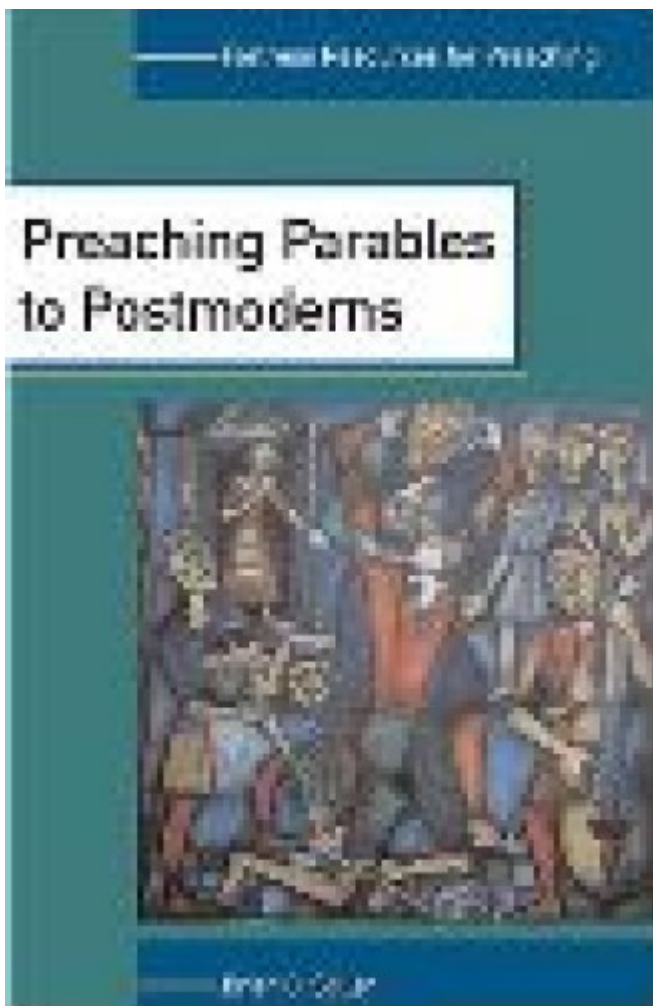


Confessing Jesus Christ/Preaching Parables to Postmoderns/Testimony to the Exiles

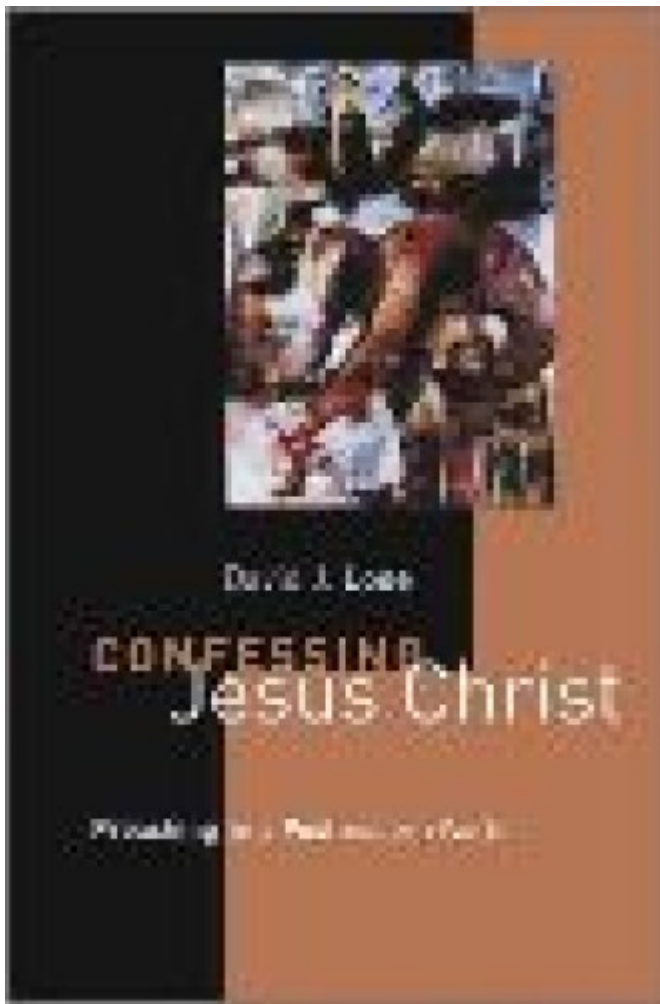
reviewed by [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

In Review



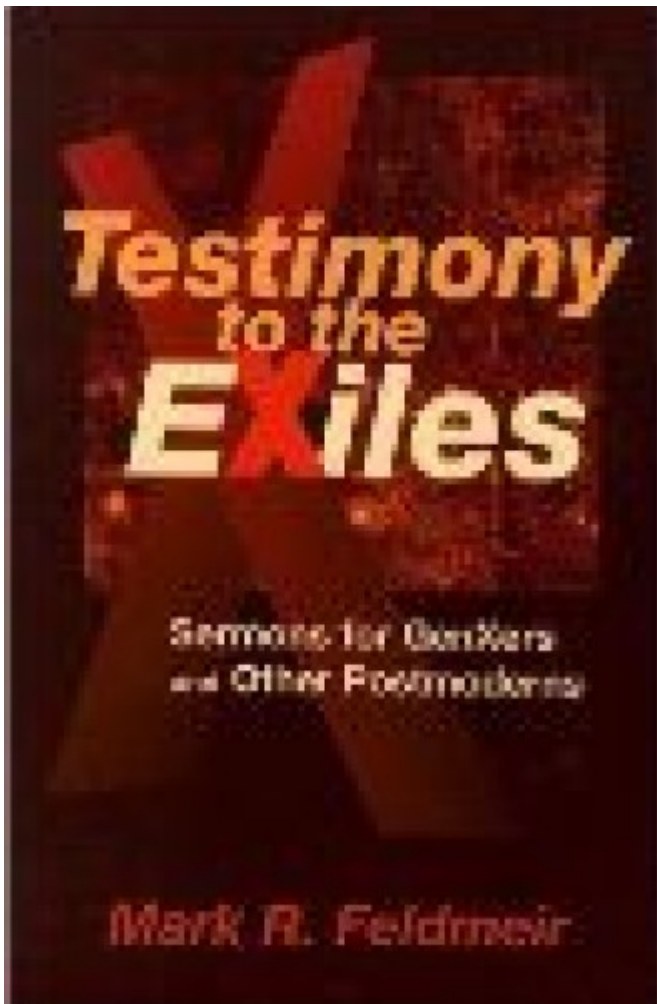
Preaching Parables to Postmoderns

Brian C. Stiller
Fortress



Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World

David J. Lose
Eerdmans



Testimony to the Exiles: Sermons for GenXers and Other Postmoderns

Mark R. Feldmeir
Chalice

Postmodernism, with its critique of modern assumptions about knowledge, language, authority and narrative, presents new challenges for preachers. Postmodernity is generally seen as entailing a rejection of the Enlightenment quest for rational certainty; an openness to various claims about truth; a questioning of authority; and a refusal to focus on a single metanarrative. Postmodern pilgrims, the argument goes, are suspicious of institutions, less than optimistic about human progress and willing to discover their own place to stand in the midst of the sinking sand of modernity.

This very well might be the end of the world as we know it, but the emergence of postmodernism is an opportunity as well as a crisis. Three recent works illustrate the urgency of making sense of postmodernism for the practice of preaching.

The most substantial is *Confessing Jesus Christ*, by David Lose. He senses an opportunity for a new hearing of the gospel that lies beyond the “tower” of modernity and the “Babel” of postmodern relativism (to use the words of Dennis Olson). In this world the preacher turns instead to confession, which is based not on the foundation of modern rationality but on faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Dismissing the rigid categories of modernity, which at varying times have been the friend or enemy of proclamation, Lose insists that confession offers an “open space” for the Holy Spirit to bring the word and the hearer into conversation with each other. We are drawn into the words of scripture and what they confess about God, and then we are called into the world to confess who we are in light of an encounter with Jesus Christ. This encounter is the basis for the authority of the preacher and the integrity of the sermon.

Where there is postmodern resistance to the Christian faith, preachers can respond in at least two different ways: by searching scripture for help or by looking to the larger culture for resonant voices that provide echoes of the Good News. The former response is proposed by Canadian evangelical leader Brian Stiller in *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*. Stiller agrees with Lose that the postmodern situation provides an opening for a fresh hearing of the gospel, and he focuses on Jesus’ parables as the medium for such an encounter. Noting “a remarkable convergence between postmodern thought and the parables of Jesus,” he suggests that the parables have a way of sneaking through our cultural resistance to the reign of God; they interest the bored, surprise the enlightened and upset the smug.

Stiller offers detailed reflections on ten parables and their relation to postmoderns. He considers the giving up of patriarchy when the father welcomes the prodigal son; matters of equity and fairness in the parable of the laborers and the vineyard; and the experience of marginalized people in the story of the widow who persistently comes before the unjust judge. Stiller includes four sermons based on parables, which serve as models for preaching in a postmodern world.

Mark Feldmeir, like Stiller, is convinced that preaching to the postmodern situation is important, but he differs in the sources from which he works. If Stiller sees the parables as ancient gifts that are perfectly suited for a postmodern audience,

Feldmeir is more immersed in the world of that audience. *Testimony to the Exiles*, a collection of sermons preached to a United Methodist congregation in southern California, draws deeply from the well of popular culture. There he discovers new parables awaiting response. "Be mindful," he notes, "that most postmoderns visit the local theater more often than they attend church; they are already well-trained to perceive the world as a series of scenes and can exegete a scene with great savvy and depth."

The testimony Feldmeir gives to the "exiles" is that there is in the world a spiritual hunger, and that the need is often addressed by popular musicians and film directors. As a preacher Feldmeir seeks not so much to convince his hearers of the truth of the gospel as to alert them to images in the world that call for reflection and response. In a culture that resists traditional means of communicating the faith, he listens for prophetic words from Bono and U2, or for a moment of insight, clarity and forgiveness in the film *Good Will Hunting*.

Postmodernism is not a topic appropriately assigned only to the philosophers; these authors' analyses and proposals are worthy of attention and engagement. Preaching in the context of postmodernism must not be limited to either exploration of the parables of Jesus or literate culture-watching. Stiller and Feldmeir need each other. The bridge from ancient faith to the postmodern world will require sustained attention to life on each side. If we do not dig deeply into the ancient faith, we lose our souls. If we do not connect with postmodern culture, we lose a generation of disciples. To confess Jesus Christ is to identify with him and his passionate commitment to God and to the world that "God so loved." This is both our challenge and our opportunity as postmodern preachers.