

Abstract

“Ongoing Evolution in our Media Culture and Listening Context
As it Pertains to the Craft of Preaching in the 21st Century”

By

The Rev. Albert R. Cutie

Project under the direction of Dr. William Brosend

The communications explosion and ongoing evolution of our media culture considerably impact the way we receive and grasp information. One of the challenges faced by those dedicated and called to the craft of preaching, is being keenly aware of the radical changes in the present and future listening context. While sermons and preaching have certainly evolved throughout history, our present reality poses totally new demands on those who have the sacred task of proclaiming of the saving message of Christ. Still the impact of this rapid evolution and superfluity of new forms of media on the mission of Christ’s church, and specifically on its mission to preach the Gospel effectively, has yet to be thoroughly measured and/or evaluated.

We live in an age where many still perceive present forms of communication, new developments in media, and the mission of the church as a terrible challenge or even as being at odds with each other. While those challenges can certainly be very real, nothing will hurt the future church more than ignoring the powerful impact of this media culture, especially as it pertains to the craft of preaching. This thesis will evaluate the present listening context, with the help of some of the latest research. It will also explore and offer perspectives from communicators, theologians, and a diverse group of well-

renowned preachers in addressing a host of issues at play for those who are seeking to effectively communicate in today's 21st century context.

Is today's church responding to this ongoing evolution by seeking to understand the present-day "listening context" and the often overwhelming "media culture" in which it is called to preach? Must professional preachers and teachers of the Word of God evolve in style and practice, in order to continue being effective communicators of the Gospel message for people today? What impact does the world that is rapidly changing around us have on our traditional homiletical methodologies and/or even the way we express our message?

The aim and objective of this thesis is to analyze and research why contemporary preaching may not be evolving at a pace which meets the needs of our changing world and to study and question how today's preachers may truly begin to embrace the challenge of effectively proclaiming the Gospel within present-day circumstances. This work integrates developments in both the theology of communication and communications theory as they relate to the craft of preaching and homiletics in our times.

Chapter one looks at the historical evolution of sermons ranging from Wesley to Graham to Curry, creating a sort of summary case study for six distinguished and timeless preachers from diverse theological positions and traditions. Ultimately, we look at specific qualities in each of these renowned preachers which can be useful to contemporary preachers, within the present-day context. Chapter two explores the impact of technology and how it is, in fact, changing the way we speak, think, and process information today. The juggling act between good content, structure, and good delivery is

explored at length. Also, a simple survey on the impact of the media culture on preaching, created by the author of this work, is presented. Chapter three looks at how traditional/liturgical churches can transition themselves to preach contemporary and appealing sermons, even within the context of a traditional liturgy. This chapter also looks at how young people (i.e. *Millennials*) experience the mainstream church and explores some insights from the emergent church and the mega-church movements. Chapter four offers practical examples of extraordinary preaching, as well as analysis and examples of sermons that simply do not work in today's listening context. In this section, the use of humor in sermons, position of the preacher (pulpit or no pulpit), reading of a manuscript, and other areas regarding effective public speaking are addressed, explored, and applied to the craft of preaching. Chapter five analyzes four sermons using the criteria presented—including two that truly connected with the audience and two that did not. In conclusion, this work challenges the church to take on the media culture and the ever-changing listening context, by seeking new and creative ways to proclaim the Gospel in a style and language that engages today's audiences.

Approved _____ Date _____

Adviser

_____ Date _____

Second Adviser

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Chapter 1: The Historical Evolution of the Sermon

Chapter 2: Special Considerations for Preaching in the 21st Century: Changes in the Listening Context and How Contemporary Society Experiences Church

Chapter 3: How Approach, Style and Delivery Impact the Reception of the Message

Chapter 4: How Traditional/Liturgical Churches Can Preach Effective Contemporary Sermons

Chapter 5: Sermons that Connect vs. Sermons that Do Not

Conclusion

Appendix I

Appendix II

Bibliography

Acknowledgments

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to help others
as faithful stewards of God's Grace in its various forms.*

-1 Peter 4:10 (NIV)

My love and utmost gratitude goes to my wonderful wife, Ruhama, who through this long journey that included two pregnancies, two births, long nights in the library, travel to and from Sewanee—and through it all—has been my greatest supporter, along with our three precious children: Christian, Camila, and Albert. I love you.

To my mom and dad, thank you for raising me knowing the love of God, offering me a true example of Christian living, and always encouraging me in my education.

To the people of Church of the Resurrection in Biscayne Park and St. Benedict's in Plantation, Florida, you should know your prayers and support throughout this process will always be treasured.

To our beloved Bishop Leo Frade, Senior bishop of the Episcopal Church, I send you my unwavering gratefulness for your courageous leadership, for receiving me as a member of the Episcopal Church, and later, for welcoming me as a member of the clergy in your diocese. Ruhama and I will always be grateful to you and Diana for your incredible support.

To the staff at the Duncan Conference Center (Diocese of Southeast Florida), where I am privileged to serve on the Board of Directors. I thank you for always providing me the quietest, absolutely peaceful, and most perfect setting to get away to for prayer, research, and writing. Your ministry of hospitality is a blessing to all!

A special word of thanks goes to those who provided me with significant wisdom, guidance, and much needed direction in the preparation and completion of this project: my Thesis Director, The Reverend Dr. William Brosend (Professor of Homiletics at the University of the South and Executive Director of the Episcopal Preaching Foundation), my second reader, The Reverend Peter Wallace (President and Executive Producer, Alliance for Christian Media, and Host of "Day1"), Mr. James W. Dunkly (Librarian of the School of Theology, Associate University Librarian, and Lecturer in New Testament at the University of the South), and my very dedicated Copy Editor, Dr. Cheryl J. Hill (Nova Southeastern University), a faithful member of St. Benedict's parish, where I am privileged to serve and attempt to preach the Gospel, applying just a few of the principles presented in this work.

Introduction

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

-George Bernard Shaw

For two millennia, Christians have gone to great lengths to fulfill what is commonly known as “The Lord’s Great Commission” found in Mark 16:15 to “go preach the gospel to every creature.” Countless men and women of every generation have made great sacrifices and often extraordinary efforts to announce the unique message of the Gospel—the saving message of our Lord Jesus Christ—throughout the world. Yet, while that message has not changed and its basic meaning remains timeless, the ways in which the Gospel is communicated and the methods by which the people of our time receive that message are rapidly changing and constantly evolving. This poses new challenges and new opportunities for all who are interested in the craft of preaching and in communicating what most Christians would agree to be the most important communication of all: The Good News of Salvation.

Given the explosion of new forms of media in the 20th and early 21st centuries, the fundamental questions in our present context have increasingly become communication-related. How is the church fulfilling its role as the most prominent “communicator” of the gospel and how effectively are we dealing with the constantly evolving methods of communication? In a globalized world with immediate communication readily available almost universally, how is the church responding to the Lord’s Great Commission to preach the gospel to “all creatures”? Are we really communicating with contemporary society and within the listening context of our day? These questions can appear to be overwhelming and even fear-provoking at times, yet these are the questions we must

continually ask ourselves and the challenges that must be embraced if we are to continue to aspire to be effective communicators of the Gospel.

Without seeking to be the bearer of *bad news*, all of the latest research regarding “Millennials” (also referred to as *Generation Y*) and all others who comprise today’s up-and-coming generations indicates that our varied religious traditions in the United States and other developed countries are not doing a very effective job of appealing to younger audiences and effectively communicating the message which we claim to be sacred and essential to us. Part of my objective in this work will be to present some of the latest research on this huge “communication gap” and reflect on what it offers us as a challenge as we seek to create an effective game plan in reaching today’s audience with today’s language with the ultimate hope of entering within the reach of their new and varied listening contexts.

However, this work will go beyond evaluating new media developments and changes in the listening context in order to attempt to begin to understand what changes in approach and methods may be necessary to connect with today’s complex audiences. While much of the research one finds in this work is necessarily sociological in nature, the author intends to focus mostly on the craft of preaching and the challenges at hand for those who seek to spread the Gospel. There is no doubt that this sacred task of preaching the Gospel to all the world, entrusted to us by the Lord himself,¹ is one which is very much impacted by the changes that are a direct result of the explosive use of new forms of media by people today. We cannot deny that the craft of preaching—a message transmitted mostly by the spoken word and in a traditional format—remains at the very

¹ Mark 16:15 (NIV)

heart of the church's activity. Yet, while much has been written in the area of theology of communication and communications theory, the impact of ongoing and rapid evolution of the superfluity of new forms of media on the mission of Christ's church to preach the Gospel effectively has yet to be thoroughly measured and/or evaluated. As a matter of fact, it appears as though the more both church and communication experts write and speak about it, the more we realize that we seem to be facing a David and Goliath phenomenon. We must be aware that this is a huge challenge for the church in our times. It is a reality we are only beginning to comprehend and whose evolution may very well be faster and greater than we can keep up with. Thus, the question becomes, "Will the church ever be able to catch-up or even begin to confront what appears to be an immense and out-of-reach task?"

Perhaps one very real source of consolation for those who are intimidated by the immensity of constantly evolving and new technologies is that the preaching of the Gospel has always involved a very simple communications strategy: a preacher and an audience. It is a strategy and method that seems pretty standard and not very transient. Regardless of whether that audience is a group of five to ten people at a special service in a nursing home, a massive congregation of thousands in a mega-church, or millions watching or listening through some form of media, preaching is still preaching. That is true. Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that developments in digital communications do pose a series of real challenges to preachers and listeners alike, and that maybe there are fantastic opportunities in the midst of those very real challenges to create a better mechanism for the transmission and reception of the message. While we cannot deny that the way in which contemporary audiences receive and perceive the

message preached has certainly changed in the past few centuries, some will continue to ascribe to the theory that “the more things change, the more they stay the same” when it comes to the preaching of the Word of God. But, I believe that this could prove a dangerous route to take in the long-term. It is the route of apathy and comfort; one that we so often hear in many of our more traditional communities, which quickly asserts, “but we have always done it that way.”

Every time I think of the rapid evolution of new forms of media in the context of the church and its mission, I am reminded of the old hardware stores I often visited with my father and grandfathers as a little boy. In a matter of decades, even after spending years and years providing personal care and attention to their customers, the big department and new mega stores came in and wiped them out. It was devastating to those dedicated local business owners and obviously devastating to their most loyal clients. But they closed because the world around them changed. Their new customer base did not respond to their approach; as good and as dedicated as it was, it did not keep up with the change that surrounded them. The challenge for the church today is not dissimilar to the challenge faced by those old hardware stores. We too must be ready to ask if the 21st century church is responding to this on-going media revolution which surrounds us by seeking to understand the present-day "listening context" and the often overwhelming "media culture" in which it is called to preach. Must professional preachers and teachers of the Word of God evolve in style and practice in order to continue being effective communicators of the Gospel message? Has the world changing around us changed our methodology and/or even impacted our message?

The aim and objective of this work is to analyze, research, and begin to understand if contemporary preaching is currently evolving at a pace which meets the needs of our changing world and to study and question how today's church may truly begin to embrace the challenge of effectively proclaiming the Gospel within present-day circumstances. One could say that the greatest limitation is that none of us can get into the mind of every preacher to see how new forms of media and communication are impacting the way they prepare and impart sermons, nor can any of us get into the mind of every listener to see how new forms of media may or may not be impacting the way sermons are being received. Yet, there is an enormous amount of valuable research that suggests that every area of communication is evolving and impacting the way we transmit and receive information. Some necessary historical references will be made by comparing and contrasting changes in preaching styles within our modern and more contemporary period. Exploring this may allow us to learn from preachers in the Christian tradition who have captivated thousands successfully, largely as a result of their unique communicative styles. Effective speaking styles and how they have and continue to evolve will also be analyzed, and I will incorporate some of the most credible research, analyses, and the opinions of various experts in the field of communication, as well as a series of sociological surveys and other useful sources to evaluate the impact of present-day media and the listening context on preaching.

This work will also include my own simple and "non-scientific" survey of preachers and congregants (listeners of sermons) who directly responded to how they perceive the importance and impact of the issue at hand, with the hope that this will help us all to pause and think and attempt to measure how what we are experiencing as a

rapidly changing and evolving media culture affects us in our desire to carry out God's work in today's world.

Chapter I

The Historical Evolution of the Sermon

“For just as you are hungry to listen to me, so too I am hungry to preach to you.”

-St. John Chrysostom

Not unlike all other methods and systems of communication, the sermon has also changed and drastically evolved throughout the centuries. In the early church, many of the sermons were similar to “Apologias” (a Greek term referring to the defense of a particular Christian teaching or doctrine), and these were usually intense theological explanations of some hot topic being debated or defined by the early Christians, especially by church leaders and others who were considered part of the theological community. The witness of Justin Martyr (c. 150 AD) in his famous letter to the Roman Emperor, Antoninus Pius, describes those early Christian sermons by saying that the “presider of the assembly speaks to us; he urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings.”² This is one of the earliest and rarest descriptions of what a Christian sermon was like in the second century of Christianity, within the context of Sunday worship. Yet, we get a whole lot from that brief statement. We are told that there was a preacher that the assembly listened to, and there were things they were all trying to live up to as a result of the proclamation of the readings from the Word of God, in whatever format—orally or written—they may have shared it or heard it. In any case, it is fair to say that the craft of preaching has always involved a preacher and an audience trying to understand how to best understand and apply the meaning of the Word of God for the living out of our Christian lives. The fact that there is a preacher, and that

² Justin Martyr, 150 AD.

there is also an audience of listeners, is perhaps one of the only aspects of preaching and proclamation that will not be radically subjected to the communications revolution that is so rapidly and constantly taking place around us.

However, we cannot overlook the cultural context of the early Christian church, which highlights the fact that many of the most renowned written and verbally passed-on testimonies of the first centuries of Christianity were writings focused on the martyrdoms of significant figures who had a great impact on the life of that primitive church. If we look at the works surrounding popular early martyrs such as Perpetua and Felicity as well as the lives of countless other martyrs in this period, we will find that even though these were most often autobiographical writings of what they and others experienced in the midst of great persecution and cannot be described as a classic sermon or homily, these written works were certainly considered a powerful witness that led those around them in the Christian community to embrace the Gospel and to live the message of the Word of God.³ The witness of these written and verbally transmitted stories was a very powerful tool that brought growth and attention to the early Christian church, which found itself at odds with a very hostile and particularly difficult cultural milieu for the earliest followers of Christ.

In this sense, one could say that the Christian sermon has gone full-circle, with so many of our contemporary popular preachers of the 20th and 21st century focusing a great deal of attention (in their sermons) on their own personal testimonies of pain, abuse, addiction, and a host of other human dramas experienced in their own personal past,

³ Paul Scott Wilson, *A Concise History of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 30-34.

which often make their message more appealing—and sometimes even more credible—to many contemporary listeners. The same frequently applies to popular television personalities and other prominent leaders who have overcome some form of hardship and live to tell about it. In the early church, for some it was martyrdom and the witness it provided that made the Gospel attractive. If we look at the growth and attraction of today's phenomenon known as “mega-churches,” maybe not much has changed in this regard.

In order to go deeper into our analysis of whatever palpable changes exist within the craft of preaching as a direct result of our media culture, this chapter will focus on the evolution of sermons since the post-reformation era of Christianity by briefly looking at a very theologically and denominationally diverse group of popular preachers who can be categorized as rather “iconic” figures in the most recent centuries of Christian history. The first two lived in a time when, apart from printed media, technology did not provide for much more than the actual traditional pulpit and the spoken word. Yet, with the dawn of radio and television in the 20th century and the subsequent explosion of new forms of mass media, others in this group became among the most influential people of our times, and in some cases, re-runs of their sermons and work continue to be received by millions and millions of people throughout the world. By looking to the sermons, style, and impact of each one of these well-known and transformational preachers, I believe we will be able to get a good sense of the evolution which has occurred and the ongoing developments that will continue to take place in preaching. Rather than pretending to use these six preachers as some sort of case study, we will look directly at the specific style used to preach the Christian Gospel and the impact that their surroundings and their

particular cultural milieu have had on the message they proclaimed and continue to transmit.

With this purpose in mind, for the sake of comparison and in order to accomplish a brief analysis the particular style and delivery, I will refer to the preaching of John Wesley (18th century), Charles H. Spurgeon (19th century), Fulton J. Sheen (20th century), Billy Graham (20th century), Joyce Meyer (20th and 21st centuries), and Michael Curry (20th and 21st centuries).

John Wesley (1703-1791)

John Wesley understood the apostolic mission of the church in the most radical way and put it into practice in the most literal way. The very origin of the word “apostle” (in Greek *apostollein*) refers to one who is “sent” or to actually “send away.” Wesley, his brother Charles (the well renowned author of church hymns), along with another great Anglican preacher and mentor to Wesley, George Whitefield, took the Gospel to the streets and were among the first in England to promote preaching outdoors at a time when this was certainly not a popular practice in the 18th century. They were actually harshly criticized and persecuted for initiating this practice.

Wesley and his colleagues had begun this practice of public preaching and what would evolve to become what we now call “revivals” as a result of their association with the “Holy Club” in Oxford.⁴ The Holy Club was dedicated to the pursuit of holiness and became the origin of what would become known as the “Holiness Movement,” and their specific method of religious study, piety, and service would eventually lead to the establishment of Methodist societies and the Methodist way, although Wesley would

⁴ Wilson, 131.

declare himself an Anglican with no separatist tendencies until his death.⁵ In any case, there is little doubt that in Wesley's unique style and in the movement he joined and helped to lead, there was something new that was indeed taking place. Wesley and those who became adherents of his method were taking Christianity back out into the streets, beyond the walls of the church. The step of taking the sermon from the context of the traditional indoor pulpit and making it available to all who were spontaneously invited to listen to preaching on the street was not just a new method, but an application of an old "forgotten" method—the one used by Prophets and Apostles of biblical times, way beyond the confines of physical structures and/or religious buildings. One could say that those revivals of the 18th century were the "mass media" of their times. It was certainly the only way to reach thousands of people, gathered in a single space, to hear God's message.

I believe this open air or "field preaching," as it was referred to then, led Wesley to become a truly effective communicator among the people of his time. He possessed a simplicity and directness which was not so common among his colleagues who preached in much more formal indoor settings. This is more than a well-founded assumption and is very evident from the preface of Wesley's first publication of sermons in 1746 in which he states:

I design plain truth for plain people; therefore, to set purpose, I abstain from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings; and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning, unless in sometimes citing the original Scripture. I labour to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life; and, in particular, those kinds of technical terms that so frequently occur in Bodies of Divinity; those modes of

⁵ Ibid., 133.

speaking which men of reading are intimately acquainted with, but to common people are an unknown tongue.⁶

Here, Wesley the street preacher is articulating and making his case for what guides his preaching style and content most—a desire to connect and communicate the Gospel effectively to all people, both those familiar with theological concepts and (mostly) those who are not. It is obvious that in the eyes of too many of the churchmen of his day, this type of enthusiastic and popular approach posed a real threat and was seen as a danger to the dignified way of preaching most ascribed to. It was so much so that this new open air preaching would prove to never live up to their lofty understanding of the style and context that was needed to effectively preach the Christian message. In spite of the opposition he faced by colleagues in the institutional church, Wesley continued to motivate the listeners of his “outdoor sermons” to be faithful in their attendance to worship services and the reception of the sacraments. While he was indeed an innovative preacher, he by no means discouraged the traditional practice of Christianity and regular church attendance.⁷ However, as several critics have noted, none of his published sermons put much emphasis on church attendance.

What we do find explicitly present in almost all of Wesley’s sermons is his passion, personal style, and approach. Obviously, upon reading the sermons with today’s expectations, they do not contain the type of speech or approach we are accustomed to hearing in contemporary sermons, but they very much represent his 18th century context and the use of the sermon in order to express doctrinal and theological perspectives. At

⁶ Edward H. Sugden, ed., *Wesley’s Standard Sermons Consisting of 44 Discourses Published in Four Volumes Vol. 1*, (London: Epworth Press, 1956), Preface.

⁷ Wilson, 133.

the same time, one can see that there is a very personal and direct message being transmitted. This typical Wesleyan approach is most evident in Wesley's 1746 sermon on "Justification by Faith":

Thou ungodly one, who hearest or readest these words! Thou vile, helpless, miserable sinner! I charge thee before God, the Judge of all, go straight unto him, with all thy ungodliness. Take heed thou destroy not thy own soul by pleading thy righteousness, more or less. Go as altogether ungodly, guilty, lost, destroyed, deserving and dropping into hell; and thou shalt then find favour in his sight, and know that he justifieth the ungodly. As such thou shalt be brought unto the "blood of sprinkling," as an undone, helpless, damned sinner. Thus "look unto Jesus!" There is "the Lamb of God," who "taketh away thy sins!" Plead thou no works, no righteousness of thine own! No humility, contrition, sincerity! In nowise. That were, in very deed, to deny the Lord that bought thee. No: Plead thou, singly, the blood of the covenant, the ransom paid for thy proud, stubborn, sinful soul. Who art thou, that now seest and feelest both thine inward and outward ungodliness Thou art the man! I want thee for my Lord! I challenge "thee" for a child of God by faith! The Lord hath need of thee. Thou who feelest thou art just fit for hell, art just fit to advance his glory; the glory of his free grace, justifying the ungodly and him that worketh not. O come quickly! Believe in the Lord Jesus; and thou, even thou, art reconciled to God.⁸

The passion and unique style in the above conclusion of Wesley's "Justification" sermon is evident. While some of the language seems rather harsh to contemporary ears, one can clearly identify a zealous and energetic preaching style manifested in the written text. Yet, as we read these sermons, one wonders how it was possible for thousands of people to both hear and understand these outdoor preachers and their very elaborate phrases in an age of no microphones or public address systems. The answer provided by several scholars is that preaching was carefully delivered with a kind of voice that was

⁸ "Sermons of John Wesley" (Sermon #5) "Justification by Faith" accessed October 15, 2014, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-5-justification-by-faith>.

“close to singing,”⁹ and this allowed their voices to carry and be heard at much greater distances than the spoken word is heard. This kind of style should not be considered the contemporary and almost gimmicky shouting we hear from so many of today’s preachers, but a true instrument which captivated large audiences and allowed the message to be heard and effectively understood. The projection and clarity of Wesley’s voice accompanied the passion with which the message was proclaimed. To illustrate this point, we look to Wesley’s mentor and another great outdoor preacher, George Whitefield, who was once asked if someone could publish his sermons. Whitefield responded, “Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.”¹⁰

To Wesley’s contemporaries, the content, power, and delivery of the spoken word had great value and seemed to be an integral part of the craft of preaching. Once those sermons were written, which unfortunately is the only and very limited way by which we can experience them today, they lose a great deal of their impact and personality. Perhaps today, as so many are reimagining the traditional context of worship through the emerging church and other movements that experiment with preaching outside of a church and/or traditional pulpit experience, we can look to Wesley, Whitefield, and others who brought the crowds together in outdoor settings and effectively brought the Gospel to the masses.

⁹ Wilson, 137.

¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Preaching and Preachers*. (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1971), 58.

Contemporary preachers can surely benefit from Wesley's perseverance in listening to the voice of God within and seeking new ways to proclaim the message of the kingdom. Although it was not considered decent or proper for a man of the cloth to go out and do "street preaching," that is precisely what Wesley did. Besides, even after suffering persecution from both friends and foes of the Gospel, with steadfast conviction he continued doing what he knew in his heart God was asking of him and what was producing, through the power of the Holy Spirit, what he perceived as deep conversions and people turning to God through the method he was sure was accomplishing the effective proclamation of the Word of God. He did all this without microphones, video cameras, or any type of sophisticated equipment. His only instruments were the Gospel, his voice, and his God-given courage to break the mold and take the saving message of God way beyond buildings and traditional pulpits. There is little doubt Christianity could benefit greatly from the innovation and courage which is so clearly witnessed in John Wesley's ministry as preacher and pastor.

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

Charles Spurgeon was known as the "Prince of Preachers." While he was a Baptist preacher who served as the pastor of London's largest congregation, he never attended a Bible College or any kind of seminary. He received harsh criticism throughout his life, but especially at the beginning of his ministry at the age of 19 when he took over the renowned New Park Street Baptist Church, where he was often referred to as the "boy preacher."¹¹ Regardless, Spurgeon was privileged to preach at some of the largest venues

¹¹ "*The Secrets of Spurgeon's Preaching*," accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/juneweb-only/52.0.html>.

in London and was known to have preached to over 10,000,000 people in his lifetime. Furthermore, it is important to note that there is no other Christian author—living or dead—who has more material in print, even more than a century after his death.¹² His impact was, and continues to be, enormous in many Christian circles.

Spurgeon considered himself a hard-core Calvinist, yet his theology never seemed to get in the way of his popular appeal. His emphasis was connecting with people, and his powerful voice, theatrical style, and humor helped him to accomplish that. On the occasion of Spurgeon's first Sunday at New Park Street Church, he had 80 persons in his congregation. On his last Sunday there, after 37 years, he had the largest evangelical congregation in the world.¹³ What was evident from his preaching and life was that he possessed a contagious spirituality, and his ability to preach in a way that was accessible to all made him a very powerful communicator who was always in command of his message. He did not write out his sermons, and those who observed him claim that most often, it was just a very brief written outline on the back of an envelope or piece of paper which he took up to the pulpit with him.

In one of his sermons, which expresses his personal style and approach, he spoke of how humbled he was by the incredible sacredness of the task he considered preaching to be:

Often, when I come in at the door and my eyes fall on this vast congregation, I feel a tremor go through me to think that I should have to speak to you all and be, in some measure, accountable for your future state. Unless I preach the Gospel faithfully and with all my heart, your blood will be required at my hands. Do not wonder, therefore, that when I am weak and sick, I feel my head swim when I

¹² Ibid., *"The Secrets of Spurgeon's Preaching"* in Christianity Today (2005).

¹³ Ibid.

stand up to speak to you, and my heart is often faint within me. But I do have this joy at the back of it all - God does set many sinners free in this place! Some people reported that I was mourning that there were no conversions. Brothers and Sisters, if you were all to be converted tonight, I should mourn for the myriads outside! That is true, but I praise the Lord for the many who are converted here. When I came last Tuesday to see converts, I had 21 whom I was able to propose to the Church - and it will be the same next Tuesday, I do not doubt. God is saving souls! I am not preaching in vain. I am not despondent about that matter—liberty is given to the captives and there will be liberty for some of them, tonight! I wonder who it will be? Some of you young women over yonder, I trust. Some who have dropped in here, tonight, for the first time. Oh, may this first opportunity of your hearing the Word in this place be the time of beginning a new life which shall never end - a life of holiness, a life of peace with God! (1894 - Sermon #2371)¹⁴

In spite of the fact that Spurgeon spoke before multitudes, he never lost a sense of the personal pastoral connection with his flock. There is a powerfully evident humility in this preacher, and one cannot help but notice that his great preaching ability was accompanied with a great deal of individual pastoral care, something almost unheard of in Christian contemporary preachers who often make themselves inaccessible. Additionally, in comparison with Wesley, it is apparent that there is lot less formality in Spurgeon's sermons. He was certainly among the first media preachers, even before the existence of television and radio, because of his very effective and considerable use of the print media. Spurgeon sold 20,000 copies of his sermons each week. They were translated into 20 languages, and he collected his sermons into 63 volumes. Today, Spurgeon's sermons are considered the largest collection of books by any Christian author in history. His impact in the 19th century was truly remarkable. One important lesson Spurgeon passes on to today's preachers is the fact that sermons have a life of their own, and if we value what we preach, it should be made available way beyond the preaching moment in the

¹⁴“*Notable Quotes of Charles Spurgeon,*” accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.spurgeongems.org>.

form of a text, audio, or video version of it. How many times have you heard, “That was a great sermon?” Yet, just a few moments after we have been inspired and touched by such an impacting message, the mind moves on to other things and the content of the sermon just does not stay with us in the way we would like it to. If we had to recall the sermon and share it with a family member or with someone we would like to share it with, the message is mostly forgotten. Spurgeon caught on to this modern idea quite early, and thanks to the availability of his sermons, we are still talking about them today. Important messages should not be easily forgotten.

Fulton J. Sheen (1895-1979)

When we hear the term “televangelists,” our minds often wander to some of the horror stories surrounding a number of famous preachers with extravagant lifestyles who were not always models of Christian living. Yet, the person often referred to as “the first televangelist” was a deeply spiritual and brilliant Roman Catholic bishop whose television presence coincided with the dawn of television and made a huge, positive impact on American society, even well beyond his own religious tradition or Christian denomination. Billy Graham often referred to Bishop Fulton J. Sheen as “the greatest communicator of the 20th century,” and Time Magazine called him “the microphone of God.”¹⁵ For those of us familiar with his work, it is truly difficult to find anyone to compare him to. The uniqueness of his style and magnitude of his eloquence is truly unparalleled.

¹⁵ “Religion: The Microphone of God” Obituary of Fulton J. Sheen in *Time Magazine*, December 24, 1979, accessed December 10, 2014, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,947144,00.html>.

Fulton J. Sheen started as an extremely popular host on radio in 1930, where he had millions of listeners. For a period of time, he received thousands of daily letters from his faithful audience. Shortly after the dawn of television in 1951, he went on prime-time national television and coincided in the same exact broadcast schedule on a competing network with the great Milton Berle and even found himself as a competitor of “Uncle Miltie” shortly thereafter, earning him the nickname of “Uncle Fultie” by his legions of viewers. He realized his audience was a little bit of everyone, and unlike so many other television and radio preachers, he understood he was reaching people with a universal message that applied to people of all faith traditions. In his autobiography, Sheen states,

When I began television nationally and on a commercial basis, I was no longer talking in the name of the church and under the sponsorship of bishops. The new method had to be more ecumenical and directed to Catholics, Protestant, Jews, and all men of good will. It was no longer a presentation of Christian doctrine but rather a reasoned approach to it beginning with something that was common to the audience. Hence, during those television years, the subjects ranged from communism, to art, to science, to humor, aviation, war, etc.¹⁶

The uniqueness and particular charisma of Sheen was manifested in that he was able to reach millions and millions on non-religious media with a message that never came across as “churchy,” yet he was able to communicate the Gospel effectively. He was personally responsible for conversions of several prominent public figures to Christianity, and he personally baptized them and brought them into the church. Bishop Sheen had the gift of making Christianity appealing to all, and he was a true master at using the immense power of the media for this kind of “indirect evangelism” (as I like to call it) very effectively. He understood that the very presence of a man of the cloth on

¹⁶ Fulton J. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen* (New York: Image, 1982).

secular/commercial television and radio was enough to make the people of his day wonder about spiritual and religious matters, without him necessarily having to always preach a sermon.

Sheen had a classical education and was well versed in several biblical and modern languages. Furthermore, he earned two doctorates: one in philosophy and another in theology. This master communicator was the author of 73 books, many of which became classics that were well received by people of all faith traditions and an array of Christian denominations. He was truly ecumenical and developed ties with the likes of Billy Graham, several popular rabbis, and a host of other religious leaders even before the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism came to pass. While Sheen was a true academic, his educational level and theoretical thoroughness never distanced him from the importance of effectively and practically reaching his audience. On the contrary, he was able to explain things and speak in a way that easily connected with all. His programs were not a pulpit in front of a congregation, but a kind of town meeting conversation style lecture, where the dynamic bishop caught everyone's attention as he spoke on issues of the day and countless topics of human interest. The very title of his program said it all: "Life is Worth Living." His programs were all about life, decades before "self-help" would even become a recognizable genre.

When it came to preaching, in the context of the liturgy, he was equally engaging. Here, there was no camera to look into with his piercing eyes, but he looked into the crowd in a way that each person felt he was speaking to them. His preaching style was certainly much more formal than what is customary today, but his personal style always made his formality take a back seat because of the powerful way in which he connected

the message with his listeners. Bishop Sheen had a unique way of combining anecdotes, humor, and constant biblical references that were knit together in the smoothest and most seamless way. He was a Christ-centered preacher and spoke of the Lord in a way that made the Gospel message come alive, and he mesmerized the audience while challenging them to never be afraid to respond to their Christian calling. The cross of Christ was one of his constant references, but it was always in the framework and at the service of hope. Unlike so many Christian preachers, Sheen did not focus on the cross in order to emphasize the pain but to emphasize the hope of resurrection. In one of his popular Lenten missions he said,

Love does not kill pain, but it diminishes it... As Christians we have one law: Good Friday and Easter. Nothing is ever accomplished that is worthwhile without some self-denial and mortification. If you have a cross, bear it. It is his! And you'll be glad of it and for it someday. Your salvation is assured.¹⁷

Like so many of the preachers I have made reference to in this chapter, Bishop Sheen was criticized and treated harshly by some within the church. His own archbishop in New York, Cardinal Spellman, did everything possible to get him out of New York after they had a disagreement about the proper use of mission funds. When the Pope sided with Sheen, the Cardinal never seemed to get over it and used his power to maneuver that he be appointed Bishop of Rochester, placing him as far away from Manhattan as possible. Sheen was never invited to preach at St. Patrick's Cathedral again during Spellman's lifetime. He had to settle for the tiny St. Agnes Church a few blocks

¹⁷ Bishop Fulton J. Sheen "Our Cross" – Sermon preached at a Lenten Mission, accessed November 1, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkEBsVZBijg>.

away, where the street (East 43rd Street) is now named after him.¹⁸ Two months prior to his death and with Spellman now long gone, Sheen was present at St. Patrick's when he was embraced by Pope John Paul II during his first pastoral visit to the United States. The Pope said to Sheen, "You have written and spoken well of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are a loyal son of the Church...."¹⁹

Contemporary preachers in a pluralistic society must be more and more willing to communicate beyond their own faith tradition. This in no way means that we disregard the gospel or down-play our fidelity to Christian doctrine as Christian preachers. Yet, what we can all learn from Sheen was his great ability to preach and teach audiences way beyond his own comfort zone and tradition, motivated by the conviction of the universality of the message of God's love—a message that goes beyond every human boundary. One of the most appealing qualities of Fulton J. Sheen that contemporary preachers must reflect on is whether or not we are authentically interested in communicating to the larger world, without ever feeling that we must in any way compromise our Christian faith. His use of humor, anecdotes and moving personal stories seemed almost mystical. He captivated and enthralled his listeners because he brought it all together: content, delivery, and his unique personal style. Above all, he was an effective communicator, and indeed, for millions, he became "the microphone of God." Perhaps his greatest lesson for the preachers of our times would be that while you can be

¹⁸ Patricia Kossman "Remembering Fulton Sheen" in *America*, Dec. 6, 2004, accessed November 15, 2014, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/511/article/remembering-fulton-sheen>.

¹⁹ "Biography of Venerable Fulton Sheen," accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.actorschapel.org/Biography-Venerable-Fulton-Sheen>.

very competent in your academic understanding of theology, if your communication skills are weak, your theology and your ability to communicate it may also come across as weak and uninteresting.

Billy Graham (Born November, 1918)

For decades, when most people in the United States thought of a “national preacher,” they immediately would think of Billy Graham. Since the late 1940s, Graham and the evangelistic organization he founded created the largest gatherings of people under tents and stadiums for him to preach the Gospel and to invite people to accept Christ in their lives through altar calls, something which has been shunned by some evangelicals as too emotional and not “true conversions.” Regardless of his critics and those who try to down-play his legacy, there is little doubt that Rev. Graham is still considered to be one of world’s greatest representatives of Christianity and a powerful voice. He has preached to more than 215 million persons through faith rallies and revivals in 185 countries worldwide.²⁰

Like Sheen, Graham spent much of his preaching time making references to the problems and issues that were most pressing to believers and non-believers alike in the 20th century: the Cold War, communism, the moral decline in society since the 1960s, and other things. These issues and the biblical perspective on them made his preaching particularly effective, because this country was hungry for that kind of moral compass and spiritual leadership that is often absent from public life. Graham’s friendship with presidents and other public figures over the years has also significantly impacted his

²⁰ Billy Graham Evangelistic Association Figures, accessed October 10, 2014, <http://billygraham.org/about/biographies/billy-graham/>.

credibility and prominence in American society. He has appeared in Gallup's list of "Most Admired Men" for the 58th time, which is more than any other person on the planet.²¹

Graham's preaching style is not perceived to be particularly creative or dynamic if one compares it to many contemporary preachers, but he does come across as strongly authoritative while truly authentic, often repeating the phrase "the Bible says" and quoting Scripture passages to support his points during his preaching. His style is reminiscent of the traditional sermons often associated with American mainstream denominations. While his children and grandchildren have also been involved in various aspects of ministry, Billy Graham continues to be the face of the family ministry and the only one who truly has universal appeal.

Much has been written and said about Graham being the "personal advisor" or "minister" to the President of the United States, but I would venture to say that those relationships were mostly symbolic and truly a bridge to become the nation's spiritual voice at so many critical times in our recent history. Very few religious leaders have had the spiritual and moral impact on the United States which can be attributed to Reverend Graham. This has been apparent on numerous occasions, especially in very significant national events, but perhaps never as obvious as it was during his moving sermon at the Cathedral Church of Saint Peter and Paul—popularly known as the National Cathedral—in Washington, D.C., where he addressed the nation a couple of days after the

²¹ Gallup Poll results published in December, 2014, accessed January 3, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/180365/barack-obama-hillary-clinton-extend-run-admired.aspx?version=print>.

devastating attacks of September 11, 2001. On that special day of Prayer and Remembrance, in his sermon before the nation's leaders, Graham said:

The Bible says that He is 'the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.' No matter how hard we try words simply cannot express the horror, the shock, and the revulsion we all feel over what took place in this nation on Tuesday morning. September 11 will go down in our history as a day to remember. Today we say to those who masterminded this cruel plot, and to those who carried it out, that the spirit of this nation will not be defeated by their twisted and diabolical schemes. Someday those responsible will be brought to justice, as President Bush and our Congress have so forcefully stated. But today we especially come together in this service to confess our need of God. We've always needed God from the very beginning of this nation but today we need Him especially. We're facing a new kind of enemy. We're involved in a new kind of warfare and we need the help of the Spirit of God. The Bible's words are our hope: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea" (Psalm 46:1, 2, NIV). But how do we understand something like this? Why does God allow evil like this to take place? Perhaps that is what you are asking now. You may even be angry at God. I want to assure you that God understands those feelings that you may have. We've seen so much on our television, and hear on our radio, stories that bring tears to our eyes and make us all feel a sense of anger. But God can be trusted, even when life seems at its darkest. But what are some of the lessons we can learn? First, we are reminded of the mystery and reality of evil. I have been asked on hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and He is a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst of suffering. The Bible says God is not the author of evil. It speaks of evil as a "mystery." In 2 Thessalonians 2:7 it talks about the mystery of iniquity. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" He asked that question, "Who can understand it?" And that is one reason we each need God in our lives. The lesson of this event is not only about the mystery of iniquity and evil, but secondly, it is a lesson about our need for each other.²²

In spite of the countless tent and stadium rallies since 1949 and the days of ongoing national and international crusades, I believe moments like the above referenced sermon will be Graham's most lasting legacy, because it was in those moments that he

²² The Rev. Billy Graham, Sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. on the Day of Remembrance for 9/11 (September 14, 2001).

preached the Gospel and comforted an entire nation and its leaders. Graham was present with a message of serenity and providing a spiritual sense of security when it was most difficult to have hope or faith or to think about God. His preaching will be a memorable and not easily forgotten part of American history.

Perhaps the most important thing contemporary preachers and leaders within our mainstream denominations can learn from Graham is the importance of incarnational preaching—the ability to speak to the reality that is before us in a way that brings biblical images, examples, and truths to the forefront of the particular national dilemma or tragedy most present in people’s minds. Too often, the message preached today seems divorced from the most pressing issues on the minds and hearts of listeners. We do preaching a great disservice when it is not incarnational and “connected” to the needs and interests of the listening audience.

Joyce Meyer (Born June, 1943)

I chose Joyce Meyer as one of our iconic preachers, not because of any kind of affinity to her brand of theology or her interpretation of Scripture, but because she encompasses so much of what the craft of preaching in the 21st century church has become for a growing number of Christian clergy today. Meyer is the perfect combination of spiritual guru, preacher, counselor, self-help life coach, and powerfully effective communicator, all in one. She goes beyond being the traditional televangelist and engages her audiences of millions with her particular charisma and unique style. She is a woman, and while she does deliberately direct much of her preaching, teaching, and public speaking events to women, she is equally effective with male audiences who are just as impacted by listening to her.

Joyce Meyer has mastered the art of preaching to people today far beyond religious or denominational lines, and her messages are often filled with biblical references while never religious or “churchy” in tone. Though she was once a Lutheran, she became the associate pastor at a non-denominational church for several years before resigning to start her own ministry. Meyer often refers to “church folks,” the rigidity of religious institutions, and the people who she felt mistreated by when she worked for a particular church. Even this is a powerful message that resonates with many of her listeners, because so many people feel totally alienated and disenfranchised from the organized religious institutions of their upbringing. In addition to that, Meyer also often shares her personal testimony of sexual abuse by her father and other forms of abuse by her first husband, which permits her to have an almost immediate connection and great credibility with countless people who have suffered emotional and physical abuse of various types. Not unlike her colleague in the media world, Oprah Winfrey (known as “Queen of All Media” and who early in her career shared painful details about her abusive past), Meyer has mastered the ability to rise from adversity as a helper to others who may have suffered similar experiences. This makes her more than a preacher of the Gospel to many women and men; she has become a kind of “spiritual hero” who, because of her ability to conquer the pain of her past, is now a living witness, worthy of imitation.

This brings us to how the sermon genre has evolved and continues to evolve into a much more personal and testimony-driven form of communication. Like so many other contemporary preachers, Meyer offers a no-nonsense message of hope through her live preaching, teaching, conferences, and books. The result of her incredible impact has resulted in a huge media-empire, which is surely the direct result of her magnetic persona

and her extraordinary ability to communicate in a way that appeals to millions. She is indeed unique, but this self-help/biblical style is quickly becoming what is being heard in many of the new “non-denominational” Christian churches in our times and from a good number of our most prominent televangelists of the 21st century.

One of Meyer’s recent sermons focused on something that is a recurring theme of hers: how we deal with our feelings. She said,

I certainly remember lots of times in my life when people asked me why I was being so harsh. I didn't realize that I was. I just had a lot going on and felt pressured, so the pressure came through in harsh voice tones. That didn't excuse my bad behavior, but it was the root of the problem. I am very thankful I know the Word of God and have Him in my life to help and comfort me. But a lot of difficult people don't have that. I have had to work very hard with the Holy Spirit for the ability to act on God's Word when people are rude...instead of merely reacting with a behavior that matches or tops theirs. Jesus teaches us how to respond to those who treat us well and those who do not (*see Luke 6:32–35*). If you are in a situation that requires you to be with one of these hard-to-get-along-with people every day, I urge you to pray for them instead of reacting emotionally to them. Our prayers open a door for God to work through.²³

It is plain to see that this preacher’s message is mostly light on theology and heavy on practical advice for Christian living, and that is perhaps what makes her preaching so accessible and appealing. Meyer has effectively managed to bring together a very personal approach to preaching and teaching with a sense of reverence for God’s Word and its very practical applications to daily living, which is explosively popular. She often is heard shying away from the title “televangelist” and prefers to be referred to as a “Practical Bible Teacher.” Perhaps this is another reason why she is seen by a potential audience of three billion people throughout the world each week and has written more than 70 books on various aspects of Christian living. Her impact on the craft of preaching

²³ Joyce Meyer “God’s Word vs. Your Feelings,” accessed November 20, 2014, http://www.joycemeyer.org/articles/ea.aspx?article=gods_word_vs_your_feelings.

and on her recognition as one of the most influential contemporary preachers of the Christian message is immense. As one with experience in the area of international television and radio, I am intrigued by her incredibly captivating style and authenticity as a communicator of the Gospel. I have closely observed Meyer speak in person, read some of her books, heard her audio messages, and watched her on television. I have been able to appreciate that she possesses something which very few television personalities possess: she comes across exactly the same way in a variety of formats, regardless of what setting she is in. Conceivably, what contemporary preachers can learn from Meyer is that we need to bring more of our own humanity into our preaching; our personality, humor, creativity, personal experiences, and so forth. All of those aspects of who we are can be used by God in a way that will enhance our connection with those who are sitting before us. It is frustrating to meet clergy with such great personalities and who are so interesting when you speak to them one-on-one, yet produce the most dull and lifeless sermons. From Meyer we learn that what you preach, when you preach, and how you preach it could be very important to you, but if you do not find a way to effectively connect it with your audience, your message could very easily get lost. Meyer is, above all, a wonderfully gifted story-teller and “connector” of God’s message with the reality and problems of everyday living.

Michael Curry (Born March, 1953)

Michael Curry is an Episcopal bishop and undoubtedly one of the most noted and recognized Anglican preachers and speakers in the Church today. With his unique charisma, energy, and style, there is little doubt that if Bishop Curry was not a leader within a traditional mainstream denomination, he would be a very popular television

preacher with an audience of millions every week. He is a dedicated ecumenist, an active diocesan bishop, and above all, a person who is often mentioned when anyone in the Episcopal Church begins their list of “favorite” preachers. Curry “has a national preaching and teaching ministry, having been featured on Day 1 (formerly known as The Protestant Hour) and as a frequent speaker at conferences around the country. He has received honorary degrees from Sewanee and Yale.”²⁴ As a result of his great ability as a preacher and communicator, Bishop Curry has become one of the most recognized spokespersons for the Episcopal Church at the national and international level.

Above all, Curry’s personal dynamic style, straightforwardness, and his special gift in using words and images are among the many qualities that contribute to his recognition as an outstanding preacher. The unique way in which he brings the Scriptures together and connects them with the most pressing issues in the minds of his listeners is truly remarkable. As William Brosend points out in *The Preaching of Jesus*, referring to the sermon delivered by Bishop Curry at the 2003 General Convention of the Episcopal Church (also known as one of the most tumultuous gatherings in the denomination’s history),

Excellent sermons frequently share one thing in common: a transparent structure, whether the preacher planned it or not. The really good ones do not seem to need to plan it; they think that way. My later experience with sermons by Bishop Curry suggests that the clear structure of this sermon was no accident, or more precisely, it was the accident of design.²⁵

²⁴ Biographical page of The Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, accessed January 20, 2015, http://day1.org/280-the_rt_rev_michael_curry.

²⁵ William Brosend, *The Preaching of Jesus: Gospel Proclamation Then and Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 95.

Curry's preaching style comes across as a work of art. It comes across almost like listening to one's favorite classical tune where a series of improvisational pitches and tempos all have a way of coming together in a coherent way. One cannot help but feel captivated by the energy and crescendo in his voice, movements, and contagious enthusiasm for the biblical message. To highlight Brosend's point, what one experiences in a variety of Bishop Curry's sermons is indeed, "the accident of design." Conceivably, this is why Curry's own understanding of sermon structure and preparation is so deeply incarnational; it is where structure, message, and reality come together. In his own words,

The Word comes to life in the world. When preparing a sermon, the preacher needs to study the word and hit the streets to see that Word lived out today... It's only out of the chemistry of bringing all that stuff together that something worth saying, that actually has the gravity of God's Word and that has the reality of life as it gets lived somehow brought together—that's incarnation... That's where preaching happens.²⁶

Contemporary preachers can certainly learn from Curry's structure in preparing and thinking about the special impact of the Word to be proclaimed. Those involved in the craft of preaching can all learn from his "accident of design" and never forget to "hit the streets" by connecting the biblical message with the realities at hand—or better yet—on people's minds. Curry reminds us that perhaps the one place Christianity is losing most of its relevance is precisely in the pulpit. When people come in and out of church each Sunday and do not experience a truly transformational message for their lives or have been only been fed a series of theological interpretations of the Scriptures, the Word has not really "hit the streets." Too often preaching comes across as an eloquently presented list of ideas that are often disconnected from each other, and thus, disconnected

²⁶ Michael Curry, "Preaching Moment 271: Michael Curry," accessed January 25, 2015, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2638>.

from the audience and their everyday realities. Curry's unique style teaches us that mainstream denominations can indeed preach eloquently organized sermons that bring together "all that stuff" (biblical exegesis, sound structure, provocative and relevant content, effective delivery, and other things) that is needed to proclaim God's Word effectively and in a way that transforms people's lives.

Chapter II

Special Considerations for Preaching in the 21st Century: Changes in the Listening Context and How Contemporary Society Experiences Church

“I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully.

Most people never listen.”

— Ernest Hemingway

Did you ever play a game called “pass the message” or “gossip”? This popular game, often used as an ice-breaker, has a very similar impact on people of all ages, languages, and genders. The point of the game and the way it actually works is that a message is secretly shared by the first person in the group to a second person who then passes it on to the next person and so on. Each person passes on the message secretly as he or she understands it. Depending on the size of the group, it can get very interesting. Often what the first person actually said suffers a significant amount of change or distortion which tends to make the first person—the originator or first to pass on the message—wonder what could have happened to what was originally said. The point is that it is often a real challenge to “pass on the message” as it was meant to be transmitted and received. In addition to that, we cannot ignore that it has often been the assumption of institutions of all kinds that people are actually listening and often take it for granted that listeners are comprehending the core of the message being presented, when in fact, history has proven over and over again that people mostly hear what they want to hear and understand what they choose to understand.

Preachers today, whether we want to face it or not, are challenged by a very strong kind of “pass the message” phenomenon. The fact is that the listeners in our audience are each perceiving a message that often speaks to them and is most certainly

received and/or distorted by their own prejudices, concepts, theology, and attitudes about life and faith. Beyond those regular filters, I believe the greatest challenges we face in our contemporary audiences are still not really known by us. There is simply not enough research to illustrate how the listening parts of our brains work in the 21st century, especially in a society where the norm is becoming multi-tasking and rapidly fading attention spans are just part of who we have become. To be focused on one thing, one message, one image, and/or one sound is no longer part of our reality.

The challenges surrounding listening and comprehension, while not limited to the areas of education and marketing, have been a challenge for a very long time. In the midst of my research on this subject, I was a bit surprised to find that the struggle to help others to truly listen has been on the minds of educators and communications experts long before this whole media explosion took place. One will find a variety of articles from educators and other experts from the 1940s and 1950s sounding a lot like their contemporaries who wonder if anyone is actually listening to lectures anymore. While our focus in this work is church and not the classroom, when it comes to the present listening context and 21st century challenges, there are some important things to be learned from those involved in education and seeking ways to measure how their students (the listening audience) are either truly listening and attentive to what is being presented or distracted by other stimuli, prompted by access to a variety of new media.

A study published in *Psychological Science* (Mueller and Oppenheimer)²⁷

²⁷ Pam A. Mueller (Princeton) and Daniel E. Oppenheimer (University of California, Los Angeles), “The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking”, *Psychological Science*, no. 25: 1159-1168, (Citation continued on next page)

by two university professors of psychology dove into a subject matter I would imagine was quite controversial among their students. They wanted to try to understand if note-taking the old fashioned way with a pen and paper was more effective for the learning process than the new and almost standard laptop or notebook computer approach. As it turns out, the students who used the “longhand” method did much better when it came to answering questions on tests and appeared to have reinforced understanding of the material.²⁸ Those who conducted the study were convinced their finding would be different. They had the impression that “heavy media multi-taskers” would have a special ability to memorize and would be able to be much choosier when it came to what they paid attention to and what they were able to put aside. Yet their findings found the exact opposite. I would imagine the students who were heavy “multi-taskers” were also under the impression that they had a greater ability to retain information and be attentive than their colleagues who used the more traditional “longhand” method. However, that is clearly not the case.

A somewhat similar study at the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT)²⁹ was aimed at helping students understand how bringing their computers to class could affect their attentiveness, engagement, and subsequent

(June 2014), accessed January 12, 2015,
<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/04/22/0956797614524581.full.pdf+html>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Erping Zhu, Matthew Kaplan, R. Charles Dershimer and Inger Bergom, “Use Of Laptops in the Classroom: Research and Best Practices,” *CRLT Occasional Papers* (University of Michigan, 2011) no. 30.

learning. One of the conclusions from this study appears to be more like a confession than an actual scientific conclusion. It turns out that 75% of the 595 students who participated in the study openly admitted that when they brought their laptops to the classroom, they used them for other things such as email and chatting with friends on social media, a discovery that we can all be sure was not a great surprise to their professors.

One could ask, but why would laptops in the classrooms and the use of other technology be in any way similar to the way people in the pews listen to and receive the message preached in sermons? Is not the context totally different? Are not those people in the pews much more disconnected from the “outside world” when they come to church than those students in their large university classrooms? After more than two decades as a preacher, my conclusion is that there is in fact a very similar scenario that takes place between people sitting in the pews facing mostly in the same direction and young people sitting in a class room, and this is especially so as our technology becomes more “mobile”; people are now interacting simply by tapping their finger on a tiny screen. In many ways, the laptop and other larger computers are no longer the most frequently used device and are quickly becoming the secondary devices for daily and instant communication.

Furthermore, when the focus of attention is “up there” in the pulpit or sanctuary, distance has a way of allowing people to make their attention available to other distractions. Perhaps, this is yet another good reason to move around closer to the people and come down from the traditional pulpit. In any case, we must all be aware of the fact that today there so many more reasons and opportunities to disconnect. For instance, one

thing I have heard some older people say for years is, “Father, when the sermon is no good, I just read the church bulletin.” And one can assume there was no influence of new media anywhere near these folks. So whether it is the laptop, the smart phone, the written page, or any other distraction, there is always a way to “disconnect,” and we should be aware that those ways will continue to keep multiplying.

For any communicator who considers what he or she needs to say and express to a listening audience is of any importance, some of the current research on listening, learning, and real comprehension that has been published in the last few years could prove to be a bit scary. The words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew as he explained to his disciples why he spoke in parables appear to come back to haunt us: “... they hear, but do not listen or understand.”³⁰ While the constant evolution of social and other new forms of media are impressive, the claim that we are somehow more “connected” than ever may be deceptive and far from the truth. In fact, one of the greatest challenges posed by new media is a false impression of connectedness when we are truly disconnected from those who may be standing right in front of us.

Today’s innumerable advances in science and technology allow neuroscientists and other experts to go as far as looking inside the human brain and literally seeing how it responds to a variety of stimuli, including the action of listening to the spoken word in a variety of contexts. This research is particularly invaluable to the church, because in spite of all the new media and resources that are beginning to spring up in many worship services of various denominations and traditions, most of us are still relying on the spoken word in a traditional format, which is often not aided by anything visual in the

³⁰ Matthew 13:13 (NIV)

way we transmit the message we teach and preach. Below is a visual graph of a patient with congenital blindness. This particular study measured the impact of a variety of sounds, including listening to speech, in someone with totally impaired vision.

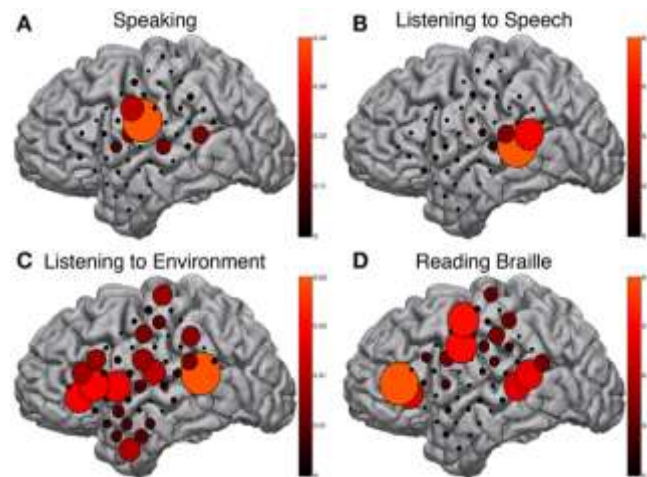


Figure 1: Changes that occur in the brain while speaking, listening to speech, listening to the environment, and when reading Braille.³¹

There is no doubt, and the most up-to-date research continually confirms it, that one thing which is invaluable for preachers to be aware of today is the listening context—the way we listen and receive information—stimulates totally different parts of our brains. Furthermore, the ways in which that spoken message is imparted has a lot more to do with how effectively that message reaches us. In the particular field of religion and spirituality, we often speak of “listening to the sermon,” yet we do not always make a distinction between actually perceiving and internalizing the spoken message. The

³¹ Jarod L. Roland, Carl D. Hacker, Jonathan D. Breshears, Charles M. Gaona, R. Edward Hogan, Harold Burton, Maurizio Corbetta and Eric C. Leuthardt, “Brain Mapping,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00431/full> 31 July 2013.

preached Word often calls for a response. But how is a response possible if the message has not been internalized or fully grasped? Diana Corley Schnapp has been a professor of communications for forty years, with an extensive background in religious studies. She writes,

A problem arises in writers' use of the word *listen* to mean *attention to and/or responding to* reading scripture or other religious writing in that if the written word is read, a different type of communication experience from listening occurs, and this calls for differing communication skills... Unless the scripture or religious experience is presented orally, is it accurate to say that the receiver "*listens to the Word?*"³²

Taking a closer look at some of the latest research regarding the explosion of the use of social media among children, youth, and adults of every age group, one can easily conclude why preachers must not just become aware of the growing impact of new forms of media on the craft of preaching, but do everything they can in becoming effective communicators to a radically new media culture. The present cultural context is made up of people who interact in a whole new way and at a faster speed, involving a whole new set of dynamics. This most definitely includes new ways in which our listeners use their brains. And if communications are indeed evolving so rapidly, we must be ready to recognize how the dynamics involved in listening and speaking must also evolve. Our brains and the way we receive and use information could indeed be changing, more than we can begin to imagine or comprehend.

The author Nicholas Carr has written extensively on the cultural and technological consequences of the internet and new forms of media. In his best-selling

³² Diana Corley Schnapp, "Listening in Spirituality and Religion," in *Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century* ed. Andrew D. Wolvin (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 246.

book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing To Our Brains*, Carr presents us with an enormous collection of studies and research conducted by a great assortment of experts and international researchers that sheds light on how new forms of media and our use of the Internet, in general, is indeed changing our way of reading, listening, comprehending, and retaining the information we receive. In his chapter entitled “The Juggler’s Brain”

Carr states

One thing is very clear: if, knowing what we know today about the brain’s plasticity, you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks and works a lot like the Internet. It’s not just that we tend to use the Net regularly, even obsessively. It’s that the Net delivers precisely the kind of sensory and cognitive stimuli – repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive – that have been shown to result in strong and rapid alterations in brain circuits and functions...the Net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use.³³

It is clearly evident that the use of Internet and new media indeed alters our brains and must, consequently, have some impact on the way we listen to sermons and any other form of the spoken word.

If we take a look at the total world population, the latest investigations indicate that one in four persons living on the planet are now actively and regularly using social media. That is almost two billion people in the year 2015.³⁴ And there is little doubt that social media and other new forms of interactive media are changing the way we obtain and share information about almost every aspect of our lives, from looking for the right restaurant to choosing a house of worship to visit next weekend. Therefore, in order to

³³ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What The Internet is Doing To Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011), 116.

³⁴ Social Networking Fact Sheet, accessed November 20, 2014, <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>.

get a broader sense of what other preachers and listeners of sermons were thinking and feeling about this issue, as part of my research process for this work, I decided to engage as many as 100 preachers and 100 listeners of sermons to give me their impressions on what they thought about the present listening context and how they perceive this explosion of new media to be impacting them. I understood that all 200 subjects would not return their surveys, but if I got more than half of them to respond, I could get a pretty good idea of what preachers and listeners of sermons were thinking. The preachers came from various religious traditions, including two rabbis and a host of pastors and other clergy from various Christian denominations. A significant number of Anglican/Episcopal clergy who are my colleagues both at the University of the South (Sewanee) and others who serve in a variety of contexts throughout the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, and Latin America also took interest in the questions involved and in the scope of the project. Section “A” was for preachers and section “B” was for listeners of sermons. The survey was received with such enthusiasm from both clergy and laity that several people asked me to include others for whom the survey was not originally sent but who wanted to participate too.

I honestly expected some hesitation in getting the surveys back or inquiries from those who received it regarding the questions being asked. Yet that was not the case. It appears the survey was clear to most people and some even sent theirs back with written feedback and very thoughtful comments on how they feel new forms of media are impacting the sermons they give or hear. I also gave everyone who received the survey 10 days to respond, and I received a significant number of them back within 48 to hours. That was yet another very pleasant surprise.

The survey was intended to target a varied audience, including a diversity of faith traditions, age groups, and cultures. It was sent out via e-mail, and a significant number of clergy and listeners of sermons did prefer to fill out a hard copy. The three questions in each category, while not identical, were made as similar as possible in order to maintain a sense of uniformity. Respondents were asked to rate their answer to each question on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = no impact and 10 = significant impact. The participants in the survey are leaders and clergy from my local churches and synagogues. I also incorporated church leaders from beyond my diocese at the national and international level who expressed an interest in participating. The survey includes the responses of 77 clergy persons and 95 lay persons. Table 1 presents the results of the survey.

Table 1: Survey Results

Questions	Some or no impact (1-5)	Significant impact (6-10)
PREACHERS (n=77)		
In your perception as a preacher, how do new forms of media (i.e. Internet, social media, mobile phones, tablets, etc.) impact your listeners and the listening context?	65 (84.42%)	12 (15.58%)
In your delivery and preparation as a preacher, what impact do these new forms of media have on your content and approach to preaching?	73 (94.81%)	4 (5.19%)
In my personal experience as a preacher, I would say the overall impact new forms of media have on my preaching experience is?	68 (88.31%)	9 (11.69 %)
CONGREGANTS (n=95)		
As a congregant and listener of sermons, how and to what extent do new forms of media (i.e. Internet, social media, mobile phones, tablets, etc.) impact the way you listen to a sermon?	70 (73.68%)	25 (26.32%)
As an active listener of sermons, what impact do you perceive these new forms of media have on your preacher's approach to the craft of preaching?	90 (94.74%)	5 (5.26%)
In my personal experience, as a regular listener of sermons, I would say the overall impact new forms of media have on the way I listen to and receive sermons	80 (84.21%)	15 (15.79%)

While I realize that this is far from a scientific study and it was only meant to be a very general sampling of the influence of new forms of media among preachers and listeners, it is very telling. The results truly astonished me and were far from the kinds of responses I expected to receive. I sincerely thought both groups surveyed would be forced to have to recognize and more readily admit that they are indeed impacted by technology and media. What initially surprised me was the lack of significant disparity in most of the responses from both the preachers and from those who regularly listen to sermons. In both instances, almost 75% of those who participated in the survey claimed new media has “some impact” to almost “no impact” in the way they preach or receive the message of sermons. As you can see above, the responses to the survey were overwhelmingly the same for both groups, regardless of whether the emphasis was on speaking or listening. The only real discernible disparity which can be perceived among lay people and clergy, is that almost 11% more of the laity admitted to being influenced and/or impacted by new media in the way they listen, in comparison to the response and perception when those who preach to them dealt with a similar question. Yet, the differences were not nearly as significant as I suspected they would be.

I had only two mega-church pastors and one Anglican priest who work with a younger demographic rate the impact at “10”; in other words they felt that new forms of media have a huge or a very significant impact on them in their task as preachers. It is no surprise that these three preachers are also probably the only ones who participated in my survey who have consistently experienced significant growth in their congregations and are attracting young people in great numbers. The great majority of those who responded

to the survey are in mainstream older congregations and spending a lot of time on wondering what the future will look like for their churches.

We are now obliged to take another twist, which I believe to be inspired and directly provoked by the evolution of new media and continued changes in the listening context itself. It has to do with a radical departure from how we traditionally understand the entire concept of “church” itself, with preaching and traditional liturgy being at the very core of that understanding. I am referring to the influence of a younger generation of Christians today—within and even outside the Emerging Church movements—and how they perceive the effectiveness of traditional preaching and worship in general. Their claims are real and based on the fact that we have a growing population of those who will not even step in the door to worship or hear a sermon. While most professional church people do not appear to be overly interested in their claims or approach, their message does clearly address the issue of “connecting people” with the message of the Gospel, a task at the very core of the mission entrusted to us by Jesus himself to “go out” and spread good news.

While this movement has many names and faces and is very vast in its focus and theology, there is a young couple from Perth, Western Australia, who are perhaps among those who best illustrate the power and motivation of this ecclesiological phenomenon to move away from the traditional format of church into a 21st century model of effective communication, resulting in a truly interactive church. Pastor Kevin-Neil Ward left his traditional church job as a successful pastor and church planter to join his wife Kathleen in trying to model what they understand to be closer to the early church and the experience of worship and faith lived out by the early Christian communities. They write,

This century, the world around us is changing. The internet is the first ever truly two-way media. Instead of sitting back and being broadcasted at, we are now active participants and contributors. We now place a priority on connection, on being part of the conversation, on participation. People have 24/7 access to high-quality information and inspiration, so they no longer need to go to church for those things. Slowly but surely, these global, societal shifts are changing the way we do church... More and more people in churches are tired of sitting silently, staring at the backs of each other's heads—they want to connect with one another, to love and support and encourage and build one another up, like the Bible tells us to. People are tired of meeting in special buildings and hiding away from the world around them—they want to transform their neighborhoods and communities. God's people are tired of being passive consumers, sitting back in the pews and quietly listening—they want to be active participants, empowered to have a voice and make a difference.³⁵

If we take a good look at this claim, presented by two young ministers of our times, there is much that is being said about a new way of listening and a new way of actually preaching and receiving the message. As we will observe in our next chapter, this is perhaps the biggest challenge facing traditional churches and preachers in the 21st century. While we cannot deny that our ways of interacting as human beings have dramatically changed and will probably continue to change as technology becomes more and more a part of our lives, how is today's church responding to this huge paradigm shift occurring around us? This change cannot be limited to spoken language and the listening context, but as it pertains specifically to the preaching most people hear and experience in thousands of houses of worship each weekend.

Furthermore, social media and the Internet are also shaping the image and projection of our churches even before people walk into them. For example, if you are looking for a place to worship or a preacher to hear, you may visit that website before

³⁵ Kathleen and Kevin-Neil Ward, "How the Pulpit is Changing in the 21st Century and Why it is a Good Thing," accessed December 1, 2014, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/pastors-preaching-articles/kathleen-and-kevin-neil-ward-how-the-pulpit-is-changing-in-the-21st-century-and-why-its-a-good-thing-2033.asp>.

you attend in order to know what you are getting yourself into. That was unheard of in the past, but that is how people function today in relationship to their church. Most churches today are becoming more like restaurants: people want to know what is being served there and what reviews they are getting from those who have been there before they will even consider visiting. The menu and offerings are carefully analyzed even before people walk in the door, and that “menu” is primarily analyzed by the type of sermon, music, and overall worship service we are attempting to lure people into attending. If they like the experience, it will be rated favorably, but if your sermon is boring, the incense is overwhelming, or your ushers are rude, you could get blacklisted in the world of social media.

One other very real challenge is that today’s preachers must pay special attention to the fact that we are no longer preaching in a traditional Judeo-Christian society. Call it post-modern, neo-pagan, pluralistic, secular, or whatever you choose to call it, it is becoming increasingly clear that we are no longer speaking to the audience that once possessed a basic understanding of religious content or even the most basic elements of a religious culture. Those “Happy Days” are gone. Professor Stephen Prothero from the University of Boston has written several best-selling books on the matter.³⁶ In a recent presentation to journalists sponsored by the Pew Forum Religion and Public Life Project, Prothero spoke in his familiar humorous style and said,

...most Americans cannot name any of the Gospels. It’s about 50 percent, a little below, when you ask them to name a Gospel. Most don’t know that Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Bible. Ten percent think that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. A sizeable minority think that Sodom and Gomorrah were a happily married

³⁶ *Religious Literacy, God is Not One, American Jesus* and others.

biblical couple. This is the kind of stuff you get when you ask about the Bible, you ask about Judaism and Christianity.³⁷

The American Bible Society, one of American's oldest institutions whose mission is to make the Bible available to everyone and to engage people with the message of Sacred Scripture, has commissioned surveys in the past to measure the impact that the Bible has actually had in the life of people in the United States and throughout the world. One of their most recent surveys revealed that while many people own Bibles and seem to think they know a lot about the biblical message, there is actually a huge disparity between owning a Bible and actually reading it or learning from it regularly. As many as 43% were not even able to name the first five books of the Bible.³⁸ Studies with results like these are becoming more and more common. The fact is that we cannot assume that the people we are preaching to or trying to engage in our churches have even the most basic biblical knowledge.

When today's preachers are eloquently speaking with the hope of connecting and being understood, it is important to be aware that this multi-tasking, technologically sophisticated audience may very well be in the dark ages when it comes to basic religious/theological concepts. In this sense, one could easily conclude that the present listening context is not just impaired by outside stimuli and distractions, but by the very

³⁷ Stephen Prothero, "Religious Literacy: What Every American Should Know" (Pew Forum Faith Angle Conference), accessed November 27, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2007/12/03/religious-literacy-what-every-american-should-know/>.

³⁸ Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Bible Survey: Many Americans scramble their Scripture," accessed November 28, 2014, <http://www.religionnews.com/2014/04/24/bible-women-war-american-bible-society-pew/>.

fact that there is very little interest in knowing even the most basic biblical or religious data. This poses yet another challenge which preachers cannot ignore. In some ways, this sociological reality of the growing number of folks uninterested in religious and biblical matter is reminiscent of a humorous self-help relationship book written in 2009 entitled, “He’s Just Not That Into You,” which was supposed to offer single women great advice on how to deal with issues in their sentimental relationships. Perhaps it is time for us to have a version of this book for preachers, which could be entitled, “They’re Just Not That Into You,” referring to a congregation sitting in front of us each Sunday that may be connected to countless other things, but mostly not so interested in what we have to say. At least that is what more and more growing evidence is pointing to. The challenges for today’s preachers to make the biblical message relevant and applicable and to get the Gospel across effectively are indeed great!

Chapter III

How Approach, Style and Delivery Impact the Reception of the Message

“There are no uninteresting things, only uninterested people.”

— *G.K. Chesterton*

Real estate experts will often use the now well-known mantra: “Location, location, location!” As a matter of fact, if we look around, almost every profession, sport, or any other array of human activities will often refer to a similar one-word mantra or coined term to describe the nature of that activity, something strongly associated with it, or what ultimately makes it effective. I wonder what preachers, liturgists, and theologians would use as a mantra in our times if they had to describe what they look for in a good sermon with one word. Would it be “content,” “delivery,” or “approach?” For others, could it be “exegesis,” “theology,” or “cohesion?” Is there one word that could be turned into the essential preaching mantra? I wonder.

After looking at some aspects of the historical evolution of sermons and the research surrounding particular challenges presented by the 21st century culture, I would like to suggest that with the constant evolution of new forms of media, a sermon has necessarily become a kind of “juggling act” with a variety of important elements and requirements and demanding so much more from the preacher than was the case in ages past. It would also be fair to say that perhaps we will never really be able to use one word that can truly summarize what defines good preaching or makes it truly effective to listeners today. This is perhaps one of our greatest challenges as communicators of the Gospel. Are we able to put our finger on what it is that we need to be doing in order to effectively communicate what God wants our congregants in the pews to get from the

Word proclaimed, given the countless challenges presented by today's particular listening context? And beyond putting a finger on it, will we be able to form new preachers of the Gospel that will be able to integrate sound theological principles with the tools of communication necessary to speak effectively today?

The research is clear that there is a growing number of young Americans who are totally indifferent toward the practice of traditional faith or any kind of church affiliation. It is funny that when some very religious individuals heard about the growth in the number of "nones,"³⁹ a group of them got really excited thinking there were a bunch of young women joining convents to become nuns. But the fact is that it is not only spelled and pronounced a bit differently, but it has to do with a worrisome and growing negative trend that points to a lack of church attendance and an overall lack of interest in religious faith. This is just one indicator that to a great number of young people in our society, the church has become boring, distant, or uninteresting. As a matter of fact, I would think we could go further and say that they perceive that most of us church professionals and religiously affiliated adults are totally uninterested in them and in their issues. And in some cases, we have demonstrated just that, by putting ourselves an arm's distance away from our youth with an attitude that is often judgmental and not very welcoming, especially when they are going through those periods of radical transitions as adolescents and young adults.

It is not just young people who are feeling uninterested. It is no secret that most mainstream churches continue to report steady declines in membership, and aging

³⁹ Pew Research Religion and Public Life: "Nones on the Rise," accessed December 5, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/#growth>.

congregations are not replacing themselves once they are called home to God. It is a scary reality for many faithful believers, but fear will not resolve the issue. The fact is that preaching is at the very heart of the church's life and worship. If the Sunday message is not delivered in a way that is appealing, impacting, and captivating, chances are a significant number of your flock will go church-hopping until they find a place to finally land. I believe the trends we see with young people are a reflection of what has been going on spiritually and religiously with their own parents and in their home lives. This disconnect does not occur in a vacuum; it is the result of years and years of inconsistent church affiliation and probably an inherited sense that the church is just "not that important" anymore. I believe it became unimportant when it became "uninteresting." In other words, maybe the new question, as with so many other areas of contemporary society is, "What is in it for me?" The quality and style of the sermon is certainly at the core of what could be the answer.

The Barna Group does extensive research in the area of religious trends in the United States. They have studied the issue of why Christians become "dropouts," "underchurched," "dechurched," or "unchurched," and while some of this terminology may seem as new to most of us when we first hear these expressions, it certainly very clearly describes a growing phenomenon taking place around us. In one of their most recent studies on church attendance, we find truly astonishing and challenging figures:

As of 2014, the estimated number of people in the U.S. who Barna Group would define as "churchless"—meaning they have not attended a Christian church service, other than a special event such as a wedding or a funeral, at any time during the past six months—stands at 114 million. Add to that the roughly 42 million children and teenagers who are unchurched and you have 156 million U.S. residents who are not engaged with a Christian church. To put that in context, if all those unchurched people were a separate nation, it would be the eighth most populous country in the world, trailing only China, India, Indonesia, Brazil,

Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the remaining churched public of the United States (159 million). In the past decade...the number of adults who are unchurched has increased by more than 30%. This is an increase of 38 million individuals—that’s more people than live in Canada or Australia. The vast majority of America’s churchless have attended a church. Very few of America’s unchurched adults are purely unchurched—most of them, rather, are de-churched. Only about one-quarter of unchurched adults (23%) has never attended a Christian church at any time in his or her life, other than for a special service such as a wedding or funeral ceremony (though this number is on the rise; in 1993, only 15% of unchurched adults had never been connected to a church). The majority of unchurched individuals (76%) have firsthand experience with one or more Christian churches and, based on that sampling, have decided they can better use their time in other ways.⁴⁰

Some may argue that these “dropouts” or “de-churched” folks are not precisely the ones we are preaching to, but I would venture to say that this could be a very mistaken assumption on our part. Most of our smaller congregations will get a handful of those folks who at some point got tired or became uninterested in church, but still come by casually and often drop in just to give it another try. Frequently they will come with mom or grandma, especially when they are visiting from out of town, and what we do at this crucial moment or how welcome they are made to feel may be just the thing that will bring them back. Yet, I must emphasize that I am sure nothing will make people want to come back to church as much as a well-prepared and well-executed sermon.

In my own diaconal and priestly ministry, probably as a result of my work in Spanish-language media as the host of a variety of radio and television programs, I have often encountered those who felt the church had nothing or little to say to them. They will often say, “Father, I stopped going because I didn’t feel it did anything for me.” When they build up the nerve to give the church another try, it is usually due to a personal

⁴⁰ Barna Group, “10 Facts About America’s Churchless,” accessed December 10, 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/698-10-facts-about-america-s-churchless#.VLWGxrA3McA>.

connection with a member of the congregation who invites them to “hear my pastor,” or they may just come “to get a book signed.” What I have discovered ultimately brings them back with the desire to want to continue coming is primarily a direct result from a positive experience with the sermon; rarely do I hear much about how the liturgy or the sound of the organ attracts them. They are there for a message that will help them get through the week with an uplifting, biblical, and practical message. I find that this is more and more what is attracting people to look for a church: someone and something that speaks to them and motivates them to continue to live the Christian life. It is important to note that the quality of the music and the particular worship style usually come in second and third after preaching.

In 2001, when I began to write my syndicated newspaper columns, *El Nuevo Herald* in Miami (The Miami Herald’s Spanish-language paper), the newspaper had a fine Editor-in-Chief who had been a newspaper man most of his life. Mr. Carlos Castañeda’s greatest concern each and every day—and could be the single greatest reason why he was such a successful newspaper editor for so many years—was the contents and style of the layout of the front cover of the next day’s paper. He always said that what went on the front cover of the newspaper was like “dressing up the monkey” and what attracted people to pick it up, buy it, and read it. Likewise, there are four aspects of preaching that I would like to expound on which have nothing to do with theological aptitude, hermeneutics, biblical knowledge, or the more academic aspects of an effective sermon, which while totally necessary, are not what will attract most people to the content message being delivered. Let us focus on these four things that will help us to “dress the monkey” in order to attract listeners to this very important message: *know the*

audience, use humor and anecdotes, know where to stand, and avoid reading from a written text.

Know the Audience

As early as the sixth century, Gregory the Great, shortly after his election as Bishop of Rome, wrote *The Book of Pastoral Rule* in which he emphasized the preacher's role in getting to know the audience and adapting the sermon to the particular needs of the listeners. He often referred to homiletics as "the art of preaching" and was known to be an extremely eloquent preacher himself. When speaking on the importance of this connection with the congregation, Gregory said,

For the things that profit some often hurt others; seeing that also for the most part herbs which nourish some animals are fatal to others; and the gentle hissing that quiets horses incites whelps; and the medicine which abates one disease aggravates another; and the bread which invigorates the life of the strong kills little children. Therefore according to the quality of the hearers ought the discourse of teachers to be fashioned, so as to suit all and each for their several needs, and yet never deviate from the art of common edification. For what are the intent minds of hearers but, so to speak, a kind of tight tensions of strings in a harp, which the skillful player, that he may produce a tune not at variance with itself, strikes variously?⁴¹

If anyone ever tells you that preaching the Gospel is exactly the same in every context and congregation, I can assure you that person is seriously lacking pastoral experience. Even in the same church, a good number of larger churches will usually need to offer a variety of services at different times, provide different lengths of the service, and cater to diverse populations. In each situation, the message must be addressed to the particular crowd and must address the needs of those present. It is not the same to preach

⁴¹ Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, Part III, 1-3, translated by James Barmby, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. XII (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1894), 25.

to a group of senior citizens as it is to a church full of children, youth, and families. Likewise, sometimes churches have people of a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, which could require special care. I have served blue-collar communities and much more affluent ones and there is certainly a difference in the way the message is received, and many times it also requires an adjustment in the way it is presented. Knowing the audience is a significant part of effective communication and effective preaching.

It is also important to recognize the faith traditions, customs, and practices of your particular congregation. In Anglicanism, for instance, where there are a variety of liturgical and theological inclinations (i.e., Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical, Low Church, Broad Church, etc.) the preacher should be aware and sensitive to local customs and culturally sensitive as well. The pulpit is not a place for the imposition of ideas or a place to air out one's political or social agenda. It is a sacred space for proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and not your own personal soap box. Whenever a clergy person turns the pulpit into their own platform, they are forgetting the fact that those precious moments belong to the Lord and his people; it is a time for their own edification and renewal. The sermon is never the right time or place for personal agendas to be aired out or for theological discourses which only an elite group of people (mostly clergy) are even remotely interested in. Hence, when we know our audience and truly care for their needs –and not our own- we get out of the way and the Word is proclaimed.

Use Humor and Anecdotes

The use of humor in sermons usually varies from very good to very bad, with only a few landing in between. It is true that not everyone feels they know how to tell a joke. Yet preachers should not give up just because it did not go so well one time or another.

We have all experienced things that worked and things that just did not. Humor in a sermon is more than joke-telling, and a preacher must be very aware that appropriate humor or any other instrument we use to connect with the audience must not be confused for a gimmick or something superficial. Experience has taught me that humor connects like very few other things can. The effective preacher must first seek to become an effective communicator, storyteller, and master at proclamation of the Word. The preacher is a presenter of images that come alive and are integrated into the message to make it come alive for the listeners. To tell a joke in a totally disconnected way and then start a sermon is mostly a useless exercise and will not help you or your listeners in any way. But if you integrate your humor or anecdote or inspirational story as part of your message, then you are enhancing what you are saying and creating the types of “connectors” and “images” in people’s minds that will help them take the message with them and continue to digest it throughout the week. If it is done well, it can be like the gravy on your turkey dinner—it just makes an already good thing better. Good images, stories, and humor are all at the service of making the power of God’s message in the sermon more digestible and easier to comprehend and to grasp.

Joseph Webb is a Professor of Homiletics and author of several books on preaching and communications. In his work, *Comedy and Preaching*, he makes an argument against those who would dismiss the use of comedy and anecdotes in preaching as something that devaluates preaching or takes away from its integrity. He emphasizes the very point which is being made in this chapter:

In a recent meeting of the Academy of Homiletics, the annual gathering of men and women who teach preaching in seminaries, no less a homiletician than Henry Mitchell, the great African American scholar, presented a paper in which he discussed what he believes preaching is going to have to be to survive in the third

millennium. He said that is it necessary to clarify the meaning of a couple of terms, one of which was entertainment. ‘We say that we don’t believe in religion as entertainment,’ Mitchell said. ‘We believe in preaching educational sermons, not entertaining ones. Well, the opposite of entertaining is boring, not educational. And unless we engage an audience, we need not try to teach them anything at all. Our problem is simply how to entertain with integrity, how to engage an audience compellingly, with the gospel, and for high purposes [his emphases].’ What Mitchell expressed is that it is time to quit putting down sermons that entertain, as though they are somehow not theological or even spiritual. It is time, instead, to embrace the idea that the pulpit is a place where something called entertainment not only can but *should* go on. Boredom fostered by the pulpit not only is not being tolerated by contemporary people, many of whom are now former churchgoers, but it will not be tolerated as a preaching paradigm of the future.⁴²

I could not agree more with Webb; boring and uninteresting is simply not going to make it in the preaching of the 21st century. It was never so great before, but today’s audiences are more demanding, have a lot more access to media, and are going to need the message presented in a much more appealing and compelling way than it was in generations past. Communications have changed and evolved. It is also time for preaching ride the wave of change, if it is to truly be a relevant force in the present culture and listening context. While resistance to this need for more relevant preaching is certainly in full force among faith leaders of every tradition and most especially among those starting out in ministry who are still on a “theological high” from their seminary studies, Henry Mitchell’s challenge is consistent with the endless flow of data we are receiving on new trends in church attendance, or lack thereof. It is not a matter of confusing good and effective preaching with light theology and/or watering down the Gospel, but it is important to make every effort to deliver sermons that are understandable and accessible to contemporary people accustomed to a new form of communication in almost every other

⁴² Joseph M. Webb, *Comedy and Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 38.

aspect of their lives. Why should a seminar at work feel appealing and inspiring, but a sermon at our church on any given Sunday feel like a chore to bear?

There is also an added element of *humanity* in using anecdotes, and especially humor. The listener tends to feel much more connected to a preacher who can laugh and who can readily demonstrate that he or she can feel and express emotions as part of his or her daily experience. Perhaps we no longer live in a time when we question the humanity of our clergy, but not too long ago, in many of our traditions, we looked at “men of the cloth” as somewhat different from the rest of humanity and gave them attributes applicable only to God and the angels. Today’s preachers must not limit themselves to preach the incarnational Gospel of the Word made flesh, but they must also appear to be human and touchable themselves—real people with real feelings. Too many of our intellectual preachers today boast of an “incarnational theology” but their preaching style does not in any way make it “flesh that dwells among us.” It does not serve the church or anyone when clergy appear to be cold and distant, even if it is only applicable to their speaking or preaching style. The more natural we are in our preaching voice and style, the greater our impact will be on our listeners. This is simply true of all communicators today, not just clergy.

Avoid the Reading of a Written Text

There is a funny story often told by the great Fulton J. Sheen of an old Irish lady who was hearing a bishop read a lengthy sermon, and in a moment of desperation, she said out loud: “Glory be to God, if he can’t remember what he’s saying, how does he expect us to?” If we understand how the pulpit can create a physical barrier, reading a sermon from a printed text has a similar effect, in that the reader is constantly looking

down in order to read and flip pages while constantly losing eye contact with his listeners for the sake of finding what he or she is going to read next. I realize that many people have grown accustomed to listening to sermons that are being read and some preachers can only preach with a text, but it is a bad, outdated communications habit that today's church needs to move away from. Our rapidly changing media culture demands that we look at ways of capturing the imaginations and the attention of our 21st century listeners, and in no other aspect of contemporary society does someone stand in front of you and read a text for 10 to 15 minutes; it is simply not good communication anymore, and it maybe never ever was. I can't imagine our Lord, in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount saying to Peter and Andrew, "Can you guys please fetch my text; I forgot what comes next."

Preachers need to move away from the rehearsed, written text and the almost cloned tonality that so often accompanies it, and teach themselves to speak from an organized outline that will immediately lend itself to greater spontaneity and a much more effective and natural delivery. Even if we were to look at the origins of the "written and read" sermon, they are not so clear. Yet, David Larsen, in his book, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying The Issues in Preaching Today*, says it started under Henry VIII in England, and he certainly has a few strong and well-defined opinions on the issue. He writes:

The reading of the sermon manuscript actually originated during the reign of King Henry VIII of England. This is the most difficult and the least acceptable of the methods used in our day. The great problem with it is that it sounds written and read. The visual society in which we live has plunged us into a new communications ball game. The world of print must yield to the speech event... long before television it was realized that reading the sermon creates distance... Paper is not a good conductor of heat... Every break in eye contact is

risky, especially when that break comes toward the end of the sentence and is often accompanied by a voice drop.⁴³

Perhaps we grew up in a parish that had great preachers who were accustomed to using a written manuscript, and reading the sermon worked for them. Maybe we are attached to the cerebral and more academic sermon that often requires us to write each word and deliver it like a university or formal lecture. Whatever the case may be, preachers who are committed to excellence must not forget that the art of good communication also evolves, and in order for it to take place more effectively in our present context, it will require that we too evolve. There is little room for the preacher's own preferences, fears, and attachments to habits formed in the past. On the contrary, the preacher today must be willing to accept the challenge of speaking and connecting with a radically new type of audience that will require a new methodology and approach—part of a listening context that is rapidly changing, as we observed in Chapter II.

Michael J. Quicke, author of *360 Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking, and Living the Word*, puts it in context for us:

Preaching in the twenty-first century means preaching in the midst of change. Lyle Schaller describes three basic options when facing change: to sit back, to plunge in blindly, or to learn from experience so that an anticipatory style of leadership is developed. Some preachers in well-established congregations that are biblically literate and expect traditional preaching can sit back and claim that the effects of culture shift are overstated and that the old ways are the best. Other preachers seem to plunge too quickly into novelty. Instead, preachers need to develop an anticipatory style of leadership in which they learn, listen, and date to preach afresh. One aspect of such leadership is a preacher's self-awareness of where he or she is in the range of preaching opportunities in the twenty-first century.⁴⁴

⁴³ David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying The Issues In Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 187-188.

So for those who have a hard time with change and the change they experience within their congregations and in the society that surrounds them, I only have bad news: There is more of it on the way. On the other hand, for those looking for a challenge I say “hang on for the ride of your life because we never know exactly where the communications boom will take us next, but it is big enough and dynamic enough to take us in a variety of new and exciting directions.” And if it is happening in every other aspect of life and the society we live in, why would it not happen in church? I am convinced that some of the new forms of media and the interactive opportunities they create are already very actively helping the church in its sacred mission to “preach the gospel to every creature.”⁴⁵ The contemporary preacher of the good news must see, even in the midst of the constant changes in the listening context and the challenges those changes bring, an opportunity to build bridges where there may be huge gaps and to reach today’s faithful in a language they can comprehend and that will lead to the type of transformation which only the message of Jesus can offer.

⁴⁴ Michael J. Quicke, *360 Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking and Living the Word* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 110.

⁴⁵ Mark 16:15 (NIV)

Chapter IV

How traditional/liturgical churches can preach effective contemporary sermons

*“Don't say infinitely when you mean very; otherwise you'll have no word left
when you want to talk about something really infinite.”*

— C.S. Lewis

It is Sunday morning and the people are coming in from the parking lot after getting out of their cars. When a particular family's car stopped, each family member took a glance at their phone to see a post on Facebook or Instagram, read a tweet on Twitter, or send a last minute text message or email. You can hear the mother instructing them all, including her husband, “Silence your phones, it's time for church.” As they make their way into the beautiful 19th century gothic structure which is their parish church, the youngest members of the family, firmly clenching their mobile devices on one hand, realize they are now being greeted at the door by an older person who hands them a foldable piece of paper or bulletin and maybe even a big heavy book or hymnal to sing and pray along. They have not seen a book in a long time, because their school is digital now and they use iPads and desktop computers for all their assignments in and out of the classroom. So, on one hand, they are carrying their 21st century devices, while on the other hand, they are being given instruments of communication from the last few centuries.

I bring these realities of our present context to our attention, not because I think every church needs to have touch screens in the narthex or big screens instead of hymnals, even though I realize a number of us do. I think we must all be convinced that even the most traditional, liturgical, and ceremonial churches have the opportunity to preach imaginative, creative, and very effective contemporary sermons that will build up

the faith of people in every age group and demographic. And it is precisely in the “homiletical moment” and in those precious minutes we call the sermon that people will probably be most engaged with what is happening and least interested in reaching for that device in their pocket, even if it is just to check the time, date, or weather.

Preachers today must admit to themselves the very humbling reality that they are often not the most interesting thing in the room. As we have observed previously, the stimuli experienced by our people are many. Even well beyond the typical distractions that surely have always existed, we must come to the realization that our humanity is now wired differently when it comes to listening and to receiving information; this even applies to church. The sooner the church gets comfortable with the communications bandwagon we are all riding on, the better it will be for the gospel and the more effective we will become as communicators of the saving message of Christ.

Communications Theory Meets Homiletics

There is tendency to think that if we preach creatively using great stories and jokes and inserting lots of images, we cannot get into biblical exegesis or have time for an in-depth reflection on the biblical message. This is simply not true. What I am convinced is going to contribute a great deal to save our traditional churches and make them truly unique and sought out within the diverse “church-hopping buffet” that our contemporary society has become is precisely our ability to preach sermons that bring together all these elements, both the grabbers and the good theology, and do it well.

William Brosend, in *The Preaching of Jesus: Gospel Proclamation Then and Now* points out you can do both and still be interesting and avoid being boring:

Is it possible that the reason people are not very interested in our sermons is that our sermons are often not very interesting? I know that it is not feasible to be

good every week, and I often point out that if we batted one for three every game, we would make the Hall of Fame. But is that an excuse to plan to be boring? Yet we are, week in and week out. We plan on being boring, sometimes because the way we structure our sermons, beginning with our conclusion and hoping folks will hang on to the end anyway. More likely, we plan to be boring because we have planned our sermon preparation time to focus almost exclusively on exegesis, theological analysis, reflection, and shaping and developing our thoughts. We leave almost no time to shape and develop our words in order to bring our thoughts to life...it is more important to have something to say than to say it well; but *good* preaching is both.⁴⁶

Our traditional/liturgical churches can preach good contemporary sermons if we stay away from the boring and offer our people what we already possess—a balance or bridge between the new and the old. Rather than trying to fit it all in on Sunday, we may want to leave some of the exegetical and heavier teaching work for Bible study in the middle of the week and use more of our sermon time in order to answer the “fundamental homiletical question,” which according to Brosend is: “What does the Holy Spirit want the People of God to hear from these texts on this occasion?”⁴⁷ If preachers take the time to truly answer that question at the start of their sermon preparation, it is almost impossible that the outcome is a boring sermon, because we are counting on God speaking to his people through the craft of preaching. I often say to the folks at the parishes that I have been honored to serve that I am just “an accident of the Holy Spirit.” At first, I see the expression of hesitation on the faces of some of our people who are simply not ready to admit that their clergy person is some sort of “accident.” But when I explain to them that we are truly just like a musical instrument, capable of producing sounds, but that God is the actual musician and the music, then they get it; only then is it

⁴⁶ William Brosend, *The Preaching of Jesus: Gospel Proclamation Then and Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 134.

⁴⁷ Brosend, *Ibid.*, 48.

okay for their priest to identify himself as “an accident.” Hence, it is part of keeping in mind that we preachers are at the service of God’s message and not our own. This is all the more reason why traditional/liturgical churches must develop better and more effective communicators of the Gospel.

Much has been written on communication theory, theology of communication, and a host of other important areas that would truly serve the contemporary preacher’s ongoing professional formation, especially in the important task of becoming a more effective communicator. Yet very few works are written with the attractive style and appeal we find in Charles H. Kraft, a noted pastor and long-time professor of anthropology and communications. Among his dozens of published works, there is one I would consider to be a little “jewel” that should be mandatory reading for every seminarian and preacher of the Gospel in our times: *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*. While the latest revised edition was published in 1991 (eight printing), this work is perhaps one of the most complete Christian texts in the area of effective communication and offers a complete understanding of the art of communication as it relates to preaching and the church’s mission in our world. Kraft breaks down some of the myths of communication and uses the Lord Jesus as a point of reference and example of good and effective communication. Kraft says,

God’s way is to use ordinary, highly communicative language to convey spiritual truth... Truly effective communicators are more concerned with ‘preciseness’ in the way people respond to their messages than with the preciseness of their vocabulary. They, therefore, prepare carefully but with a very different emphasis than those who aim at technical preciseness. *They concern themselves with personal factors more than with the impersonal, structural, and linguistic factors*

in message construction. They are constantly conscious of and oriented toward the impression their messages make on their receptors.⁴⁸

Kraft's challenge to preachers today is to be much more intentional about the message and less concerned with what we think people need to hear. In other words, the sermon is not the time to give an exposition of how much you learned or how well you did in New Testament Studies while in seminary, but a real opportunity for transformation in the lives of God's people through the preaching of God's Word. More emphasis is needed on the "receptors" or listeners and less concern with the technicality of what the preacher may feel is of utmost importance.

My point is that communications theory and homiletics *should* meet, and they should meet often. Ultimately, one of our biggest problems comes down to this: Many preachers are in a business they simply do not know well or have not truly been professionally prepared for. In most cases, we train seminarians to know a lot of theology and we fill their minds with great new philosophical concepts and theological theories, yet they will be expected to stand up each Sunday and be professional orators; public speakers who can captivate and communicate a message we consider the most important message for all to hear. Yet, we spend little, if any, time helping future clergy to be excellent public speakers. They take two or three preaching classes and preach a few times in class and at a local congregation, and before you know it "voila"; they are ordained to preach the Good News to the world. To form effective communicators, we must do much more to teach even basic communication skills to those we are expecting to speak professionally—and probably for the rest of their lives.

⁴⁸ Charles H. Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 33.

A Return to the Jesus Method

A return to what I like to call the “Jesus method” which so often uses that which Kraft describes as “ordinary, highly communicative language” could be precisely what the church needs most at this time. When we look at the Lord’s use of the most simple language and earthly examples to convey a spiritual lesson, I often wonder what has happened to most of us who are his preachers. The Jesus method is not so readily seen or heard on Sunday mornings. There is no stiffness, complicated-to-grasp theology or exegesis, or difficult ideas to connect and comprehend anywhere in the preaching of Jesus, but there is certainly a lot of that coming from our pulpits on Sunday mornings. Could it be that the standard, most mainstream churches have set for themselves to stay away from the emotional, simple, and approachable message is precisely what is emptying our pews? Perhaps we are not at a crucial turning-point in history in which the church must take a closer look at the Master and begin to pay attention to His method.

The Sunday liturgy is full of formalities. One could say they are mostly necessary formalities, since the very nature of the liturgy requires a sense of structure and order that is essential to what needs to take place within the time allotted for a particular worship service. In Anglicanism we use *The Book of Common Prayer* as our guide for liturgy, although it does provide great flexibility for a variety of styles from the most formal high church liturgies to the more straightforward evangelical ones. People line up, there is usually an elaborate procession where ministers both lay and ordained are standing in a particular order, and so on. And this aspect of the church’s formality, often criticized by those who advocate for a “livelier” and less “ritualistic” form of worship, is not precisely what turns people away. Even our traditional worship spaces are usually very

inspirational and inviting, so much so that they often attract tourists with cameras who love to be there most often when services are not happening. Recent studies confirm that people between eighteen and twenty years old (often referred to as “Millennials”) are very much attracted to the traditional buildings for worship over the auditorium, warehouse-looking churches⁴⁹ that are so prevalent today.

So why are some young people attending these “warehouse churches” and driving right by their traditional home parish in order to be fed spiritually? It is mostly because of the sermon. There is an undeniable communication gap that has been created by a message that is not perceived as relevant to contemporary ears. Yes, there is the fact that most of us cannot afford a full-time Youth Pastor and we do not have a high tech youth lounge or built-in church Starbuck’s-style “Coffee Shop,” but the alienation among youth and also a significant number of adults is mostly because of the message at the heart of our worship services and *how* the message is being preached and delivered. We need to constantly find new ways to connect the Word with the audience. Our challenge is to take the eternal message of God and seek new ways to apply it to a rapidly changing world that just keeps on changing, and at a pace faster than we can even grasp.

Allowing our Sermons and Ourselves to be Evaluated

Bill Hybels is considered one of America’s most influential preachers and the pastor of one of the largest churches in the world. He tells the story of how he started out as a youth minister in the 1970s and how he was doing what most preachers of the time

⁴⁹ “Designing Worship Spaces with Millennials in Mind” (November, 2014), accessed December 5, 2014, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/689-designing-worship-spaces-with-millennials-in-mind#.VLanjdLF_Db.

did: conversational, dialogue preaching.⁵⁰ Yet, he realized that he continued to have the same 25 youth each week and they were not very interested in what he was preparing for them. It was not until he began to perceive the real needs of his listeners and tried to connect with them that he was able to begin to really preach and teach those young people. He claims the strength of his preaching comes from being evaluated by folks in his congregation, something that makes most clergy cringe. Yet Hybels is convinced that his success as preacher began with implementing the practice of honest and regular evaluation. He says, “Every preacher is evaluated, one way or another, by every listener. Constructive evaluation won’t happen, though, no matter how willing I am to receive it, unless I am asking the right people the right questions at the right time.”⁵¹

This poses another very real challenge for traditional/liturgical churches: Are our clergy able to accept criticism and be evaluated in one of their most important weekly tasks? True, this kind of regular evaluation that Hybels refers to can be exhausting and intimidating, but I wonder if that is not the kind of thing that we need most. Rather than being evaluated superficially at the door as people leave the church, shake hands, and say in passing “great sermon,” could this actually become something that empowers the laity to think about the message and evaluate its impact in their lives? Can the result of this type of evaluation make not just the preacher better, but the listeners much more engaged in the message preached? I would imagine it is this kind of two-way engagement that would ultimately help close whatever gap may exist between preacher and congregation.

⁵⁰ Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson, *Mastering Contemporary Preaching* (Portland: Christianity Today, 1989), 153.

⁵¹ Hybels, et al, *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*, 153.

Practical tools for this are readily available or could easily be created by preachers with specific “target questions” for their particular listeners based on age, culture, and religious or denominational affiliation. In the appendix of his book, *Preaching and Leading Worship*, one of the greatest preachers in the English language, Will Willimon, offers a very practical form of evaluation entitled, “Sermon Reaction Questionnaire.”⁵² This interesting survey can be easily filled out by anyone in the congregation because of its simplicity and directness. It targets everything from eye contact to content and even allows the listeners to evaluate if the sermon went on “too long.” Sensitive pastors and preachers should beware, because the questionnaire is written in the typical style of someone who is known for his interest in being direct and not so interested in softening the message in order to please the crowd.

Willimon has also made a strong connection that becomes what is perhaps the greatest challenge for all of us who intend to preach: the importance of personal integrity and an authentic spiritual life. Have you ever met a preacher that acted and spoke as if he or she did not really believe? Do we preachers realize that our lives may be in for much tougher evaluation than our words ever will be? In his role as bishop in his own denomination and long-time professor with an extensive history of training future ministers of the gospel, Willimon knows better than most what it takes to preach a good sermon and what makes good preachers, really good ones. He observes:

Homiletical habits—disciplines, weekly study, honesty and humility about what the text says and does not say, confidence in the ability of God to make our puny congregations worthy to hear God’s Word, a weekly willingness to allow the Word to devastate the preacher before it lays a hand on the congregation—all

⁵² Will H. Willimon, *Preaching and Leading Worship* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), Appendix.

these are habits, skills of the homiletical craft, which form us preachers into better people than we would be if we had been left to our own devices.⁵³

The good preacher becomes a good sermon! The people of God are seeking living sermons; stories of faith and courage, of healing and reconciliation, of strength and true discipleship, of brokenness restored. Willimon's point can be scary when you come to think of it, because whether we choose to be aware of it or not, we become living sermons in the flesh. Our faith is incarnational and people are also seeking incarnate models of faith. The Word became flesh and the Word also becomes flesh through the witness of the preacher's Christian living, which is perhaps the best sermon we can all preach. Willimon's perspective is that every aspect of a preacher is evaluated and looked at as an integral part of the preaching experience. The next chapter will explore much more about the importance of evaluating one's own preaching and style and learning practical lessons from the strengths and weaknesses of other preachers.

⁵³ Will H. Willimon, "The Preacher As an Extension of the Preaching Moment," in *Preaching on the Brink: The Future of Preaching*, ed. Martha J. Simmons (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 169.

Chapter V

Sermons that Connect vs. Sermons that *Do Not*

"Too many church services start at eleven sharp and end at twelve dull."

— Vance Havner

It seems that every aspect of life is *reviewed* today. That is part of the living in the midst of our media culture, especially with the incredible power of our multiple outlets of social media, which invite us to “like,” “share,” “comment,” and “review” almost everything, instantly. For example, if someone goes to a restaurant and the service or food is not good, they can easily get on their phone and find a myriad of folks who agree and possibly were already subjected to the same horrible gastronomic experience they are now privy to. It is truly fascinating to see how much evaluation and reviewing are becoming a part of the way we make decisions. It is no different when it comes to church, and especially, when it comes to preaching.

Two Sermons that *did not* Connect at All

I had the unique privilege of being invited by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church to preach at a special bi-lingual Eucharist at the 77th General Convention in July, 2012.⁵⁴ As one who has been preaching regularly for twenty years, it should not have been a nerve-racking experience, but it was. Here I was, a practically new Episcopalian at the time, being granted a privilege that many of my colleagues who have been in the church forever have never had. It was a big deal! Then came the memo saying I was to preach between seven to ten minutes, it had to be written out for the

⁵⁴ The Rev. Albert R. Cutie, “*On the Feast of Bartolome de las Casas*” (Sermon at the 77th General Convention of the Episcopal Church, July 2012), accessed February 25, 2015, <https://episcopalchurch.wistia.com/medias/6ynzmvhsva>.

official church website, and it had to be in English and Spanish, which was easy enough for me, since I had done that a hundred times before. But ten minutes? Written text? Really?

I have never been an anxious or nervous preacher, but when I am asked to preach at an assembly like this, with the Presiding Bishop, my own bishop, and a host of other church leaders staring up at me from the front row and expecting to hear a great sermon, it is certainly very different than my accustomed parish setting with the folks who already believe one walks on water and always say, “Thanks for the wonderful sermon.” No, this was not my typical Sunday crowd—my comfort zone—it was as uncomfortable as it gets. And the more I analyzed it, the more I realized my biggest problem is that I do not preach well from a prepared text. I always mentally prepare my text and outline, but I do not read a manuscript as I preach; it is just not fluid enough for me, and I sense an immediate barrier between me and the audience when I do it.

Michael Rogness has been a Lutheran pastor and seminary professor for decades. In his work, *Preaching to a TV Generation*, he says:

In the past, when the sermon manuscript lay completed on the desk, the pastor could sit back and say with satisfaction, “Finally, it’s done!” All that remained was to read it to the congregation. That is longer true. With a completed manuscript we are half done. Now we have to learn it. A good sermon has to be well written and well delivered. In the age of television, many a fine sermon dies from poor delivery... The age of reading before an audience is gone!⁵⁵

Perhaps what I experienced reading that sermon is part of what Rogness is referring to. Can it be that we are just not hard-wired for read messages anymore? Is it possible that the church, by accepting read sermons from a manuscript, is insisting on using a

⁵⁵ Michael Rogness, *Preaching to a TV Generation: The Sermon in the Electronic Age* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 1994), 94-95.

communications tool that, like the telegram or an old manual typewriter, is no longer in use? Is it possible that even Rogness's twenty year old book is now outdated and that the problem is no longer the TV generation, but the here-comes-every-form-of-media-possible generation?

I am convinced that preaching from a text is what mostly killed my important convention sermon, for a variety of reasons. By its very nature, a bi-lingual sermon must be something somewhat spontaneous. It requires one to go back and forth between both languages often, while keeping in mind that you lose the audience which understands one language and not the other, particularly when you spend too much time with the language they do not comprehend. It is a tricky exercise, but it can be done well with some practice. For some reason, when I was told I had to write a manuscript, I lost the dynamism of the "back and forth" which I would normally have in a bi-lingual sermon. At times, it can even be humorous for both audiences, the English-speakers and Spanish-speakers, because they sense that there are so many anglicized words in our contemporary use of Spanish that translation of certain things will easily make some folks really laugh. And we cannot deny that this element of participation and active listening is certainly part of an effective sermon when the listeners are truly into it. This is one more reason why I believe my General Convention sermon did not work, because it was all about what I wanted to say and did not engage those present in English or in Spanish. The language spoken was simply an accident.

Many things can often go wrong with sermons. Sometimes, sermons just start the wrong way and they never quite recuperate. For example, an effective preacher cannot begin a sermon by saying to people, "I know you just heard this great message from the

Scripture, and I will get to it eventually, but I am first going to talk to you about something else I have on my mind.” First, it is an act of insolence to speak to your audience almost as if they were not there during the proclamation of the Word or as if they are not smart enough to retain the message proclaimed, even just a few minutes after hearing it. This tends to happen, particularly when preachers forget where they are and what they are supposed to be doing within the context of worship and liturgy. In the craft of preaching, we are simply facilitators of the Holy Spirit that is seeking to speak to God’s people. Second, a preacher cannot decide there is something more pressing than the Gospel to be preached. Regardless of what is happening in the world that week, if you cannot or do not have the skill to connect it with the biblical message, stick with the Scripture proclaimed and maybe talk about the pressing issue at another time. Do not force the newsy issue you want to talk about, if it does not fit in the sermon. Third, a sermon is not the place for announcements, nor the place to announce your next “Bible study series.” It is certainly not the place to offer orientations about what people should do before, during, or after liturgy. It is not the time to teach a class about the days of Holy Week, for example. There are good adult education classes to accomplish that throughout the week.

The preacher of the sermon that I am referring to and that prompted these observations, spent more than half of the time allotted for the sermon I observed repeating the story heard in the Gospel passage already clearly proclaimed. That kind of re-telling or repeating is not what a sermon needs to be. In other words, the sermon should not be confused with the preacher’s time or preacher’s needs to clarify. On the contrary, it is truly a time for the listeners to seek what God is saying to them in the

proclamation of the Word. It is a sacred time in which the preacher should not try to interfere too much.

I chose to analyze the sermon of a well-known author, well-educated person, and popular speaker. I am sure she is a gifted preacher, but even the best preachers occasionally have a bad day. For example, there was a Palm Sunday sermon by this preacher on the biblical texts of the day, but it just did not seem to work.⁵⁶ After almost two minutes giving us announcements about several happenings and past or future events in the local church, all the while going back and forth between why it all applies to the Scriptures just proclaimed, the preacher eventually starts to preach. Yet, there was little or no discernible application of the Word of God just proclaimed. The content was almost exclusively a run-down of Holy Week and how Palm Sunday fitted into the church services coming up for the rest of that week. For 15 minutes, I wondered when the core of the sermon was coming, but it never did. The examples and humorous references were disconnected from the biblical text at hand. There was no perceptible structure, no clear vision or focus in this sermon.

From a clearly public speaking perspective, one notices numerous glitches and multiple distractions in the preacher's speech. The use of "umm" and "uhh" several times in this sermon came across as a lack of preparation or clarity in the delivery of the message. Preachers must remember that if there is no speech disorder or serious impediment present, vocalized pauses are not acceptable for preachers or public speakers of any kind. Perhaps one of the most distracting things was how this preacher played with

⁵⁶ The Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniel (Palm Sunday Sermon at the First Congregational Church of Glen Ellyn, UCC), accessed February 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPyIhJg3TY8>.

her hair and did a significant amount of head wagging, which only served to detract from the message. Whatever gestures a good preacher uses while moving and preaching are meant to enhance and reinforce the message, not take away from it. This applies to all preachers, regardless of age, genre, or tradition. If you are a woman or man with long hair, pick it up or make sure you keep it away from your face before you get up and speak. Anything that detracts for the message being preached or presented should be consciously avoided.

Sermons that Connect and Respond to the Present Listening Context

Bishop Michael Curry (one of the preachers highlighted in Chapter II)

consistently preaches sermons that *do* work. One of his recent sermons to young people at the closing Eucharist for the Episcopal Youth Event 2014,⁵⁷ Curry did something which works with young people and most certainly with listeners of all ages. He started by using one word—“go.” The sermon lasted more than twenty minutes, but he began by focusing his audience and telling the huge gathering of youth to just remember that one, simple, two letter word, “go.”

With his typical charismatic-style he intertwines anecdotes and real-life inspirational stories that related so effectively with the youth present that they could not stop laughing and applauding. He used a number of biblical images and stories too, using the core of his message focusing on the love of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. The good news was proclaimed effectively, but in a way and style that was certainly entertaining and filled with content that connected with the audience before him. As you

⁵⁷ Rt. Rev. Michael Curry’s sermon from the Closing Eucharist at the 2014 Episcopal Youth Event, accessed March 13, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTDRnr0fGBQ>.

analyze this sermon, you realize that nobody is left behind. There are images for pet-lovers, sports-lovers, those who are dealing with hardships, and those who feel rejected; the list can go on and on. The good news was indeed proclaimed and never watered-down, yet it was relatable and connected all the way through. So, if an Episcopal bishop in the 21st century—dressed in all the trappings bishops wear—and within the context of a structured liturgy is able to make a sermon do what Curry often makes his sermons do, contemporary preachers are indeed able to speak effectively and present the message entrusted to them in ways that can connect and relate.

On one particular Sunday, I decided to try something new to connect with my own congregation. I prepared my sermon and used what I consider to be my “standard” style of incorporating relevant humor, anecdotes, and inspirational images that enhance the way the biblical message is presented.⁵⁸ Yet, with all the research involved in this project, I thought I would try something more visual. I used the screens at our contemporary service to project questions while I was speaking; questions that were part of my sermon outline and that would be projected as I got to that place in the sermon.

This kind of approach requires some coordination with those who handle projectors and sound equipment, but it can easily be integrated and helps to focus or emphasize to the listeners those concepts or ideas you are inviting them to contemplate within the sermon. The response I got was to be expected. Only a group of young people came to me after the service and said, “Hey Father that was cool, how the questions went up on the screen as you were speaking to us.” Most of the adults did not mention it at all.

⁵⁸ The Rev. Albert R. Cutie’s sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, accessed March 12, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGF4gV2NmcM>.

Maybe many of them did not even notice, possibly because they may not be as accustomed to the interactive or multi-tasking approach of their younger counterparts in the congregation. I believe this sermon connected, for a variety of reasons, but there is little doubt that it connected with the younger sector of our audience, because it incorporated an element of media they were not accustomed to seeing within the context of church services. It brought the younger folks a bit of the multi-tasking they are accustomed to in their daily multiple and simultaneous media interactions. In other words, sermons that connect require all that good stuff which is part of a good sermon, in addition to, a good dosage of creativity and risk taking. Today's preacher cannot give up in trying new things, realizing that he or she is competing with a totally new myriad of distractions, present in the lives of most of contemporary listeners. Therefore, if the way contemporary ears listen has unquestionably changed, what could that simple reality be telling us about how today's preachers must preach?

Conclusion

“Take advantage of every opportunity to practice your communication skills so that when important occasions arise, you will have the gift, the style, the sharpness, the clarity, and the emotions to affect other people.” - Jim Rohn

Every time we preach, it is indeed a very “important occasion.” The opportunity and privilege of preaching cannot be taken lightly—I am sure no serious preacher does. The church has been given the sacred task to communicate the most important message of all: The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ! Yet we live in an age when rapid developments in technology and the changes in the way we communicate, both in our speaking and in our listening, are so great that we may sometimes feel like we are not able to keep up. There is so much going on and so many great opportunities for us. When preachers go out of their way to connect effectively, speak professionally and clearly, and prepare a well-structured and well-thought-out sermon, they are responding to the needs of today’s listening context. When we ignore these basic elements, we will have a hard time connecting.

It is no secret that most of our mainstream denominations today are hurting due to a lack of new members and a significant number are just struggling to survive. We see too many churches with declining, aging membership, and we are constantly asking ourselves what we can do to get new people in the door. Dioceses, clergy, and lay leaders are constantly investing time and economic resources to find creative ways of attracting new members and truly focusing on church growth, and that is all very good. We must certainly continue to do all of that, because it matters, and in the long term, it will make a difference.

Yet, I am convinced that the secret to church growth and to creating truly vibrant churches is in the quality and connectedness of the preaching. How much effort are we putting into preaching excellence; into spreading the Good News with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and in a way that seriously pays attention and takes into account the way contemporary audiences listen? There is little doubt that the solution to many of the challenges we face is in the way we are presenting God's message. We must begin to humbly accept that in almost every area of church communications, we are deficient and we are simply not keeping up with the world around us. Most of us are not even aware of how to begin to speak to and effectively reach those who are fully immersed in the present media culture and their unique listening context.

Fundamentalist mega-churches are not filled with people who came from a vacuum. Most of them were baptized and probably even raised in one of our mainstream churches. Sure, many of them still love the old hymns, the sacramental rites, and the liturgy; most will tell you they never really planned on moving on from the tradition of their upbringing. However, if you ask the great majority of them why they left, almost universally the answer will be, "I was bored" or "I got nothing out of it." If we translate that to church talk, it usually means just one thing: The sermon did not connect with me and I found nothing that I could take home with me to motivate and strengthen my desire to live the Christian life.

As N.T. Wright observed:

Our culture is moving in all kinds of ways toward a post-post-modernism that has yet to be shaped but for which our public world longs as it lurches from boredom and trivia to dangerous and dehumanizing behavior. I have argued that the God of the Bible, and especially of the Gospels, can be understood only as God-in-public... We face a challenging possibility in our generation: to move beyond the sterile alternatives of different types of post-Enlightenment tyranny on

one hand – the fundamentalism and secularism that have so often slugged it out on the spurious battleground of ideologically driven would-be exegesis – and postmodern chaos on the other.⁵⁹

Ultimately, we must recognize that our contemporary society is full of challenges, and those who are called to preach must begin to see themselves as professional communicators and masters of today’s language if we are to even begin to make any sort of impact on this postmodern world. There is an urgency for bridge-builders who can master this new language that is evolving and who are seeking to find new ways and new means by which to connect. The church cannot stay on the sidelines, arms folded, and watching it all go by. In order to preach the good news effectively to the people of this time and place, we must do all we can to become master communicators, obtaining whatever necessary professional skills within our reach to bring the saving message of Christ to our evolving media culture—and we must do it now—for the greater Glory of God.

⁵⁹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 180.

APPENDIX I:

Survey of Preachers

A. SURVEY FOR PREACHERS:

ON THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA AND CHANGES IN THE LISTENING CONTEXT ON PREACHING⁶⁰

There are three questions below. This survey should not take you more than three to five minutes to complete. The goal of the survey is to explore among 100 preachers and 100 listeners of sermons what level of impact they perceive new forms of media, and the constantly changing “listening context” in our society have on the craft of preaching today.

Using scale from 1-10 (“1” representing NO IMPACT – “5” SOME IMPACT – “10” SIGNIFICANT IMPACT)

1. In your perception as a preacher, how do new forms of media (i.e. Internet, social media, mobile phones, tablets, etc.) impact your listeners and the listening context? (*Rate impact of new forms of media on how your sermon is received by today’s listeners*):

2. In your delivery and preparation as a preacher, what impact do these new forms of media have on your content and approach to preaching? (*Rate how new forms of media impact your style of preaching and your sermon preparation*): _____

3. In my personal experience as a preacher, I would say the overall impact new forms of media have on my preaching experience is (*Rate how new forms of media impact your overall approach to the craft of preaching – especially your particular listeners and preaching style*): _____

⁶⁰ Survey created and written by The Rev. Albert R. Cutié for the purposes of this project.

APPENDIX II:

Survey of Listeners

**B. SURVEY FOR THOSE WHO LISTEN TO SERMONS WITH REGULARITY:
ON THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA AND CHANGES IN THE LISTENING
CONTEXT ON PREACHING**

Using scale from 1-10 (“1” representing NO IMPACT – “5” SOME IMPACT – “10”
SIGNIFICANT IMPACT)

1. As a congregant and listener of sermons, how and to what extent do new forms of media (i.e. Internet, social media, mobile phones, tablets, etc.) impact the way you listen to a sermon? (*Rate impact of new forms of media on the way you listen to the sermons you hear*): _____
2. As an active listener of sermons, what impact do you perceive these new forms of media have on your preacher’s approach to the craft of preaching? (*Rate how you perceive new forms of media impact your preacher’s content, delivery and/or sermon preparation*): _____
3. In my personal experience, as a regular listener of sermons, I would say the overall impact new forms of media have on the way I listen to and receive sermons (*Rate how new forms of media impact your overall approach to listening to sermons*): _____

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baehr, Theodore. 1986. *Getting the Word Out: How to Communicate the Gospel in Today's World*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Beebe, Steven A., and Susan J Beebe. 2015. *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach (9th Edition)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Brosend, William. 2010. *The Preaching of Jesus: Gospel Proclamation, Then and Now*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Campbell, Heidi A. 2013. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. New York: Routledge.
- Carr, Nicholas. 2011. *What the Internet is doing to our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Dargan, Edwin C., and Ralph G. Turnbull. 1974. *A History of Preaching*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Duduit, Michael, ed. 1996. *Communicate with Power: Insights from America's Top Communicators*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Elliott, Mark Barger. 2000. *Creative Styles of Preaching*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
- Erickson, Millard J., and James L. Heflin. 1997. *Old Wine in New Wineskins: Doctrinal Preaching in a Changing World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Gali, Mark, and Craig Brian Larson. 1994. *Preaching that Connects: Using the Techniques of Journalists to Add Impact to Your Sermons*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Gregory the Great. 1894. "The Book of Pastoral Rule, Part III, 1-3, translated by James Barmby," *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Vol. XII*. New York: The Christian Literature Company.
- Henderson, David W. 1998. *Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to our Changing World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998.
- Hipps, Shane. 2009. *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Hybels, Bill, Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson. 1989. *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*. Portland, OR: Multnomah.

- Johnston, Graham. 2001. *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First Century Listeners*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- Kraft, Charles H. 1991. *Communication Theory for Christian Witness (Revised Edition)*. New York: Orbis Books.
- Larsen, David L. 1989. *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Lischer, Richard. 1987. *Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition*. Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press.
- Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. 1972. *Preaching and Preachers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Logan, Samuel T., Jr., ed. 1986. *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company.
- Long, Thomas G. 1989. *The Witness of Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.
- Meyrowitz, Joshua. 1985. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, Calvin. 1994. *The Empowered Communicator: The 7 Keys to Unlocking an Audience*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- Mueller, Pam, and Oppenheimer, Daniel. 2014. "The Pen is Mightier than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking." *Psychological Science, Vol 15(6)*, (April 23): 1159—68. Accessed March 12, 2015.
<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/04/22/0956797614524581.full.pdf+html>.
- Ong, Walter J. 1982. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Methuen.
- _____. 2012. *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Quicke, Michael J. 2003. *360 Degree Preaching: Hearing, Speaking and Living the Word*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Rogness, Michael. 1994. *Preaching to a TV Generation: The Sermon in the Electronic Age*. Lima, OH: CSS Publishing.

- Roland, Jarod L., Hacker, Carl D., Breshears, Jonathan D., Gaona, Charles M., Hogan, R. Edward, Burton, Harold, Corbetta, Maurizio, and Leuthardt, Eric C. 2013. "Brain Mapping." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*. Accessed October 5, 2014. <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fnhum.2013.00431/full> 31 July 2013.
- Rueter, Alvin C. 1997. *Making Good Preaching Better: A Step-by-Step Guide to Scripture-Based, People-Centered Preaching*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.
- Schnapp, Diana Corley. 2010. "Listening in Spirituality and Religion, in *Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century*, edited by Andrew D. Wolvin. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Sheen, Fulton J. 1982. *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen*. New York: Images Publishing Group.
- Simmons, Martha J., ed. 1996. *Preaching on the Brink: The Future of Homiletics*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Sugden, Edward H., ed. 1956. *Wesley's Standard Sermons Consisting of 44 Discourses Published in Four Volumes, Vol. 1, Preface*. London: Epworth Press.
- Van Harn, Roger E. 1992. *Pew Rights: For People Who Listen to Sermons*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Webb, Joseph M. 1998. *Comedy and Preaching*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.
- _____. 2001. *Preaching without Notes*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Wells, C. Richard, and A. Boyd Luter. 2002. *Inspired Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.
- White, L. Michael. 1996. *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Theological Studies.
- Willimon, William H. 1984. *Preaching and Leading Worship*. Appendix. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- _____. 1996. "The Preacher as an Extension of the Preaching Moment," in *Preaching on the Brink: The Future of Preaching*, edited by Martha J. Simmons. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- _____, and Richard Lischer. 1995. *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

- Wilson-Kastner, Patricia. 1989. *Imagery for Preaching*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Wilson, Paul S. 1992. *A Concise History of Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Wolvin, Andrew D., ed. 2010. *Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Wright, N.T. 2014. *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Xhu, Erping, Matthew Kaplan, R. Charles Dershimer, and Inger Bergom. 2011. "Use of Laptops in the Classroom: Research and Best Practices." *CRLT Occasional papers*, no. 30. University of Michigan.

