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Preaching: A Ministry of Newness

Gregory A. Smith

The message of the New Testament draws heavily on the concepts of newness and renewal. Nearly three dozen New Testament passages discuss “new” things—new wine, new commandment, new creation, new song and new Jerusalem, to name a few.

The New Testament’s references to the new involve four adjectives, two of which are predominant, *kainos* and *neos*. While the precise nuances of these two terms are the subject of scholarly debate, most authors agree that they are fairly synonymous.¹ The imagery of newness occurs in narrative, didactic and apocalyptic literature and is used by every New Testament author except James and Jude. Not only does the biblical concept of newness provide a useful paradigm for interpreting New Testament theology,² but it also outlines the contours of the task of preaching.

Preaching is the proclamation of a new message for the purpose of renewal with the hope of seeing all things made new.

The Propositions of Preaching: Newness

The most obvious reason why preaching is a ministry of newness is the fact that the Christian message itself is new. Those who heard Jesus and His earliest followers teach and preach could not help but understand that the gospel was distinct from anything they had ever heard before. When Jesus taught in the synagogue at Capernaum one Sabbath day, His

¹ For balanced discussion of the meanings of *kainos* and *neos*, see Robert H. Mounce and Carl B. Hoch, Jr., “New; Newness,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4th ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:526-27; “New,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:669-76.

² Carl B. Hoch, Jr., has developed this theme in *All Things New: The Significance of Newness for Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

hearers marveled at the newness of His message. Mark 1:27 records that “they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.’”³

A similar scenario unfolded decades later during the ministry of the Apostle Paul. While waiting for his fellow ministers to join him in Athens, Paul shared the gospel in the marketplace. The Athenians, who prided themselves in their awareness of the worldviews of their day, found Paul’s message strangely new (Acts 17:19- 21). As a result, they invited him to explain his views before the influential Areopagus council. His address, a sermon discussing creation, providence, redemption and judgment, is recorded in Acts 17:22-31.

The distinctiveness of the Christian message is also implied in the New Testament’s many references to the new covenant. The new covenant, which is consistently identified with the blood of Christ (e.g., Matt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 9:13-15), is new in comparison to the first covenant, the law of Moses. While both provided a way for mankind to enjoy the blessings of a relationship with God, there are sharp contrasts between the two (2 Cor 3:6-11; Heb 8:6-13; 9:11-15; 12:18-24). The old covenant was served by the offering of sacrifices according to the law; the new covenant ministry is exercised by means of Spirit-led activity (2 Cor 3:2ff). The new covenant is founded on better promises than the old (Heb 8:6). Its atonement is not ceremonial but spiritual, purifying the conscience rather than the body (Heb 9:11-14). Its focus is not on earthly things but on heavenly things (Heb 12:18-24).

The core of the Christian message is God offering mankind a new and final means of relating to Him.

³ All Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.

Based in the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus's blood on the cross, the new covenant supersedes the old. It truly satisfies the judgment of God towards sin. It frees us to render acceptable service to God through the Holy Spirit. It allows us to experience personal renewal through the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:28).

Related to the new covenant is the "new way" metaphor of Hebrews 10:20. This word picture derives its significance from Old Testament references to the holy of holies, that portion of the tabernacle which only the high priest could enter and only do so one day each year. According to Hebrews 10:19-22, the rending of Christ's body on the cross forever unveiled God's holy presence.⁴ Therefore, it is the privilege and responsibility of every Christian to draw near Him with the boldness that emanates from genuine faith. Under the terms of the new covenant, believers are enjoined to "continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Heb 13:15). The right of direct access to God the Father is a significant new element of the Christian message.

The propositional content of the New Testament is further distinguished from prior revelation by the new commandment Jesus issued shortly before His crucifixion: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34). Given that this maxim appears to do little more than rephrase an Old Testament principle (Lev 19:18), commentators have struggled to identify exactly why it should be viewed as new.⁵

The most plausible explanation of the newness of Jesus's love commandment is that which focuses on its "christological reference." This interpretation sees the Lord as "the model, ground, and means of the

disciples' love for one another."⁶ In other words, believers are enjoined to love one another because of their common relationship with Christ, imitating the example of His love for His disciples, and doing so by the power that His love supplies.

The love commandment is new in that its focal point is the revelation of God in Christ. It makes sense only in the light of the love that Jesus exhibited in life and death. Not surprisingly, the world judges the legitimacy of our claim to be followers of Christ by our love for other Christians (John 13:35). Understanding this fact, the early church exalted brotherly love as one of its highest virtues.

By the time John wrote his epistles, the Christian community was so familiar with the new commandment that he could refer to it as an "old commandment" (1 John 2:7; cf. 2 John 5). Loving our fellow believers is no less necessary today than it was in the first century. Preachers would do well to recognize the new commandment as an important component of the Christian message.

The newness of the propositional content of Christian preaching is perhaps most vividly portrayed in the parable of the new cloth and wine (Matt 9:14-17; Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39). The cloth portion of the parable illustrates the folly of attempting to patch the flaws of Judaism with a mere portion of Jesus's teachings. The wine segment of the parable makes clear that Christ's message is compromised when it is packaged in the trappings of traditional religion. In short, acceptance of Jesus's message of newness is an all-or-nothing proposition.

The New Testament makes clear that the Christian message was distinct from, and superior to, the prevailing world-views of the first century, whether Jewish or Greek. This principle remains true in the twenty-first century. Authentic Christian preachers proclaim unapologetically the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8).

⁴ On the proper interpretation of Hebrews 10:20, see Norman H. Young, "Tout' Estin tes Sarkos Autou (Heb. X. 20): Apposition, Dependent or Explicative?" *New Testament Studies* 20 (October 1973): 100-04.

⁵ An outline of proposed solutions to this problem appears in Terrelle B. Crum, "New Commandment," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 379-80.

⁶ Raymond F. Collins, "New Commandment," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1088. Similar views are taken by F. F. Bruce and C. K. Barrett.

While they refuse to compromise their message in order to gain cultural acceptance, they remain sensitive to cultural concerns by offering authoritative answers to contemporary problems. In summary, effective preachers capitalize on the newness of their message, advancing truth that refreshes “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt 5:6).

The Purposes of Preaching: Renewal

The purpose of preaching is not merely to proclaim a new message, but to prompt the audience to act on it in faith. God has ordained preaching as the means by which unbelievers are drawn to salvation (1 Cor 1:21) and saints are led to maturity in Christ (Col 1:27-28). In short, preachers are concerned with effecting genuine spiritual renewal in the lives of their hearers.

The idea of renewal is prominent in the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s epistles. Perhaps the most significant image of renewal is that of new creation. While the phrase “new creation” occurs only twice (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), other passages use slightly different terms to express the same idea. The concept of new creation is complex, involving several dimensions.⁷ At its most basic level it refers to regeneration; therefore, it is accurate to say that new creation occurs when a person is united with Christ by faith (2 Cor 5:17).

Paul often used the imagery of clothing to describe new creation and its effects. Several passages indicate that when we are saved we are clothed with a new humanity (Col 3:10), the essence of which is Christ Himself (Gal 3:27). However, other passages instruct us to put on Christ or the new man (Rom 13:12, 14; Eph 4:22-24), implying that regeneration does not fully accomplish this task. These seemingly

conflicting statements describe the tension between “what believers *are* and what they *should become*.”⁸

Having been made new already, we are to live out the presence of Christ in our lives by ridding ourselves of the old garment of sinful ways and putting on the new apparel of righteousness. We should evidence the reality of new creation by practicing good works (Eph 2:10).

In summary, though new creation itself is instantaneous, its effects are worked out gradually through the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2). Similarly, we can only gain strength to face the hardships of Christian service by submitting daily to internal renewing (2 Cor 4:16-18). Awareness of these processes is essential to effective preaching.

As “God’s fellow workers,” preachers must work in consort with the Holy Spirit to foster renewal in the lives of their listeners (1 Cor 3:9ff). They should recognize, however, that God’s design for spiritual renewal is larger than the individual believer. Indeed, certain aspects of renewal can only be accomplished corporately in the Church.

Ephesians 2:15 refers to the church as a “new man.” While this metaphor speaks of the church as Christ’s body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 4:11-16), it also emphasizes its qualitative newness. The Church accomplishes what no other institution in history has done: It unites Jews and Gentiles in a single organism (Eph 2:14-16). In truth, however, Christ’s Body is not made up of Jews and Gentiles or members of any other social groups, but of believers in Christ (1 Cor 10:32). According to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in building the Church Christ “does not produce a conglomeration of different people; He produces a new people, a new family, a new household, a new race.”⁹

⁷ For a good introduction to the concept of new creation, see Stephen Motyer, “New Creation, New Creature,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 759-60.

⁸ David S. Dockery, “New Nature and Old Nature,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 629; emphasis his.

⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation: (Studies in Ephesians Chapter 2)* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 216.

The preaching of the cross unites former rivals into a single new man, granting equality of access to God by way of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:14-18). The members of the Church strive together to grow in Christ (Eph 4:13-16) and glorify God through the harmonious exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:12ff). They accept one another as fellow heirs of God's grace (Rom 15:7).

Their religious background, social class and gender are of no consequence because of their common faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:28). In sum, Paul's reference to the Church as a new man emphasizes God's intention to bring renewal to the human race by uniting all believers in Christ.

While the "new man" metaphor refers to the Church's unity, Paul's reference to the Church as a "new lump" (1 Cor 5:7) speaks of its spiritual purity. A new lump is literally a fresh batch of dough that contains no leaven. This metaphor draws on the Old Testament view of leaven as a picture of sin. Just as the Israelites were to purge their dwellings of every trace of leaven in order to observe the Passover, the local church is to cleanse itself from sin in order to maintain the vibrancy of its testimony before the world. Because we are unleavened in God's sight, we must recognize the pervasive nature of sin and deal with it severely.

The New Testament uses vivid imagery to describe God's design for spiritual renewal. Individual Christians are the objects of the Holy Spirit's new creation. The Body of Christ is a new man that integrates people of diverse social classes. The local assembly is a lump of pure dough in a morally corrupt world. Effective preachers understand God's plan for renewal and align their preaching with it. In both preparation and delivery, they remain focused on their primary purpose: to facilitate the Holy Spirit's work of renewal.

The Prospects of Preaching: All Things Made New

A final reason why preaching is a ministry of newness is that it anticipates the fulfillment of God's

promise to make all things new (Rev 21:5). Ever since mankind fell into sin, God has been intervening in human history to bring about final redemption and reconciliation. As noted above, the Holy Spirit is currently at work effecting renewal among individual believers and churches. However, God's plan for restoration includes not only the human race, but the entire physical creation as well (Rom 8:20-22). He will eventually "gather together in one all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10; cf. Col 1:19-20).

While it is not precisely clear how God will make all things new, the book of Revelation does provide some clues. Christ Himself will have a new name that will be known only to the redeemed (2:17; 3:12). Heaven will vibrate with the sound of a new song that exalts the worth of Christ, the Lamb (5:9ff; cf. 14:3). History will culminate with the creation of a new heaven and earth (21:1) and the introduction of God's holy city, the New Jerusalem (21:2ff).

The fact that all things will be made new carries at least two consequences for preaching. First, it confers on preaching the vital role of inviting listeners to participate in future newness by responding to the gospel. Second, it demands that preaching be saturated with the hope that God will indeed resolve all things for good.

The twin themes of newness and renewal so saturate the New Testament that no expositor can grasp the full significance of the biblical message without laying hold of their meaning. In addition, as this article has shown, the propositions, purposes and prospects of Christian preaching are fundamentally new. These facts suggest that the concept of newness is a useful paradigm for evaluating preaching.

A case can be made that every sermon should share distinctively new truth, call listeners to submit to the Holy Spirit's renewing power and offer the hope of new things yet to come. Therefore, preachers would do well to examine their sermon ideas through the lens of renewal in the early stages of homiletical development.

Understanding the New Testament's newness theme also benefits the expositor by providing a

theological context in which to interpret a passage. For example, when preaching on the subject of baptism from Romans 6:1-6, the preacher would benefit from an awareness of biblical teaching on new creation. In fact, the preacher could lead the audience to realize that baptism is a visible symbol of God's overarching purpose of renewal. The New Testament's new things do not stand in isolation, but rather in a continuum that describes God's plan for time and eternity.

Authentic Christian preaching reflects its identity as a ministry of newness. It proclaims a message that is refreshingly new. It facilitates the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in human lives. It offers hope that God will one day make all things new. In a world ruled by sin and sorrow, preaching holds propositions, purposes and prospects that are genuinely new.

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