applicable to the listeners’ situation.

“The authority of a preacher begins with the exegesis of the text. If you don’t understand what it meant the day it was written, you have no chance of understanding what it means today. But we can’t stop there,” he said.

“The ‘bridge’ is telling vivid, crisp, fresh and credible narrative experiences of living people whose experiences illustrate the truth of our text.

“What we must accept is that there is no such thing as a meta-narrative anymore, which is a fancy way of saying everyone isn’t living the same story. When I grew up, everybody around me understood the world the same way. But that is no longer true.”

To that end, he encouraged “making a journey of discovery through the text with the congregation to a definite point.”

Gregory made eight suggestions about biblical preaching today:

- Get over the idea that authority is ceded on a preacher because of education, ordination, reputation or position.
- Remember that truth is proclaimed in community, not to a gaggle of Lone Ranger independents.
- Preaching needs to be more than verb parsing, noun declining and theological-term spouting pontification.
- Preaching needs to be transformative in addition to being informative.
- Preaching needs to include more lived experiences of faith.
- Preaching may be less linear but not non-linear or without form.
- Preaching still needs unity—preaching about one big idea.
- Inductive and narrative does not mean disunified and incoherent.

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