

MODERN MEDIA AND THE SERMON

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How have our modern media technologies changed the way we receive and process information? And what impact does this have on the preparation and delivery of the sermon? Our author, a pastor and communication professor, shares some insights from research.

The preacher steps into the pulpit. She scans the congregation, watching as they fumble with the bulletins, put away the hymn books, and get settled in their seats. Now every eye is on her. As she begins to speak, the attention of everyone is riveted on her every word. Then, a ten-year-old in the sixth pew lifts his arm and directs a remote control device at her. Click! The pastor continues to speak, but now a teenager two rows behind likewise points her remote toward the pulpit. Click! Then another teen. Click! As the preacher continues, more and more young people switch channels. Click! Click!

The adults are changing channels now, too. Click, click, click! Despite the fact that the eyes remain fixed on her, the gaze has become unfocused. Click! Nearly every member has changed channels. Each is pursuing a different thought, every mind on a different channel.

Click, click! A few channel surfers switch back and listen in to what she has to say for a few phrases before moving on. Click, click, click! Before the preacher is three minutes into her sermon, most of the congregation's members have their minds somewhere else, tuned to a different channel, thinking about something other than the preacher's words.

No, modern technology has not yet developed a hand-held device that allows people sitting in church pews to switch off the preacher of the day or to tune into a different sermon from elsewhere. But as one looks out into the faces of a congregation while preaching, it is often clear that many are tuned in on some other wavelength.

It is possible that it has always been so. It may be that preaching has always been a matter of leading those who listen to a sermon into a process of reflection brought about by a word or phrase turned in one way or another which sparks a thought, remembrance, or fantasy.

On the other hand, perhaps this is a brand new phenomenon, something unique to the present generation. A decade ago, authors such as Richard Jensen, Michael Rogness, Timothy Turner, and Tex Sample strongly suggested that this is the case — and that the cause is clearly television. These authors contended that the people who participate in worship today are somehow fundamentally different — that decades of electronic media have changed those who listen to sermons. According to these authors, the entire art and science of preaching needs to be revised to accommodate the television generation.

What Research Claimed

These claims were not without basis in social scientific theory and research. Authors writing in the 1980s and 1990s largely based their ideas on a foundation constructed by the work of Walter J. Ong, a Jesuit scholar and early student of the young Marshall McLuhan, who researched the changes that took place in societies with the advent of literacy and, later, print.

For example, Lutherans are well aware of the role of the printing press in the Reformation. Written gospels and epistles, introduced into a primarily oral (non-literate) first-century culture, Ong noted, had a similarly profound impact. He introduced the term “secondary orality” to indicate a new age brought about by electronic media, which were once again moving the culture away from literacy. Ong, like McLuhan, insisted that the technologies used as the primary means of communication in a society literally determine how individuals learn to receive and process information.

Had Ong’s professional life extended into today’s world of hypertext and email, he might have thought twice about the demise of literacy. Media studies today are much more focused on the effects of the rapid adoption of computer-mediated communication. The books on how preaching and worship need to adapt to the internet have yet to be written. But computers, LCD projectors, PowerPoint® slides, and DVDs have nevertheless become as much a part of Sunday morning as bulletins and hymnbooks. Largely based on the writings of Sample and the like, preachers have rushed to incorporate visual technologies into the art of homiletics.

But if the social scientific foundations for the use of these techniques have now been called into question, is technology still the answer to the problem of the congregation that clicks to a different channel during the sermon?

Among media scholars, the “technological determinism” associated with McLuhan has softened considerably. The brains of those sitting in our church pews have probably not been rewired by radio and TV in a way that determines that we must live in an age of “secondary orality.” The truth concerning our relationship to our media environment is now recognized as being more complex. Thus, communication scholars today are somewhat less likely to recommend that a video projector and PowerPoint® are vital equipment for every sermon in every setting.

However, McLuhan's ideas are not completely out of fashion, and Ong's scholarship remains sound in suggesting that messages and those who perceive them are profoundly affected by the electronic media that surround us. Expectations of communications are shaped by the media we use, therefore preachers must strive to proclaim the Word in ways that will meet those expectations. To avoid being clicked off by the unseen mental remote controls in the brains of our hearers, we must preach in a way that is consistent with the current media environment.

Five Cardinal Rules

Contemporary scholarship suggests at least five cardinal rules for preachers in the media age. Some are new, but most are tried and true.

1. *Whether in text, audio, or video, those who fill our pews have become accustomed to messages that are brief, to the point, fast-paced, and powerful.* The 20-minute, three-point sermon is long out of date in such an environment. We may bemoan the fact that brevity does not allow for theological depth. Nevertheless, to avoid the click of the changing mental channel, we must come to the point quickly.
2. *The media environment is one that is based on the telling of stories.* Writing and print can be used referentially, to record data and to work out detailed logic. Oral and electronic means of communication are more emotive. Therefore, a body of thought known as narrative theory suggests that the preacher attempting to reach a media-soaked congregation will do better with stories than with subtleties of doctrine or exegesis. Jesus' parables endured, often when the context of where and when he originally told them had been lost. The gospel itself has come to us primarily in the form of story. Preachers, to be effective, must use narrative to the fullest. Tell stories, jokes, parables, and tales.
3. *Today's dominant media make use of visual as well as aural or textual channels to communicate.* Preachers, too, must be visual. Just because a congregation can't afford a fancy video projection system is no reason not to use visual means to get meaning across. An object used for a children's sermon can be carried over to become a visual aid for the homily. Pictures, charts, or even the good old-fashioned chalk board can be employed. The use of visuals, such as stained glass windows and symbols sewn into paraments, has a long history in the church. Just make sure that the visual is large enough to be seen from the back pew. Painting pictures with words can be the next best thing. Use visual imagery in illustrations, in setting the scene for narratives, and in describing biblical settings.
4. *If one has video projection technology available, commonsense communication practice demands that the visuals enhance the sermon and neither compete with the spoken word nor replace it.* If a visual is too "busy," with excessive movement, highly textured background, poor color contrast, or just too much text on the screen at once, attention will be turned away from the preacher and diverted to deciphering the image. Keep PowerPoint® slides simple. Use a large font and a few words for emphasis, not an entire text. Avoid the temptation to utilize elaborate

animations or to cram a few more lines onto the screen. Use the visual only when speaking about it, then switch to a blank slide or one suited to the following point.

5. *Finally and most essentially, oral presentation must be truly oral.* Written language and spoken language are different. Media professionals are paid a great deal of money to write and read scripts in a way that doesn't sound like reading. The skill is difficult. Most people can't read from a manuscript and still sound natural and conversational. However, an extemporaneous sermon — carefully planned, prepared, and practiced — can be delivered in a conversational style. In extemporaneous delivery (not to be confused with impromptu or unprepared delivery) the focus is on using a few notes to order key ideas while using everyday vocabulary and maintaining near constant eye contact with the congregation. In this mode, the voice naturally becomes more expressive, and attention is maintained.

The effects of the mass media on individuals are complex and difficult to measure. As media technologies evolve, theories concerning media effects likewise develop. Whether scholars see those effects as subtle or profound, it is clear that the media shape what those in the pews expect from those attempting to communicate with them. By shaping the delivery of a sermon to those expectations, communication of the gospel can be achieved.

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