

# Faith, Doubt, and Disbelief: Preaching Undeconstructible Truth in a Metamodern Context

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## Abstract

*Postmodernism's claim against absolute truth has been problematic for preaching. If the primary purpose for preaching is disseminating truth, and there is no absolute truth, then what is preaching's principal purpose? Many preachers feel the pressure of navigating a context in which truth and authority are under fire, and questioners are leaving the evangelical church in the US in increasing numbers. Homiletic responses to postmodernism include ignoring or vocally opposing it, with few preachers accepting postmodernism as a worthy conversation partner. However, postmodernism has given way to a new cultural era identified as metamodernism, and the postmodern truth dismissal has shifted, allowing room for the possibility of truth. Metamodernism maintains postmodernism's cynicism toward truth, but is fused with modern optimism for the possibility that truth exists. This provides a unique opportunity for preaching through a metamodern lens and accepting the challenges of preaching that deconstructs toward that which is "undeconstructible."*

**Keywords:** metamodernism; metamodern; postmodernism; deconstruction; deconstructing Christians; evangelical; exvangelicals; truth; doubt; disbelief; faith; preaching

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## 1. Preaching and the Post-postmodern Context

Preaching's relevance is directly related to the level of thoughtful engagement it maintains with the context in which it is situated, and its successful interface with the dominant thought paradigms of its listeners. In the United States during the past few decades, preaching in general has had a strained relationship with its postmodern context and the thinking paradigms associated with postmodernism. Postmodern deconstruction effectively dismantled the idea of absolute truth, discarded metanarratives, demonstrated the relativity of knowledge, exposed the rupture between language and meaning, delegitimized authority, and challenged the privilege enjoyed by certain positions (such as pulpit spaces that have traditionally been accorded to those with particular demographic advantages)—which happen to be some of the conventions (including texts) on which preaching has relied for centuries. Since postmodernism has impugned many of its foundations, preaching itself has in some ways experienced an identity crisis. Preachers have reacted to postmodernism in a variety of ways, from taking an adversarial stance in an attempt to discredit postmodernism, to ignoring it with the apparent hope that it will eventually pass, to attempting or feigning patchwork alignment with aspects of it while trying to leave preaching, its purpose, and its theology mostly intact. How can preaching preach its "truth" if truth itself is an outdated concept? A metamodern homiletic offers preachers a way to approach truth—to change

preaching's relationship with truth such that preaching can still function as a way toward truth.

On the other side of the pulpit, listeners whose dominant thought paradigms are influenced by postmodernism, and who are undergoing their own personal popularized version of deconstruction,<sup>1</sup> are questioning the authority of preachers and their messages, as well as the social and political structures through which Christianity operates, and called into question doctrinal requirements—"truths"—that have created boundaries between those who believe and those who either do not believe or are not certain if they believe. A large number of those who sincerely question Christianity's conventions eventually find the social pressures of "church as usual" to be inhospitable for their questions, and feel compelled to leave. Several research entities have identified this group of people who are leaving church as the "fastest-growing demographic,"<sup>2</sup> a movement that is variously called "deconstructing Christians" or "exvangelicals" or "dones"—people who have been actively affiliated with the evangelical church, but who are now deconstructing (in a popular sense) their faith and belief systems. However, even this popularized Christian deconstruction seems to demonstrate a trajectory beyond postmodernism toward metamodern thinking processes.

I argue, with a growing number of scholars in various fields, that postmodernism has lost its dominance and a new cultural era has quietly taken ascendance—a cultural shift theorists have identified as "metamodernism," which has emerged as a negotiation between postmodernism and modernism in response to postmodernism's ideological impasses. The doubt and deconstruction process that is taking place in the deconstructing Christian movement, I argue, is not functioning as nihilistic postmodern deconstruction away from spirituality or God, but instead as a process that is indicative of a metamodern turn: it is generative doubt oriented toward growth that is simultaneously deconstructive *and* constructive. Metamodernism, and "constructive deconstruction," is willing to re-entertain metanarratives and other modern aspects postmodernism left behind, including, significantly for our task, the idea of truth. Metamodernism combines the cynicism of postmodernism with the willingness to examine and re-integrate aspects of modernism that may still have value if those aspects are appropriately positioned in terms of their level of authority and functionality.

This paper represents an intersection of my dissertation research with the 2022 Societas Homiletica conference theme of "Preaching Toward Truth," and contends that preaching has a unique opportunity, as postmodernism gives way to metamodernism, to think homiletically

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<sup>1</sup> Deconstruction has become a popularized term used broadly (with a wide array of meanings) that does not adhere to the particularities and nuances of its original philosophical and linguistic meaning. While impossible to curtail to a specific definition, deconstruction in its popularized sense seems to be a companion term for doubt that spurs internal and/or external examination, typically resulting in a change in ideology or behavior. Though there is some entanglement of meaning moving between original and popularized deconstruction, when speaking of self-described "deconstructing" Christians in this paper, the term signifies the popularized meaning and function.

<sup>2</sup> George Barna/David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them: Based on Surveys by Barna Group*. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014, 7.

through a metamodern lens about truth. A metamodern homiletic is an approach to preaching that recognizes doubt and questioning as building blocks for growth; reframes its relationship with metanarratives and “truth,” such that those who are questioning find themselves not stymied, but stimulated; positions the preacher as principal doubter, as a midwife for the birth of knowledge and understanding rather than the arbiter of all biblical wisdom; listens to and echoes polyphony; finds a way to exist in the tensions of uncertainties; expands the social imaginary and opens up group space for inclusivity of diversity; and preaches not “the” truth, but rather orients listeners toward the pursuit of truth that exists in possibility regardless of our ability to access it.

## 2. The Death and Resurrection of Truth

The concept of truth has always been debated; however, modernism was generally characterized by a quest for universal truth via a rationalistic, positivist, scientific method and the assumption that truth is possible, and postmodernism was generally characterized by a dubiousness toward the possibility of truth altogether. During the past couple of decades, a shift has taken place that is neither modern nor postmodern in its conception of truth. Theorists have noted a cultural turn that has signaled the advent of a new paradigm (variously called a “structure of feeling” or “cultural logic”<sup>3</sup> or “episteme,”<sup>4</sup> among other descriptions) that is no longer postmodern, in part because of its relationship with the idea of truth. Perhaps it could be described as an intellectual paradigm that unconsciously guides the way people think about, understand, interact with, and influence the world around them. Not a collective unconscious, but possibly a collective lens of consciousness that itself is invisible, but becomes demonstrable in what we observe of how people are negotiating their understanding of the world. For our purposes, metamodernism is the lens through which people think about truth, specifically in the context of Christianity.

The term for the ascendent era, “metamodernism,” was popularized by researchers Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, who described it as a kind of “oscillation” or “negotiation between the modern and the postmodern.”<sup>5</sup> Metamodernism arises not to replace postmodernism, but to put postmodernism back into conversation/tension with aspects of modernism. For example, Jean-François Lyotard described the “postmodern condition” as having an “incredulity toward metanarratives,”<sup>6</sup> particularly the way metanarratives and universals legitimized certain discourses. While modernism thrived on metanarratives to fuel

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<sup>3</sup> Robin van den Akker/Alison Gibbons/Timotheus Vermeulen (eds.), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017, 29.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Ceriello, “Metamodern Mysticism: Narrative Encounters with Contemporary Western Secular Spiritualities.” Rice University, 2018, 59–60.  
Online: <https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/103873/CERIELLO-DOCUMENT-2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>5</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen/Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” in: *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature, v. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

its ambitions in science, progress, and rationalism, postmodernism consistently challenges metanarratives that operate detected and undetected in societal systems. Metamodernism, however, fuses postmodern cynicism with modern optimism, revives the value of metanarratives (modernism) but holds them accountable to critique (postmodernism) and gives them conditional or provisional value that exposes them to revision, tempering their legitimizing authority. Similarly, metamodernism negotiates between modernism and postmodernism on the issue of truth.

Metamodernism is not a cultural shift that theorists are attempting to coax into existence, nor is it an all-encompassing panacea for what ails postmodernism. Rather, it is already observable in a variety of ways, some of which could be understood as potentially positive (which will be our primary focus in the context of Christian deconstruction and preaching as we explore aspects of metamodernism that may be helpful for a contemporary homiletic), and others of which may be considered societally toxic. For example, the United States has been grappling with the “Make America Great Again” movement, inspired by Donald Trump, which is metamodern in the sense that it pairs neoromanticism with unbridled optimism; however, it also unravels some of the headway made by postmodernism in terms of human and civil rights, not to mention the distortions to the concept of “truth” in an era of fake news—where the worst of postmodern cynicism is paired with the most blindfolded optimism of modernism to create metanarratives that have been illegitimately crowned as truth.<sup>7</sup>

The characteristics of metamodernism, however, are significant for the concept of truth as an absolute or universal. Modernism assumes that truth exists, which is what creates the framework for a modernist (scientific, rational, positivist) approach to the world. Of course, “the nature of truth” has been “a source of philosophical controversy throughout the history of philosophy,” Jeff Malpas points out, as has the “question of our access to truth.” However, “what has not been generally doubted [prior to postmodernism] is the very possibility of truth. In this sense, the post-modern era is also post-truth—it is an era in which the possibility of truth has been relinquished, rejected, or perhaps simply forgotten.”<sup>8</sup> Metamodernism holds the optimism of modernism (in the presupposition that truth exists) in tension with postmodern skepticism, reminding us that while truth may exist, its existence does not necessarily mean we have access to it, nor that what “truth” we access is unmitigated—and it does not assume that truth is static. Since metamodernism negotiates with rather than eclipses postmodernism, deconstruction is still a dominant force; however, it is accompanied by a constructive optimism, which means that deconstruction functions with positive purpose: to

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<sup>7</sup> In addition, some, such as the Swedish writers Emil Ejner and Daniel Görtz, who write under the shared pen name Hanzi Freinacht (including a biography in their works as though Freinacht is an actual person) have imagined metamodernism as a prescriptive approach, mixing what they consider to be metamodernism with spiral development theory. While they have some interesting points, there is danger in their approach in reinstating some of the very problems postmodernism deconstructed for us in terms of hierarchical authority structures, intellectual hierarchies, etc. and I don’t consider them to be mainstream metamodern.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Malpas, “Retrieving Truth: Modernism, Post-Modernism and The Problem of Truth,” in: *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 75, no. 2/3 (1992): 287–88.

move us in the direction of that which is undeconstructible—which, arguably, was the driving purpose of postmodern deconstruction before it lost its way.

Though popularized deconstruction has strayed from the nuances of philosophical and linguistic deconstruction, I argue it is still a (perhaps inevitable) ripple effect of the eventualities of deconstruction (in the original sense), that continues to evolve and consequentially influence cultural shifts, creating surplus ripple effects.

### 3. Deconstructing Christians

One of the phenomena spun from postmodernism is the introduction of the concept of deconstruction—in its evolved sense—into the consciousness and vocabulary of Christians who are grappling with practical and ideological issues regarding truth. In an attempt to translate into theory the self-reporting of various deconstructing Christians regarding the concept of truth, I argue that deconstructing Christians are using the terminology to describe the troubling of truth—truth's existence, its housing, its definition, its accessibility, its manipulation and ownership, and even its usefulness as a central focus of spiritual life. It appears that postmodern skepticism toward truth is coming to bear on the thinking and lives of Christians who are re-examining the pre-packaged truth they are expected by their church communities to accept, as well as the authority of the religious entities that dispensed it. However, I contend that this phenomenon is not a postmodern movement as much as it is a metamodern movement. The difference between traditional doubt and skepticism and the contemporary doubt and skepticism of Christian deconstruction is the optimism and potential for growth that opens up when new thinking spaces are cleared and made available for possibility by a *constructive* deconstruction. Constructive deconstruction holds and protects the flickering hope that if the deconstructible exists, the undeconstructible must also exist. The resulting orientation is in the direction of an undeconstructible truth, which I argue is a metamodern development.

Metamodernism hopes for truth, and even though there is no unmitigated access to truth, the idea is to deconstruct toward truth, asking questions of what has been considered truth to see if it deconstructs itself. The deconstruction process creates an entrance for truth, spaces where polyphonic knowledge can be gathered—even if it is paradoxical or contradictory—because within that broad spectrum of knowledge and experience lie hints of the truth being pursued. In that respect, truth remains a moving target. We can't necessarily name truth—though many Christian theologians have tried, pinning truth to a set of doctrines like so many dry-preserved (but dead) entomological specimens—but we can name what we find as evidence of truth, which allows us to make truth claims. However, when we have evidence of what we believe represents truth that allows us to make a truth claim, the truth claim is always held loosely, it is always provisional, and it is always open to revision if it is falsified or if we discover a representation of truer truth.

#### 4. The Myths of Deconstructing Christians

Deconstructing Christians have become the mark for many evangelical preachers attempting to shield their flocks from the danger of questioning. However, the assumption of some preachers occupying evangelical pulpits in the United States that a Christian's "deconstruction" is a move toward nihilism or spiritual disconnection indicates a gross misunderstanding of the deconstructing Christian movement, its purpose, and its possibility.

Christians who deconstruct are often accused of being on the fringes of Christianity, not knowing their Bibles well enough, not having a strong foundational faith, and seeking to live out from under consequences of immoral behavior; however, burgeoning research seems to indicate the opposite—people who are leaving evangelicalism are often the ones who relied heavily on their faith, taught Bible classes, and were involved in leadership.<sup>9</sup> In addition, podcasts, articles, and social media posts by self-described deconstructing Christians indicate that many of the "dones" are not leaving God or spirituality, they are leaving the evangelical version of God and spirituality behind for the freedom to ask questions and grow, even as they grieve the loss of their faith community.<sup>10</sup>

The deconstructing Christian movement tends to inspire defensiveness in preachers and parishioners alike, because it appears to be a threat to their preaching and their truth—and indeed it is a threat relative to the fragility of the truth they hold. It could be argued that if truth deconstructs itself when questioned, perhaps it is not truth, and since what people believe is formational for group and individual identity, therein lies an even greater threat: when the hobby of beliefs a preacher preaches become falsified, then the identity that has been created around those beliefs is shaken. Many preachers would prefer that their congregations arrive at a set of beliefs and remain there, which means that arrival represents the cessation of thinking and the refocusing of energies from the process of seeking to the process of defending.

#### 5. An Undeconstructible Truth

The threat of deconstruction for the evangelical community is real. Deconstruction relentlessly "exposes the truth that we never have access to Truth, and so all of our perspectives are necessarily partial."<sup>11</sup> This does not bode well for a community that was founded on a list of non-negotiable fundamentals that have been regarded as truth, who have used those fundamentals as gates to determine who is in or out, who is saved or lost, and who is right or wrong. The idea that truth may not be accessible is a "risky proposition" that may appear "threatening to many elements of church," as Ron Allen points out. And yet, "it is consistent with the parabolic teachings of the New Testament Jesus. For time and time again,

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<sup>9</sup> Phil Drysdale, "Deconstruction & The Bible 2021," The Deconstruction Network (blog), 2022, <https://thedeconstructionnetwork.com/research/deconstruction-research-findings/deconstruction-the-bible-2021/>.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Rachel Martin, "The Search for a Church," NPR, n.d., <https://www.wmfe.org/2023-09-10/the-search-for-a-church-that-isnt-a-church>.

<sup>11</sup> Phil Snider, *Preaching after God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics* (Eugene, Or: Cascade Books, 2012), 120.

the Scriptures tell of Christ calling established structures and norms into question.”<sup>12</sup> Evangelical Christians, as most Christians do, tend to see themselves on the side of Jesus in the Gospels as he changes expectations and casts new understandings; however, many of those same evangelical Christians would be unwilling to have the same challenges performed on their beliefs, and feel threatened by anyone who attempts to “deconstruct” the beliefs to which their identities are firmly attached. It is received as an attack on truth, an indication of a hatred of truth. However, as many who deconstruct their faith and their beliefs would attest, deconstruction is driven by a love of truth, not a hatred of it.

Phil Snider emphasizes, “We must also recognize that simply because deconstruction exposes the ‘contingency of what we like to call the ‘truth’ (i.e., our own finite perspectives) *does not mean that deconstruction lacks a passion for truth*. Far from it. For there is a complementary theory of truth at work in deconstruction that is driven by a passion for the undeconstructible.”<sup>13</sup> Here Snider is referring to John Caputo’s work, in which Caputo explains:

The misbegotten notion that deconstruction is some kind of random intellectual violence, a merely destructive and negative assault on anything still standing, arises from a failure to see what deconstruction affirms, a failure to see that every deconstructive analysis is undertaken in the name of something, something affirmatively un-deconstructible. For without the undeconstructible deconstruction would be without “impulse” and “drive,” as Derrida says in the “Roundtable,” without movement, momentum, or motivation. The word “deconstruction” has made its way into high-brow, and even not so high-brow parlance, where it has come to be indistinguishable from a purely negative critique, without any affirmative upshot, so that one would no more want to be “deconstructed” than hit by a truck. But apart from the popular misunderstanding, which we might expect, even its partisans have sometimes shrunk from affirming what is affirmatively undeconstructible... Everything in deconstruction is driven by the undeconstructible, fired and inspired, inflamed and impassioned, set into motion by what is not deconstructible. Deconstruction is internally related to the undeconstructible and is incoherent without it.<sup>14</sup>

Deconstruction is fueled by the personal and the passionate. And, as belief is related to identity, so deconstruction is also related to identity. Deconstruction of one’s belief system or faith is not purely an intellectual or theoretical enterprise. It is excruciatingly intimate. Even when a Christian’s deconstruction seems to be aimed externally, it is connected internally. And there are consequences associated with both—internal consequences due to identity-altering evolvment, and external consequences due to risking the relationships associated

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald J. Allen, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 75–76.

<sup>13</sup> Snider (note 11), 122.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 128–29.

with previously held beliefs about truth, making deconstruction a crucial and emotionally weighty process.

Our identities are shaped in physical community, as well as communities of ideology. People determine who they are and what their resulting behaviors should be based on their identification with a particular community in which there is a prototypical identity. They exchange their individual identity for the group identity, taking on the prototypical identity (and the pre-established prototypical belief system) that is assigned as part of one's belonging to the group.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, deconstruction happens in duality: by deconstructing the group ideology that has shaped one's internal beliefs, a person deconstructs the prototypical identity that comes with being part of the group, which means one's internal beliefs and all of the beliefs about one's identity, God, the world, etc. are necessarily affected.

Perhaps there is a difference between deconstructing with critical distance, and deconstructing using what Gayatri Spivak calls, "critical intimacy." She reminisces that her mentor, Paul de Man told the postmodern critic, Fredric Jameson, "Fred, you can only deconstruct what you love," because, Spivak adds, "You're doing it from the inside with intimacy. You're turning it around."<sup>16</sup> Granted, Spivak was speaking about feminine essentialism and other aspects of identity; however, I believe the point about critical intimacy translates when talking about one's spirituality. I would not argue that people *only* deconstruct what they love—but they do tend to deconstruct the things that are important to them, not the things that are unimportant to them. Thus, the very fact that deconstructing Christians are re-evaluating their identities and beliefs based on a deconstruction of group ideology or theology and expectations of the group in terms of assent to proposition and alignment of one's behavior, means that it is *important*, not that it is *unimportant*. Therefore, people who assume that deconstructing Christians are trying to deconstruct themselves out of affiliation with something because they don't love it, or it's not important, or don't want to be held accountable to it, are exactly mistaken: Christians who deconstruct are deconstructing something that is of critical intimacy, not just critical distance, and the very fact that they are deconstructing it is evidence of its profound importance to their faith, belief, spiritual process or understanding of truth. If it were not important, no one would bother deconstructing it. In addition, deconstruction is actually a powerful testament to the idea that truth must exist, because the process of deconstructing is stripping away all of the un-truth in search of an undeconstructible truth.

Given the personal nature of deconstruction, it is easy for evangelical preachers to pour salt in the wound of someone's deconstructive process by belittling its importance, by identifying it as unacceptable or appalling, or by speaking as though deconstructing one's beliefs is somehow placing oneself in opposition to God, as though God and the evangelical

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<sup>15</sup> Holly R. Engstrom and Kristin Laurin, "Existential Uncertainty and Religion," in *The Science of Religion, Spirituality, and Existentialism*, ed. K. Vail and C. Routledge (London: Academic Press, 2020), 246.

<sup>16</sup> Steve Paulson, "Critical Intimacy: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 29, 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/critical-intimacy-interview-gayatri-chakravorty-spivak/>.



institution are synonymous. Preachers who want to effectively preach to those who are deconstructing their beliefs and grappling with truth are best equipped when they come to the pulpit with compassion and sensitivity, a recognition of the depth of what is taking place in a deconstructing Christian, an understanding that people are not interested in the preacher's truth or "the" truth, and a comfortability with questions and uncertainties.

Researchers Packard and Hope, who, for their *Church Refugees* project, interviewed people who had left the church, noted that one of the recurring themes that came from their interviews of "dones" was the need for authentic conversations—not necessarily agreement, but a situation "wherein both parties are open to being influenced by the other."<sup>17</sup> Packard and Hope noted that their respondents repeatedly expressed "being comfortable with both the question and the uncertainty as a desirable dynamic. They felt virtually no need to resolve the questions. Instead, they needed a safe place to ask questions and explore possible answers, and there was a distinct feeling that this is not what church typically allows."<sup>18</sup> In fact, the inability to ask core questions "and explore various aspects of their faith wasn't supported in the church, and it was a major factor in their decisions to leave."<sup>19</sup>

Mark, one of the interviewees in the *Church Refugees* project, explained:

I want to be in a place that welcomes disagreement. Not to disagree to be rude or nasty, but out of legitimate differences of opinion. Being able to express those differences openly is a more authentic experience of faith to me. I think my biggest fear is that I'm going to get into another situation where I'm going to be the one asking questions, and I'm going to be shuffled out the door again. And I don't want that. I have to be able to ask questions. It's how I learn. What I don't want is a church that says, 'Yes, we love questions. In fact, here's a list of acceptable questions, and here are the acceptable answers. Does God exist? Yes. Did Jesus turn water into wine? Yes. Next question.' There's no thought or conversation, just acceptable and unacceptable questions and answers. That doesn't work for me. I question things. It's how I understand God. And I'm quite comfortable having that come back at me. I invite that difference.<sup>20</sup>

Respondents felt that even if their questions were "courted" by the church, "it was often not in a truly authentic way."<sup>21</sup> The church seemed to only entertain questions for the purpose of answering them, and, as respondent Megan said, "They thought they had all the answers." There was no opportunity for a two-way influence, and, "because she had no ability to shape or influence them at all, she left."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, Colorado: Group Publishing, 2015), 78.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 80–81.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Respondents expressed being “leery of doctrine,” saying “it limits, rather than clarifies, their understanding of God.”<sup>23</sup> They were more interested “in exploring the questions, mystery, and doubt that come with faith,” and they understood dogma to be “inherently opposed to questioning and exploration.”<sup>24</sup> Jackson, another interviewee, said, “I wanted to think critically about my religion and to critically challenge things. I did that very actively through my college years. I felt it strengthened my religion, but not my role in the church. The church wanted no part of that.”<sup>25</sup>

Packard and Hope reported that respondents “were much more interested in the gray spaces between their certainties. Furthermore, they were unconcerned about ensuring that those around them view the world as they do.”<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, they concluded “that none of these things—neither the doubt, nor the questions, nor the disagreement—should preclude them from acting together on behalf of God.”<sup>27</sup> Phil Drysdale, founder of the Deconstruction Network,<sup>28</sup> points out that some churches have picked up on the language of deconstruction, and have tried to incorporate the language as if to say, “See—we’re deconstructing!” However, they are deconstructing the superficial things – the things that are already open for debate—not the core issues. It seems that if people had had a place where they could have authentic, exploratory conversations in an affirming environment, and the focus was more on unity than uniformity, they would be less likely to leave.

Psychologists have documented people’s desire for certainty for decades, so it is curious that people who are deconstructing their belief systems seem to prefer the uncertainty of not knowing, while continuing exploration, over the uncertainty of doctrinal “certainties” that are becoming more difficult to defend.

## 6. Church as [Un]usual

When respondents were asked about their ideal church, they had some notions of what they would have appreciated in terms of pastoral leadership and church, though as one respondent commented, “It’s hard to do church differently when people already have an idea of what church should look like.”<sup>29</sup> The church they described was one where people are welcomed regardless of who they are or where they are in their faith journey, and “there are many different voices coming from the pulpit.”<sup>30</sup>

For dechurched or deconstructing Christians, the purpose of the pastor was not to convince people “of the theological underpinnings of church doctrine.” Rather than a pastor as “who conveys knowledge and wisdom,” they would like to see the pastor as one that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>28</sup> See [www.phildrysdale.com](http://www.phildrysdale.com) and <https://www.youtube.com/phildrysdale>.

<sup>29</sup> Packard/Hope (note 17), 95.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 88.

“develops and facilitates understanding.” As Packard and Hope point out, “that’s the role the dechurched would like to see their pastors play. Furthermore, it’s the only role they’ll accept when choosing a pastor.”<sup>31</sup>

Interview data from people who have left the evangelical church bears the characteristics of a metamodern orientation toward the concept of truth, particularly as respondents talk about their own desire for truth as a guided quest, not a pre-determined destination. The description of the role “dones” would prefer their pastors occupy demonstrates the need for a new attitude for preachers toward preaching and its purpose, as well as toward truth.

## 7. A Metamodern Homiletic

Homileticians have spent a significant amount of energy reacting to the postmodern challenge, attempting to answer the question, “How do we get people to believe truth in an era of postmodern deconstruction, when concepts such as authority and truth have been sidelined as ‘mere’ authority and ‘mere’ truth at best?” This question operates from the premise that belief is central and the job of preachers is to make people believe, and therefore a definite truth in which to believe is a requirement. From the perspective of a metamodern homiletic, that is the wrong question. Beliefs are not only *not* central, but they are actually provisional and revisable, which removes the pressure from locating and pinning down static truth under a paperweight of certainty. Beliefs are temporary footings in an endless pursuit of truth, articulations of a present and living truth, and further exploration is not only still possible, but encouraged. Preaching, therefore, is not a task of maneuvering people to a point of belief; it is coming alongside people and asking the big questions with them, being brave enough to perform sermonic deconstructions on behalf of the congregation in a communal setting without the promise of a satisfying resolution, orienting people toward a journey rather than a destination. This does not mean the preacher cannot have beliefs, or cannot hold truths; it means the preacher approaches the task of preaching with the humility of one recognizing the insufficiency of even our best ability to interface with truth, and the generosity of one whose ultimate commitment to truth allows for disagreement and mutuality in exploration and growth. The generosity extends to language—avoiding semantic “we” messaging that communicates parameters around an ingroup that adheres to a prescribed belief system, and assuming, as Phil Snider does, that the congregation contains listeners who “believe in God some of the time, all of the time, or none of the time.”<sup>32</sup> This allows the preacher and the congregation to be conversant with the real issues that can make church a painful and uninhabitable place for those who are almost “done,” and reclaim church—and the pulpit—as sites of conversation rather than conclusion.

While the approach of a metamodern homiletic may create breathing room for those who feel choked out of traditional church settings, it can be a source of anxiety for people who have come to depend on static truth and a set of beliefs for their individual and group identity. Church is a social reality, and through tradition, people have come to have shared expectations

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>32</sup> Snider (note 12), 10.

for what happens in church and in the pulpit. Jodi O'Brien points out that these social realities are "taken for granted unless someone steps out of character or violates routines." When someone steps outside of what is expected in some way, there is a disruption that takes place—and that disruption sometimes gives people the opportunity to pause and think about their expectations. O'Brien says that people's response to the disruptions either changes or reinforces the existing routine. It is at these junctures that possibility arises for people to participate together "in writing, rewriting, and performing various cultural routines or stories [or theologies, or sermonic expectations]."<sup>33</sup> Sermonic offerings have what Peter Berger calls "world-building potency," and they also hold a "disrupting" or "rupturing" power. Introduction of possible alternatives into the social imaginary of a community can create ruptures in the social imaginary that awaken possibilities for new "definitions of reality...[that] serve as a [new] common universe of meaning" for a community.<sup>34</sup>

In his book, *Otherwise Preaching*, John McClure introduces a "deconstruction of preaching" that exits "through the deconstructions of the four overlapping authorities that have bequeathed preaching to us: the authority of the Bible, the authority of tradition, the authority of experience, and the authority of reason." The purpose of this "exiting" is to create "redemptive space within discourse." Ideas, McClure says, "can be deconstructed, placed under erasure, and then reclaimed...as new ground in which to grow ideas that are other-wise."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, a metamodern homiletic uses words to disrupt, rupture, expand, and create space, redefining and broadening the parameters for acceptable questions, and redefining and broadening the "ingroup" prototype such that the congregation's social imaginary begins to expand to make room for the possibility of "redemptive space" and theological diversity. The common commitment is not to a set of beliefs, but common commitment to the pursuit of a further and more challenging horizon: truth.

Ruptures, of course, can become chasms. Robert Price wrote a book called *Preaching Deconstruction*, and his honesty in the introduction to the book is commendable—he admits to readers (perhaps as a warning!) that the sermons in the book were preached just prior to him being invited to leave his clerical post. Preachers have to know their congregants, know when to push and when to pull back, recognizing how much they can handle, what kind of security they can offer when their members are confronted with discomfort—in other words, pastoral care is a necessary component of disruption, especially when the disruption introduces uncertainty regarding beliefs and truth, and in relation, identity.

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<sup>33</sup> Jodi O'Brien, *The Production of Reality: Essays and Readings on Social Interaction*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2006), 334–35.

<sup>34</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Reprint edition (New York: Anchor, 1990), 134.

<sup>35</sup> John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2001), 150.

## 8. The “Truth Process”

In a metamodern habitus of preaching, doubt and deconstruction are understood as a posture of humility and honesty that recognizes its own diminutive stature in the shadow of large questions about God, questions establishment “truths,” and engages in a relational process of “becoming” and “emerging”—a theological stance in between relativism and absolutism that Catherine Keller describes as being “on the way.”<sup>36</sup> It is a posture that respects complexities, interconnections, overlapping narratives, and polyphonic dialogues, which—through disagreement, difference, and diverse perspective—lead people not toward truth, exactly, but rather into an ongoing “truth process.”<sup>37</sup>

For preachers who want to preach the truth process, and who want to rethink communication regarding truth to their changing context, it is helpful to note some of the salient features of a metamodern intellectual paradigm around which a metamodern habitus can be organized, and from which certain homiletical commitments can be derived.

1. Honesty, self-awareness, and openness to change. People who are deconstructing their faith are not interested in an immutable pulpit fixture who has all the answers; they want to engage in a mutually informative manner and expect influence to be a two-way street.
2. Creativity and poetic imagination. Some concepts are best approached in metaphor, story, and imagery that open up the realm of possibility rather than proof texts and explanations that draw parameters and box in ideas.
3. Transgression of set paradigms. Some amount of judicious iconoclasm may be necessary to disrupt petrified beliefs, particularly around the concept of God. Examining the inconsistencies, looking at the clash of opposing metaphors, exploring the paradoxical spaces that preachers often try to close regarding God, and challenging pre-conceived, categories of doing/being/thinking—these are ways to expand the conversation as well as create space for people who have profound questions, and to introduce people to the mystery.
4. Valuing both interconnectivity and diversity. People with differing ideas can gather around a shared purpose without dissolving into each other. Preachers can support this by helping people see diversity as a group value so that diversity, rather than uniformity, becomes a shared identity. Rather than stark binaries severed by belief (between those who believe and those who don't or aren't certain), congregations can be sites of rich conversation, encouraging polyphony and a multiplicity of experiences and perspectives. Preachers can also support diversity by not assuming that everyone in the congregation shares a particular belief.
5. Using grand narratives carefully. Grand narratives can be helpful heuristic devices for navigating reality, but they should be treated as provisional and revisable tools rather than as controlling narratives.

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<sup>36</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity In Process* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

6. Recognizing that we only know in part; therefore, part of the reality we construct around ourselves is to some degree fictive, which is why we continually seek after truth. We cannot take ourselves too seriously. Our religion should be playful and ironic rather than stone-faced.
7. Continuing the conversation. Rather than a series of weekly finales, sermons can be ongoing conversations that build on one another, as well as on fresh insight and perspective that takes place in community throughout the week. This allows room for change and growth and journey toward truth in the process of “becoming.” Perhaps not unlike little children, asking, “Why? Why? Why?” These kinds of exploratory sermons refuse the temporary relief of pat answers and platitudes and artificial conclusions and seek after the freedom of what Richard Kearney calls a “holy insecurity.”<sup>38</sup>

Ron Allen asks, “Will *truth* remain simply an object, something that we can be certain about, some ‘thing’ that we can study at the center of our finite systems, or will truth be understood as an active subject—God on the move?”<sup>39</sup> For the metamodern preacher, truth is an active subject to be pursued, spurred by questions and generative doubts, and explored through deconstruction, the goal of which is reaching after that which is undeconstructible. For preachers, the process of exploring doubts, pursuing questions—especially the profound and difficult questions—sermonically in line with the dominant thinking paradigms of many in the listening audience, is not the process of destruction. It is the process of deconstructing what is deconstructible *in order to* orient ourselves toward and preach toward what is undeconstructible (an undeconstructible truth), even if we never quite get there and the sermon remains an ongoing conversation rather than a series of weekly conclusions. A metamodern deconstruction toward growth is driven by and in service to expectation that an undeconstructible truth exists. In this way, metamodern deconstruction is generative, forward moving, and optimistic. Deconstruction is hopeful, personal, and frankly, biblical.

As preachers open to responding to the metamodern context in which we live, we can lead people to the truth process, engage positively and supportively with deconstructing Christians within our churches, and become responsible and responsive principal doubters, preaching ourselves and our congregations toward an undeconstructible truth.

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (Columbia University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>39</sup> Allen (note 12), 78.