PROGRESSIONAL DIALOGUE & PREACHING: ARE THEY THE SAME?

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Under the influence of postmodernism and postconservativism, the Emerging Church is engaged in dismantling much of present-day worship practices in the local church. A leader in advocating radical changes in conventional preaching is Doug Pagitt in his book Preaching Re-Imagined. *Pagitt's name for traditional preaching is "speaching," which he sees as totally inadequate to meet needs in the Christian community, because it is a one-way communication that does not allow for the listeners' input. His preferred alternative is "progressional dialogue" which involves "intentional interplay of multiple viewpoints." As he sees the goal, the Bible is not the sole repository of truth. The Christian community has an equal contribution to make. Influences that have shaped Pagitt's thinking include the Christian/cosmic metanarrative, postfoundationalism, and outcome-based church ministry. The inevitable conclusion must be that progressional dialogue is not really preaching as preaching has been defined biblically and historically.*

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Preaching is public hermeneutics. It reflects what are the preacher's fundamental interpretations of his world, his task, his people, and most important, his Bible. How he handles the Bible in the pulpit becomes the exemplar for how the congregation approaches it at home. Church history is an undeniable testimony that the pulpit is the rudder for the church.

The Emerging Church (hereafter, EC)[1] phenomenon is distinguished by its

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[1]Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, Emerging Church proponents, offer this definition of emerging churches: "Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities" (Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005] 44-45). "Emerging" churches are not necessarily synonymous with "emergent" churches. The term "emergent" refers to those associated or aligned with Emergent Village. Not all those who consider themselves "emerging" identify with the "emergent" wing of the movement. See Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 22.

iconoclastic dismantling of accepted worship forms. Every nuance of ecclesiology is being questioned and reconsidered under the twin-lens microscope of postmodern-ism[2] (culturally) and postconservatism[3] (theologically). That preaching too is receiving a theological, philosophical, and methodological facelift from leaders in the EC movement should surprise no one. Doug Pagitt has utilized the most creative and skilled scalpel on the traditional view of preaching. As a part of the "Organizing Group" in the Emergent Village, Pagitt has been pastor of Solomon's Porch, a Holistic, Missional Christian Community in Minneapolis, since its inception in January 2000.

Pagitt issues his challenge to conventional preaching in *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), a part of Zondervan's expanding library of EC articulations and resources. To date, *Preaching Re-Imagined* (hereafter, *PR-I*) is the EC's most definitive voice on preaching.

Not all who identify with the EC would subscribe to Pagitt's homiletical theories. The EC is not a monolithic movement.[4] Describing preaching in the Emerging Church movement is tantamount to reaching definitive conclusions about speeches in the Democratic Party. No matter what conclusions anyone offers, exceptions can be cited. And generalizations are just that, generalizations.

However, Doug Pagitt has made a significant contribution to the EC conversation. Unfortunately, most of this conversation emerges on the Internet. Changes, updates, additions, revisions, reversals, and clarifications to much EC thinking happens rapidly in cyberspace. On January 11, 2006, Pagitt himself wrote,

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[2]D. A. Carson provides this definition of postmodernism in the context of the Emerging Church: "[T]he fundamental issue in the move from modernism to postmodernism is *epistemology*—i.e., how we know things. Modernism is often pictured as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty, the cerebral as opposed to the affective—which in turn breeds arrogance, inflexibility, a lust to be right, the desire to control. Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we "know" is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and in fact can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right. Modernism tries to find unquestioned foundations on which to build the edifice of knowledge and then proceeds with methodological rigor; postmodernism denies that such foundations exist (it is "antifoundational") and insists that we come to "know" things in many ways, not a few of them lacking in rigor. Modernism is hard-edged and, in the domain of religion, focuses on truth versus error, right belief, confessionalism; postmodernism is gentle and, in the domain of religion, focuses on relationships, love, shared tradition, integrity in discussion" (D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005] 27).

[3]Justin Taylor writes, "…[A] significant shift is taking place in some segments of evangelicalism. The proponents of this perspective have assumed various connotations—postconservatives, reformists, the emerging church, younger evangelicals, postfundamentalists, postfoundationalists, postpropositionalists, postevangelicals—but they all bear a family resemblance and can be grouped together as having a number of common characteristics. They are self-professed evangelicals seeking to revision the theology, renew the center, transform the worshipping community of evangelicalism, cognizant of the postmodern global context within which we live" (Justin Taylor, "An Introduction to Postconservativism and the Rest of This Book," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accomodation in Postmodern Times*, eds. Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004] 17-18).

[4]For example, Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, preaches in a way that could be classified easily under the historic understanding of Protestant homiletics of which Dough Pagitt is so critical. Driscoll's sermon downloads are available at www/marshillchurch.org.

"I think blogs are adding to a culture of misunderstanding."[5] But in *PR-I* Pagitt has helpfully cemented his thoughts on the printed page, rather than in a blog to follow. Both Pagitt's critics and sympathizers should be grateful for his book.

In *PR-I* Pagitt questions conventional definitions and practices of preaching. With only four works cited,[6] he admittedly paves new roads in homiletical theory.[7]

Speaching vs. *Progressional Dialogue*

In 1928 Harry Emerson Fosdick published an essay in *Harper's Magazine* entitled: "What's Wrong With Preaching?" This leader of liberalism was calling for preaching that was more relevant, involving more of the experiences of the congregation. Fosdick wrote,

> Many preachers … indulge habitually in what they call expository sermons. They take a passage from Scripture and, proceeding on the assumption that the people attending church that morning are deeply concerned about what the passage means, they spend their half hour or more on historical exposition of the verse or chapter, ending with some appended practical application to the auditors. Could any procedure be more surely predestined to dullness and futility? Who seriously supposes that, as a matter of fact, one in a hundred of the congregation cares, to start with, what Moses, Isaiah, Paul, or John meant in those special verses, or came to church deeply concerned about it? Nobody else who talks to the public so assumes that the vital interests of the people are located in the meaning of words spoken two thousand years ago.[8]

Fosdick's conclusion was that propositional preaching, sourced in biblical data, was irrelevant. But he went further. The method of sermonic transmission (i.e., giving a speech) was problematic as well. Note his prophetic vision in 1928:

> Their method [i.e. conventional preaching], however, has long since lost its influence over intelligent people, and the future does not belong to it. The future, I think, belongs to a type of sermon which can best be described as an adventure in co-operative thinking between the preacher and his congregation.

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[5]Interestingly, I tried to access this statement again when writing this article (July/August of 2006). It has already disappeared. Pagitt made this statement in the context of announcing that he would "stop using [his] blog for the sharing of ideas." Further, he wrote, "I am convinced that in the circles I run in the use of blogs to share ideas and thoughts for the world to pick apart, misunderstand and use for their own benefit does not lead to a better world of deeper understanding. It is a negative force in the process of creating more open and interesting dialog." These comments were posted under the heading "Blog Announcement," on January 11, 2006 and found at http://pagitt.typepad.com, accessed 1/11/06.

[6]Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 229.

[7]Though his homiletical ideas have unique nuances, Paggitt is not the only or the first to propose a collaborative process between the pastor and the faith community for sermonic production and delivery. Cf. Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997; John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Preaching and Leadership Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

[8]Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What is the Matter with Preaching?," in *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?*, ed. Mike Graves (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 9.

The lecture method of instruction is no longer in the ascendant. To be sure, there are subjects which must be handled by the positive setting forth of information in a lecture, but more and more, good teaching is discussional, co-operative. The instructor does not think so much for the students but with them.

A wise preacher can so build his sermon that it will be, not a dogmatic monologue but a co-operative dialogue in which all sorts of things in the minds of the congregation—objections, questions, doubts, and confirmations—will be brought to the front and fairly dealt with.[9]

The trajectory of preaching, according to Fosdick, should be away from giving a sermonic speech and toward a "discussional, co-operative model." The fulfillment of his homiletical hopes and ideas are realized in Pagitt's *Preaching Re-Imagined*.

The Problem of *Speaching* (i.e., Historic Preaching) According to Pagitt

Like Fosdick, Pagitt is concerned about what is going on today in the name of preaching. The title of his book is a bit softer than the substance. In the title he indicates that he wants to "re-imagine" what preaching is. But in the opening chapter he confesses that he is actually "redefining" what preaching really is. He writes,

As the pastor I'm often referred to as "the preacher." And frankly, this is a role I no longer relish. There was a time when I did. There was a time when I felt my ability to deliver sermons was a high calling I sought to refine but didn't need to redefine.
     Those days are gone. Now I find myself regularly redefining my role and the role of preaching (*Pr-I*, 10).[10]

The form of preaching to which Pagitt is averse is *speaching*, a term he created (11-12). His definition of *speaching* is "the style of preaching that is hardly distinguishable from a one-way speech" (11-12). The term has an intended pejorative connotation. Pagitt explains:

Throughout this book, I will use the term speaching to discuss the ways in which preaching has degraded into speech making. I use this word to distinguish speaching, which I believe to be a form of speaking that is inconsistent with the outcomes we want to see arise from our preaching, from the act of preaching, which I believe to be a good, right, and essential calling of the church (48).

He concludes that as "speaching," "preaching doesn't work" (18) and it is "a tragically broken endeavor" (19). But that is not all. In Pagitt's estimation, speaching has serious consequences. He describes the dangers of speaching with dramatic language. The alarming nature of these statements is amplified by the fact that they implicate twenty centuries of Christian preaching. Here are some of Pagitt's critical comments about speaching (i.e., the historic mode of preaching).

"bondage" (18), "an ineffectual means of communication" (22), something "to protect

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[9] Ibid., 13.

[10] All page numbers in subsequent parentheses refer to *Preaching Re-Imagined*.

our communities from" (25), like "a repetitive stress disorder" (25), "an act of relational violence" (26), the cause of "a certain misunderstanding about God, faith, life, authority, and power that is detrimental to the message we are attempting to live and communicate as pastors" (51), "a subtle form of manipulation" (72, 74), "not a sustainable way for the church to minister" (76), "dehumanizing" (76), "a violation of what we know about building relationships" (82), equivalent in impact to a "bumper sticker" (83), "arrogant enough to presume to know …" how a grieving couple could deal with pain (87), "not good for the good news" (131), "not a sustainable means for building Christian communities who seek to live in harmony with God, each other, and the world" (162),[11] "failing to accomplish much of anything" (163), and "disruptive to the creation of communities of faith" (175).

Such statements call into question the sincerity of Pagitt's caveat elsewhere: "But it's important to keep in mind that I see the problem of speaching as more of a low-grade fever than a medical emergency" (76).[12] Low-grade fevers call for minimal treatment, but Pagitt suggests a full-scale transplant, with another mode of sermonizing replacing the diseased mode of speaching.

In chapter 13 he cites D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones as an example of speaching. This five-and-a-half page chapter is interesting for several reasons. Almost three pages is a quotation from Lloyd-Jones' 1972 book *Preaching and Preachers*. The quotation highlights Lloyd-Jones' priority of preaching (or speaching) in the church. Admittedly critical of such a priority, Pagitt fails to supply any meaningful interaction with the quotation provided except to say that he disagrees.[13] He simply advises the reader, "If one were convinced of [Lloyd-Jones'] perspective, one might be better served by drawing from the vast resources devoted to refining the role of Reformed preaching than spending time in this book" (117).

The only criticism of Lloyd-Jones' model comes in chapter 14. Pagitt believes that "this kind of emphasis on preaching is drawn from a far too limited view of the work of the church and far too heightened understanding of preaching" (119). He attributes this wrong understanding of the pulpit to the preacher's fear of being wrong. However, Paul told Timothy to pay close attention to his life and to his teaching because heaven and hell are at stake in sermonic hearing (1 Tim 4:16). And the apostle warns that God Himself will hold preachers accountable to "preach the word" (2 Tim 4:1-2). According to Paul, Lloyd-Jones was right to show the

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[11]Pagitt qualifies this comment in context: "My contention is that speaching, while perhaps a reasonable way to deliver a broad message to a broad group of people, is not a sustainable means for building Christian communities who seek to live in harmony with God, each other, and the world. I am not suggesting a move to progressional preaching as the sole means to this end—it will take a comprehensive approach—but I do believe that only when we change our ideas about speaching will we change the ways our communities articulate, express, and embody the hopeful message of God" (*PR-I* 162).

[12]Pagitt also says, "There are really good, intelligent people who hold a view on the function of preaching in the church that is very different from mine. But I'm not trying to convince people that speaching is a failure as much as I'm trying to provide a new way of thinking for those who've already concluded such but don't have the words to go with their intuition" (*PR-I* 114). It is difficult to reconcile the list of criticisms above and Pagitt's statement that he is not trying to convince people that speaching is a failure.

[13]He states, "I won't take the time to refute the thoughts presented by Dr. Lloyd-Jones other than to say that his view of preaching bears little resemblance to mine and to further suggest that those who are convinced of his position are not likely to find value in my ideas about preaching" (*PR-I* 117).

importance and gravity of the pulpit.

Pagitt's Alternative to *Speaching*: *Progressional Dialogue*

In lieu of speaching (historic preaching), Pagitt offers *progressional dialogue* as a better mode of preaching. By progressional dialogue—another term he made up (11)—he means that people in a church meeting sit in a group with equal opportunity to talk/preach about their personal story with God or perspective on a given biblical text. Pagitt defines his new homiletical conception with these descriptions:

> Progressional dialogue. . . involves the intentional interplay of multiple viewpoints that leads to unexpected and unforeseen ideas. The message will change depending on who is present and who says what. This kind of preaching is dynamic in the sense that the outcome is determined on the spot by the participants (52).

> This is my hope for what preaching can be: the mutual admonition of one another in life with God…. I'm not suggesting we become a people who spend less time telling the story, less time talking or less time leading one another, but certainly less time using one-way communication as our primary means of talking about and thinking about the gospel (26).

In *Church Re-Imagined*, he describes it this way:

> At Solomon's Porch, sermons are not primarily about my extracting truth from the Bible to apply to people's lives. In many ways the sermon is less a lecture or motivational speech than it is an act of poetry—of putting words around people's experiences to allow them to find deeper connection to their lives. As we read through sections of the Bible and see how God has interacted with people in other times and places, we better sense God interacting with us. So our sermons are not lessons that precisely define belief so much as they are stories that welcome our hopes and ideas and participation.[14]

Instead of shaping the theological direction through instruction, the sermon/progressional dialogue allows multiple viewpoints of the participants to change perspectives of others.[15]

For Pagitt the sermon is a dialogue with those who show up at the church gathering. But this dialogue is not without preparation. Members of the spiritual community are invited on Tuesday night to talk through Bible passages. In the intervening five days, the discussion held on Tuesday evening provokes thinking that leads to better conversation on Sunday. Progressional dialogue is the result, a communal sermon. Brian McLaren agrees with the conversational flavor of Pagitt's

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[14]Doug Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 166.

[15]The way progressional dialogue is presented, it is difficult not to understand it as a collage of opinions. However, Pagitt insists, "Progressional preaching is not opinion gathering. It's perspective altering. We invite other opinions to be heard not simply so they'll feel "listened to" but because we all need to hear what is being said. We listen to each other with the understanding that the comments of others force us to be involved in the real world of their experiences. The reason we listen is not only for their benefit, but also for ours" (*PR-I* 175).

emerging homiletic: "I've found that the more my preaching mirrors the flow of a conversation, the more people connect with it."[16] In Emerging terminology, progressional dialogue is the ultimate conversation for spiritual transformation in the community of faith.

Pagitt sees the Christian community as the starting point for theology. The Bible is a part, but only as "an authoritative member of the community" (31, 195). Like Stanley Grenz, he understands this community as "an experience-facilitating interpretive framework."[17] The community is the starting point and the hermeneutical grid for both experience and Scripture. This is the outgrowth of a drastic postconservative turn. As Kwabena Donkor remarks, "The fundamental implication of this communitarian turn is that the believing Christian community becomes the matrix out of which theological expression is brought forth."[18]

Philosophical Roots of Progressional Dialogue

Progressional dialogue is the resultant method of Doug Pagitt's theological and ideological presuppositions. Identifying these pillars is not an easy task. Since Pagitt is a practitioner, his underlying belief system/worldview is concealed in method more than articulated in theory. Nevertheless, the following influences seem to shape his development of progressional dialogue.

The Christian/Cosmic Metanarrative

One of the recurring themes in the EC is the "story of God" (e.g., *PR-I*, 10-11). Pagitt believes telling the story of God in communities of faith is the right impulse of the church (18) and a goal of preaching (30). The nature of this story of God is not always clear. Robert E. Webber explains: "We Christians say that the biblical story is not one story that runs along other stories. It is not a relative story. It is an all-encompassing story for all people in all places and in all times."[19] Add to this Pagitt's unqualified statement: "Being part of a global, pluralistic world is a great gift to the church, for our role in ministry is not to push the agenda of our clan but to recognize and join in the life of God wherever we find it" (125).

Such statements contain disturbingly inclusive language for those who believe the gospel to be exclusive. What does it mean that God's story is "an all encompassing story for all people in all places at all times"? What does it mean that religious pluralism is a "great gift to the church"?

In the same context Pagitt asserts,

> The benefit to living in this time and place is that we have access to an amazing variety of ways to understand, connect with, and grow in God (125).

> Because each of us has a personal relationship with God, it makes sense that each of us

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[16]Brian McLaren, "Preaching to Postmoderns," in *Preaching with Power: Dynamic Insights from Twenty Top Pastors*, ed. Michael Duduit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 119.

[17]Kwabena Donkor, "Postconservatism: A Third World Perspective," in *Reclaiming the Center* 201.

[18]Ibid., 202.

[19]Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 84.

would have a personal understanding of God (125).

In other words, God can be understood in as many ways as there are people. This highlights experience and derogates Scripture as God's self-revelation. Connection with this supposed metanarrative raises the question of the meaning of the gospel/salvation. Pagitt rejects the concept that the gospel is propositional truth to be believed. Instead, it is entering into the broader story of God in the world. The gospel itself needs to be "re-imagined." Pagitt muses,

> It seems to me that this call to communal spiritual formation challenges us to *re-imagine the gospel itself* [emphasis added]. Perhaps the challenges of living the dreams of God in the post-industrial world go beyond methodology problems. Perhaps we have been propagating a limited message, reducing biblical authors to sound bytes that cut the gospel message into so many pieces that we are left with little more than statements of what we believe rather than the broader story of how we are to enter into God's story through a life lived in faith.[20]

The doorway for entering into God's story is subjective experience, found in the lives of self and others. Accordingly, Pagitt writes, "Every person has experience, understanding, and perspective; there is no one who is totally devoid of truth"—including unbelievers (139). With regard to progressional dialogue, it seems that anyone who comes to the gathering, even the unregenerate, is invited to enter into the preaching community through progressional dialogue. Pagitt says,

> We listen to unbelievers on everything from the way we spend our money and how we educate our children to the way we care for our bodies and how we interact with the environment. So when the church maintains practices that silence the unbeliever, we reinforce the idea that preaching is intended for the safety of the church, not to help us connect with the full spectrum of our lives (224).

Unbelieving preachers? That *is* a new kind of preaching model.

Apparently the biblical qualifications for ecclesiastical leadership and spiritual instruction (e.g., 1 Tim 3:1-8) are nullified by the universality of participation in God's story. "We aren't people simply listening or talking," says Pagitt, "We are people entering into the story of God's work in the world and seeking our place in it."[21] It seems that anyone and everyone are parts of God's story, making them able preachers in the progressional dialogue model.

Postfoundationalism

As a postconservative,[22] Pagitt demonstrably reveals postfoundational thinking. Both sides of the EC debate, sympathetic and critical, agree that

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[20]Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined* 31.

[21]Ibid., 119.

[22]The terms Pagitt actually imbibes are post-evangelical, post-liberal, post-industrialized, and post-protestant (Ibid., 45). Each term fits the ideology of postconservatism.

postfoundationalism is a core conviction of Emerging epistemology.[23] "Post-foundationalism asserts that Christianity can stand on its own; it needs no rational defense," says Webber.[24] As attractive as this first sounds, the legs on which postfoundationalism faith stands are experience and community, while jettisoning the Bible's intrinsic foundations of truth (primarily that of inerrancy).[25]

Pagitt's postfoundationalism shows up in his statements about the Bible. Perhaps his clearest loyalty to postfoundationalism is in *Church Re-Imagined*:

> At bottom, our trust in the Bible does not depend on information that "proves" the Bible to be credible. We believe the Bible because our hopes, ideas, experiences, and community of faith allow and require us to believe.[26]

In *PR-I* he adds,

> I truly believe progressional dialogue is necessary to move people into fuller, richer lives of faith. People's lives are not changed by the information they get. Lives are changed by new situations, new practices, and new ways of experiencing the world (163).

In other words, faith rests on an apologetic of subjectivism and experience, not reason. Webber explains, "[T]ruth is not proven, it is embodied by individuals and by the community known as the church."[27]

This important perspective explains Pagitt's view of Scripture in his progressional dialogue homiletic. In his authority construct, subjective experience is promoted to divine fiat while Scripture is demoted to community member. The pews become pulpits as the Bible is escorted to take a seat in a pew. Here is this leveling in Pagitt's own words:

> The Bible is more than a source of our faith. The Bible ought to live as an authoritative member of our community, one to whom we listen on all topics of which she speaks. Speaching takes the Bible away from the hearers—many of whom are already intimidated by the Bible—and reminds them they are not in a position to speak on how they are implicated by this story (31).

[Note that the Bible is *an* authoritative member, not *the* authoritative member.]

> Progressional dialogue creates a relationship in which the Bible becomes a living member of the community….When this happens, the Bible becomes a part of our conversation,

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[23]See chapter 6 in Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*; Stanley J. Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001); J. P. Moreland and Garrett DeWeese, "The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise" in *Reclaiming the Center*, and Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. These are merely examples of some of the more popular works discussing the importance of postfoundationalism to the philosophic infrastructure of EC.

[24]Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* 99.

[25]Moreland and DeWeese provide an apologetic for inerrancy in this context ("The Premature Report of Foundationalism's Demise" 105-7).

[26]Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined* 168.

[27]Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* 101.

not a dead book from which I extract truth (44).

The Bible ought to live as an authoritative member of our community, one we listen to on all topics of which she speaks. Understanding the Bible as a community member means giving the Bible the freedom to speak for herself. Sometimes that will mean getting out of the way and putting less effort into interpreting Scripture for others, instead letting them carry out their own relationship with what the Bible says (195).

For every generation of Christians before the modern era the Bible was something they listened to, making them more adept at listening to each other. Now that we read the Bible, we tend to think of it as being in a different class from the Word of God still living in our brothers and sisters. There is a strong tendency to take what we see in the Bible and allow it to trump the validity of what we hear in history and in one another (218).

Should we not find a more integrated and honored place for the testimony of our people? This testimony can certainly move beyond our simple conversion stories that have become trite and overused in some traditions. This testimony can and should be offered in narratives as complex as the Bible itself. It can and should be listened to with the same sense of respect and reverence as the Bible itself (218-19).

This final quotation sums it up—people's testimonies "should be listened to with the same sense of respect and reverence as the Bible itself." No wonder Pagitt has reconstructed the sermon as conversation. If personal testimony is on level with the written Word of God—i.e., not to be trumped by Scripture (review the second to last quotation)—then conversation becomes the viable object of exegesis and exposition along with its community member—the Bible. Ergo, progressional dialogue: the homiletical conversation in the Emerging Church. The apostle Peter dramatically contradicts the notion that personal testimony rises to the "respect and reverence" of Scripture. Few could extol their experience with the story of God more than this Galilean fisherman. Along with James and John, he witnessed the glory and majesty of the incarnate God on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). Yet when discussing this event in 2 Pet 1:16-21, Peter confessed that Scripture is "more sure" (v. 19, βεβαιότερον, lit. "more firm, more secure, more trustworthy") than experience—even his own experience of eye-witnessing divine majesty.

For Pagitt the Bible raises its hand in a conversation, politely waiting until it is called upon to speak. However, in history the Bible has been the thunder of God for reformation, revival, and regeneration.

Outcome-Based Church Ministry[28]

Pagitt joins every other pastor in his desire for people to change as a result of his ministry. He comments, "The value of our practices—including preaching—ought to be judged by their effects on our communities and the ways in which

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[28]I am indebted to Scott McKnight in his blog thread for crystallizing this influence in Pagitt's thinking. McKnight wrote, "So, let me make a proposal that I think Pagitt forces us to consider: what would our churches be like if we developed an 'Outcome-Based Church Ministry'? First, we'd need to discuss very carefully what our desired outcomes are" (http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=346, accessed 9/28/06).

they help us move toward life with God" (28).[29] Again, he believes a primary deterrent to life-change in a faith community to be speaching, which he believes "to be a form of speaking that is inconsistent with the outcomes we want to see arise from our preaching" (48).

The reason he provides for the bankruptcy of speaching is that it uses knowledge as its agent for transformation. Pagitt confesses,

> I have become convinced that our misguided belief that life change can come through proper knowledge acquired through education has failed to produce the kind of radical commitment to life in harmony with God and the way of Jesus that we are called to.[30]

The impotent "knowledge" Pagitt criticizes is the information presented in speaching, i.e., propositional preaching. For evangelicals,[31] this corpus of knowledge is rooted in the knowledge of God obtained from the Bible. Pagitt's "misguided belief" that knowledge can produce change and radical commitment disregards the apostle Peter's divinely inspired words to the contrary. Peter explains that knowledge is indeed a biblical agent for change.

> Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who has called us by His own glory and excellence (2 Pet 1:2-3).[32]

In John 17:3 Jesus defined eternal life itself in the rubric of epistemology: "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

A simple survey of the book of Proverbs yields the conclusion that knowledge is not only valuable, but essential to growth in faith. Spiritual knowledge originates from God and points back to God. Proverbs 2:6 reads, "For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." Additionally, Proverbs accents the importance of spiritual knowledge with a variety of other prescriptions and descriptions (consider:1:7, 22, 29; 2:5, 10; 8:9, 10, 12; 10:14; 11:9; 12:23; 13:16; 14:6, 18; 15:14; 18:15; 19:2; 20:15; 22:12; 23:12; 24:4, 5).

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[29]Douglas Groothuis argues, "the meaning of truth cannot be a belief's usefulness, even though some beliefs are more useful or fruitful than others" ("Truth Defined and Defended," in *Reclaiming the Center* 76). He bases this conclusion on the correspondence theory of truth, described and defended in the referenced chapter.

[30]Pagitt, *Church Re-Imagined* 21.

[31]Pagitt admits his shift away from evangelicalism. He writes, "I have no regrets over my experience with the evangelical faith community. I will be ever grateful to the institutions and people who invested so much in me; yet my life experiences have led me to desire ways of Christianity beyond the practices and beliefs of my beginning. I began wondering if my experience as an evangelical was a great place for me to start but not a sufficient place for me to finish. Solomon's Porch was fueled by a desire to find a new way of life with Jesus, in community with others, that honored my past and moved boldly into the future" (*Church Re-Imagined* 43).

[32]Extended Scripture quotations are from The New American Standard Bible Update.

In the NT also, knowledge is given preeminence for change and growth. Jesus is the personal reservoir of knowledge (Col 2:3); God desires all men to come to knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4); knowledge is the bridge for believing the gospel and living a godly life (Titus 1:1); knowledge is the impetus for overwhelming worship (Rom 11:33); and knowledge is the basis for love (Phil 1:9). Conversely, Paul warned against having a zeal for God without a commensurate knowledge (Rom 10:2), and sought to destroy any speculative thought against the knowledge of God (2 Cor 10:5). And the great commission implies a body of knowledge to be transferred in gospel ministry (i.e., teaching believers to observe all that Jesus commanded, Matt 28:18-20).

With his outcome-based conviction, Pagitt proposes that a faith built on experience is superior to a faith built on knowledge. He writes, "When we move from belief-based faith to life-lived, holistic faith, the only true test is lives lived over time."[33] Yet Jesus himself said that faith is to be belief-based "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who *believe* in His name (John 1:12, emphasis added; also John 3:16).

Is Progressional Dialogue Really Preaching?

The bottom-line question is, "Is progressional dialogue really preaching?" Semantics determine the answer. Obviously, Doug Pagitt believes his conversational homiletic qualifies. But does progressional dialogue measure up to the tests of Scripture and church history?

Progressional Dialogue and the Bible

English translations render only a few Hebrew words as "preach." Primary is the hiphil of נָטַף (*nāṭap*), meaning to "drop, distill, prophesy, or preach" (e.g., Ezek 20:46; 21:2, Amos 7:16; Mic 2:6, 11). In Ecclesiastes קֹהֶלֶת (*qōhelet*) is used seven times and rendered "preacher." Also, בָּשַׂר (*baśar*) is used with the sense of "proclaiming good news" (1 Kgs 1:42; Jer 20:15). The context of these words is overwhelmingly a public speaking event, typically one commanded by the Lord.

The NT uses some fourteen Greek terms for "preach." But two word-groups are the most common. The first is εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*), which carries the idea of "announcing the good news."[34] The second is κηρύσσω (*kēryssō*), translated "proclaim, make known, preach; to proclaim an event."[35] The NT preachers were perceived in the same category as OT prophets. They functioned as ambassadors for God, bringing His message(s) through a speech event.

The Book of Acts contains the first Christian sermons. Upon examination, they qualify as speaching according to Pagitt. Roger Wagner observes that "fully one-fifth of the Book of Acts is taken up with sermons."[36] Yet when Pagitt wants to

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[33]*Church Re-Imagined* 23.

[34]Gerhard Friedrich, "εὐαγγελίζμαι," *TDNT* 2:717-21.

[35]Gerhard Friedrich, "κηρύσσω," *TDNT* 3:703-14. Friedrich comments, "The decisive thing is the action, the proclamation. For it accomplishes that which was expected by the OT prophets" (704).

[36]Roger Wagner, *Tongues Aflame: Learning to Preach from the Apostles* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publishing, 2004) 33.

justify his progressional dialogue approach, he points to a conversation between Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 (55-59). It is fair to say that these two men had a conversation about the gospel and its relationship to the Gentiles. But this is hardly like the rest of the sermons in the Book of Acts that are clearly speech events/speaching (e.g., Acts 2:14-36; 3:12-26; 7:1-53; 13:15-41; 17:22-31; 22:1-21).

Yes, Acts has many dialogues, but interactive communication does not qualify as preaching. Yes, individuals proclaim much truth in Acts. But not all who simply proclaimed/spoke truth were considered preachers.

Most of Pagitt's arguments for progressional dialogue are appeals to the reasonableness of it. But his most ardent biblical defense is his understanding that the priesthood of all believers sanctions the preacherhood of all believers. He argues,

> A belief in the priesthood of all believers compels us to reconsider our ideas about speaching and pastoral authority. Preaching is the act of people being led more deeply in the story of God. This was never meant to take place through the act of speech giving. Even in the rare instances in the Bible when speeches are made, they fit into the context of a community that is near constant dialogue. In fact, a great deal of the spiritual formation that happens to people in the Bible takes place outside of any sort of "church" environment. People in the Bible meet God when they are talking with unlikely messengers, when they are in the midst of crisis. The idea, then, that only a trained professional can speak about God with any kind of authority goes against everything we find in Scripture (153).

First, the priesthood of the believer has to do with the shared responsibility of all believers to evangelize (1 Pet 2:5, 9-10; Rev 1:6). Further, this great doctrine was highlighted by the Reformers to show all believers that access to God does not go through a priest, but directly through Christ (Heb 10:19-22).

Second, the idea of a "trained professional" speaking for God does not "go against everything we see in Scripture." First Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 both outline the need for qualified men to give spiritual leadership and instruction to the church. First Timothy 5:17-18 even says that some of these men will be "professionals"—paid for preaching and teaching (cf. 1 Cor 9:8-14). Paul instructed Timothy and Titus to find men of spiritual maturity, gospel fidelity, and theological acumen to be the preachers and overseers of the church.

Pagitt also uses 2 Tim 2:2 as an example of progressional dialogue (157): "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." But Paul wrote this to ensure transmittance of gospel truth to successive generations. It is beyond reason that Paul said these words in reference to progressional dialogues that do not "precisely define belief so much as they are stories that welcome our hopes and ideas and participation."[37]

It is Pagitt's contention that "We ought to understand churches as being more like prophetic communities than Christian teaching sites" (159). Yet, an overseer must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2), Timothy was to prescribe and teach things concerning the gospel (1 Tim 4:11), Timothy was to give particular attention to his teaching (1 Tim 4:13, 16), Timothy was to teach and exhort believers how to

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[37]*Church Re-Imagined* 166.

conduct themselves in their occupations (1 Tim 6:2), and the Word of God itself is profitable for teaching (2 Tim 3:16). There is an obvious apostolic accent on prescriptive teaching in the church.

Progressional Dialogue and the History of Preaching

According to Pagitt, the problem is the sermon as a speech**.** In fact, speaching is a "degraded" form of ecclesiastical pedagogy and should be distinguished "from the act of preaching" itself (48). He makes the undocumented assertion that this ineffective form of preaching, which "we are stuck with" (27), "is quite new. It is the creation of Enlightenment Christianity" (28, 60).

He further suggests that

> those who lived during periods of time or in places where speaching was not the normative means of preaching (basically all people before the 1700s and those living in nonindustrialized settings in our day) were not adversely affected by the lack of speachers (113).

These claims are illegitimate and unhistorical. Pagitt does not provide a single footnote or citation to substantiate these audacious ideas.

Identifying speaching as the product of the Enlightenment and absent before the 1700s is a reckless, careless, and disrespectful reconstruction of the history of preaching. What of Jesus, Paul and the apostles, Stephen, Polycarp (A.D. 68-160), Ignatius (30-110), Clement (50-100), Justin Martyr (120-190), Tertullian (170-240), Ambrose (340-397), Augustine (354-430), Chrysostom (347-407), Leo the Great (390-461), Boniface (680-655), Christopher of Alexandria (d. 863), Anselm (1033-1109), John Huss (1349-1384), Thomas a Kempis (1400-1481), John Wycliffe (1324-1384), Martin Luther (1483-1546), John Bradford (1510-1555), Hugh Latimer (1490-1555), John Rogers (1500-1555), John Knox (1505-1572), John Calvin (1509-1564), Thomas Hooker (1553-1600), Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661), John Owen (1616-1683), Richard Baxter (1615-1691), and thousands more?[38] These "speachers" came from a variety of theological backgrounds, but all understood the definition of preaching to be the same as Pagitt's definition of speaching—"a one-way speech" (11-12).

O. C. Edwards begins his work *A History of Preaching* with the following definition:

> a *speech* [emphasis added] delivered in a Christian assembly for worship by an

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[38]The following volumes on the history of preaching were consulted for this study. Every one understood, defined, and presumed the characteristics of preaching that Pagitt designates speaching. See Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (London: H. R. Allenson, Limited, 1887); Edwin Charles Dargan, *A History of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954); R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1876); O. C. Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004); Alfred Ernest Garvie, *The Christian Preacher* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920); John Ker, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888); Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); T. Harwood Pattison, *The History of Christian Preaching* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1903); Ralph G. Turnbull, *A History of Preaching*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974); F. R. Webber, *A History of Preaching in Britain and America*, 3 vols. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1952).

authorized person that applies some point of doctrine, usually drawn from a biblical passage, to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it.[39]

Edwards' work encompasses a broad spectrum of homiletical theories and examples: Catholic and Protestant, conservative and liberal. Still, his conclusions park his definition of preaching on the word "speech."

     Pagitt is not alone in opposing the historical form of preaching. In the 1930s Samuel Cadman, a pioneer in radio preaching, was asked, "What is the matter with the church? Where are the great preachers, such as we used to have?"

> His answer was: Internally, sectarian strife; externally, the prevalent indifference and the superficial character of much of the national mind. Preaching has killed the Christian church. We go to church to hear the star in the pulpit. We have become sermon tasters instead of Christian workers. You hear a fat old grocer boast that he has sat under the pulpit of Rev. "Blowhard" for twenty years, and all the time you know he has been skinning the public. We are a sorry lot and make a poor fist at religion.[40]

     Homiletical historian Ralph Turnbull provides this simple response to Cadman's rant: "This is not the best answer in the light of history!"[41] Interestingly, Cadman's reputation was as a great orator (i.e., speaker).

     In his multi-volume work on the history of preaching, Hughes Oliphant Old sees five genres of preaching. All are categories of what Pagitt describes as speaching.[42]

     In *Life and Practice in the Early Church*, Steven A. McKinion records the circumstances of the first generation of preachers after the apostles. He observes that this group of preachers believed that God had spoken through the Bible, and "it was the role of the preacher to explain its meaning to them."[43] McKinion's book provides a sermon that is the earliest example of preaching after the NT. It was preached by an unknown preacher and circulated with Clement of Rome's *First Letter to the Corinthians*. Important for this study is the fact that it was a speech given in the classic style of exposition.[44]

Conclusion: Same Word, Different Dictionaries

     Again, preaching is public hermeneutics. David L. Bartlett writes,

> A sermon is an oral interpretation of scripture, usually in the context of worship. Sermons are interpretations of scripture. Communities of faith employ and acknowledge other

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[39]Edwards, *A History of Preaching* 3-4.

[40]Cited in Turnbull, *A History of Preaching* 258-59.

[41]Ibid., 259.

[42]Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures* 1:8-18.

[43]Steven A. McKinion, *Life and Practice in the Early Church: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 73.

[44]Ibid., 75-79.

forms of edifying discourse, but a sermon properly understood interprets a sacred text for the life of a community and its members.[45]

This is the biblical and historical legacy of preaching. Those who made a difference in Christian history as preachers, orators, expositors, evangelists, reformers, teachers, missionaries, apologists … were what Pagitt calls speachers. Ask one hundred people who have not heard of Pagitt's progressional dialogue this question, "What is preaching?" Most probably, none would describe it as a conversation in a community of faith.

Preaching Re-Imagined is really preaching re-defined. We are using the same word—preaching—but have different dictionaries to define it. Preaching should find its source and parameters in the pages of Holy Scripture. It should be expose the hearers to the Scripture, explain the Scripture, and exhort them to live according to the Scripture.

What and how we preach is a public confession of what we believe about the Bible and its authority. John MacArthur concludes,

> Should not our preaching be biblical exposition, reflecting our conviction that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God? If we believe that "all Scripture is inspired by God" and inerrant, must we not be equally committed to the reality that it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17)? Should not that magnificent truth determine how we preach? … The only logical response to inerrant Scripture, then, is to preach it *expositionally.*[46]

Preachers are to be faithful to "preach the word" (2 Tim 4:2), not dialogue about personal stories.

To read church history is to understand that the pulpit has come to us on a river of blood. Men were martyred because they refused to dialogue about the truth. Many could have saved their own lives had progressional dialogue been their conviction. But the truthfulness of Scripture anchored their souls and shook continents. The church does not need to be convinced that everyone is a preacher. The church needs more men who are faithful to the sacred desk, the public speaching of Holy Scripture.

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[45] David L. Bartlett, "Sermon," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, eds. William H. Willimon and Richard Lishcher (Louisville, Ky.: Wesminster John Knox, 1995) 433.

[46] John MacArthur, "The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition,* ed. John MacArthur (Dallas: Word, 1992) 23.