

INTRODUCTION

The Ongoing Impact of the Evolution of Our Media Culture

*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 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 meaning remains timeless, the ways in

which the Gospel is communicated and received are rapidly changing and evolving. This poses new challenges and new opportunities for all who are interested in the craft of preaching and communicating.

Given the explosion of new forms of media in the twentieth and early twenty-first 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 using 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 its listening contexts, which are becoming increasingly more mobile (i.e. smart phones, tablets, watch phones, etc.) and accessible in all times and places? These questions can be overwhelming and even fear-provoking at times, yet these are the questions we must ask ourselves and the challenges we must embrace 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 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 appealing to younger audiences or effectively communicating the message that we claim as sacred and essential to us.

However, we must go beyond evaluating new media developments and changes in the listening context in order 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, our focus here is on the craft of preaching and the challenges at hand for those who seek to spread the Gospel in a sermon. We cannot deny that the craft of preaching—a message transmitted mostly by the spoken word and in the traditional context of the liturgy—remains at the very heart of the church's activity. Yet, while much has been written about the theology of communication and communications theory, the impact 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 are facing a David and Goliath phenomenon: 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 follow. Thus, the question becomes, "Will the church ever be able to address this immense task of effective contemporary communication?"

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 a congregation sitting before him or her waiting to hear a message. It is a method that seems standard and intransient. Regardless of whether that audience is a small group of people at a 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. Yet, it is equally true that while each unique context for preaching influences the method and style used to deliver the message, the core experience of preaching seems to stay the same. Perhaps the one thing that is ultimately new or innovative in the craft of preaching is that we can no longer ignore the fact that developments in digital communications pose a series of new challenges to preachers and listeners alike, and that in the midst of those very real challenges there may be fantastic opportunities to create a better mechanism for the transmission and reception of the message. While we cannot deny that the way in which congregations receive and perceive the message preached has changed in the past few centuries, some will continue to subscribe 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. This could prove a dangerous route to take in the long-term. It is the route of apathy and comfort, a perspective we hear in many of our communities which asserts, “but we have always done it that way.”

The rapid evolution of new forms of media in the context of the church and its mission remind me of the old hardware stores I often visited with my father and grandfathers

as a little boy. In a matter of decades, even after 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. This is perhaps where the “buy local” movement is beginning to fill a void left by those smaller, more personal buying experiences of the past. This trend could be good news for churches that feel they are too small to compete with mega-churches and their seemingly endless resources.

The challenge for the church today is not dissimilar to the challenge faced by those hardware stores. We too must be ready to ask if the twenty-first-century church is responding to this on-going media revolution by seeking to understand the present day “listening context” and the often overwhelming media culture in which it is called to preach. Must 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 or our message?

My hope is that this book will help us begin to understand how preaching can more effectively meet the needs of our changing world, proclaiming the Gospel to present-day circumstances. Every area of communication is evolving,

affecting the way we transmit and receive information. We will compare changes in preaching styles within our contemporary context. 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 continue to evolve will also be reviewed.

Finally, we will consider my own simple and nonscientific survey of preachers and congregants (listeners of sermons) who responded to questions regarding contemporary preaching, with the hope that this will help us to pause and think as a rapidly changing media culture affects our desire to carry out God's work in today's world.

While many today use the terms "sermon" and "homily" interchangeably, they are not always understood as being the same. Traditionally, sermons were considered speeches on some particular Christian doctrine or a discourse on morality, while homilies have historically been associated with the preaching event within the liturgy, inviting believers to apply the biblical message to their daily living. Most Anglicans/Episcopalians and Roman Catholics are accustomed to hearing the term "homily," while other Christian denominations use the term "sermon" almost exclusively. In this book, I have used the term "sermon" in a very broad way, seeking to embrace both tendencies within the Body of Christ.