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Covenant Theological Seminary

**Expositing the Scriptures in Preaching  
to Digitally Saturated Congregants**

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

By

Joshua D. Schatzle

Graduation Date: May 17, 2019

Covenant Theological Seminary

**Expository Preaching in a Digital Age**

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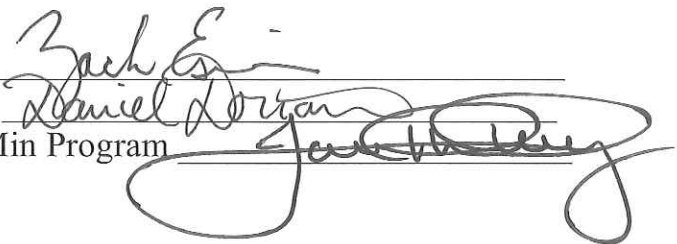
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## **Abstract**

Expository preaching in the digitally saturated context of the twenty-first century presents challenges that have been and continue to be under-addressed. A massive media shift, comparable to the dawn of the printing press, has been changing cultures worldwide for over a decade. While resources regarding media ecology are increasingly available—as are resources dealing with expository preaching and culture—preachers lack resources for expositing the scriptures in a digital age, with its shifting epistemologies. The purpose of this study is to examine how preachers navigate the challenges of expositing the scriptures to digitally saturated congregants.

Four research questions guided this qualitative study: 1. In what ways do pastors describe the effects of digital saturation on the lives of their congregants? 2. What challenges do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants? 3. What opportunities do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants? 4. What strategies do pastors employ in meeting the challenges posed by intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?

The findings of the study show that the current media ecology has shifted in demonstrable ways from that of the print age, giving way to emerging epistemologies. This study also reveals valid concerns regarding the emerging digital ecology and the church's vital need to better understand these epistemologies. Additionally, specific practices and approaches to reading and preaching scripture are presented for improving gospel communication in the current media context.

To my wife Jessi, the best part of everything, *mi vid-amor*. Thank you for supporting me through yet another degree! I promise you, as far as it depends on me, that this is the last one. What more is to be said, other than that second only to Jesus Himself, you are my rock.

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To my father, Papa Sid, who would've been so proud to see this day, who loved me with love of the Father's kind; thank you for your always-unconditional love and support. Missing you tremendously but comforted to know you are among the great cloud of witnesses cheering me from Heaven.

To my Nana, who prayed for me literally every day of her life.

To Brian Fuller, MFA, who taught me everything I know about media ecology, and whose friendship I cherish as much as I do his intellect and artistry.

“Preaching is not exposition only, but communication; not just the exegesis of a text, but the conveying of a God-given message to a living people who need to hear it.”

John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 101

“As Walter Ong noted some years ago, different media accomplish rather different ends...Even though speech may be particularly suited to the Gospel message, all our speaking will be shaped by the ‘epistemological metaphor’ of the electronic media.

So we will preach; but of course, we will preach very differently in an electronic age.”

David Buttrick, “Preaching to the Faith of America,” p. 314  
*Communication & Change in American Religious History*

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Scripture taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the world finds itself in the midst of what media ecologists call, “A Gutenberg Moment.” The term refers to a media change with worldwide cultural and sociological ramifications, similar to those of Johan Gutenberg’s printing press in the fifteenth century, and the shift to digital communications over the past decade is such a moment. Media ecologists realize in hindsight that innovations in media, such as those of Gutenberg’s press, don’t just change the way people do things; they change their fundamental makeup and identity, “affect[ing] the whole psychic and social complex.”<sup>1</sup> They change not only how they think but what they think about, and ultimately not just what they think about, but even what they think about themselves and how they define reality itself. As McLuhan’s closest friend and colleague Father John Culkin, SJ once famously remarked, in summarizing his friend McLuhan’s hypothesis, “We shape our tools, and our tools shape us.”<sup>2</sup>

Whether preachers are acquainted with the aforementioned theory or not, they are certainly aware of its effects. The people who sit in church are fundamentally different from the people who sat there only a generation ago and hence are fundamentally different from the people who have sat there for the last half-millennium.

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 19.

<sup>2</sup>Alex Kuskis, “We shape our tools and thereafter they shape us”, *McLuhan Galaxy*, April 1, 2013, <https://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2013/04/01/we-shape-our-tools-and-thereafter-our-tools-shape-us/>

The logical question that proceeds from this then is, “How then shall we preach?” As another famed media ecologist, Neil Postman, points out, there are tremendous differences between people of the print age versus those of the television era, as well as the nascent stages of the electronic culture. “The world of the printed word, . . . with its emphasis on logic, . . . sequence, history, . . . exposition, objectivity” differs greatly from the electronic (or digital) one, “with its emphasis on imagery, simultaneity, immediate gratification, and quick emotional response.”<sup>3</sup>

These technologies, and all technologies, he insists, condition people, waging a “psychic battle” in them, such that, in Postman’s assessment, the “casualties [of the electronic era] . . . are children who can’t learn to read or won’t, . . . who cannot organize their thought into logical structure, . . . and cannot attend to lecture or oral explanations for more than a few minutes at a time!”<sup>4</sup> Postman calls the former era, which immediately precedes the digital, the Age of Exposition. “Exposition is,” Postman explains, “a mode of thought, a method of learning, and a means of expression. . . a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively, and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for . . . objectivity, and a tolerance for delayed response.”<sup>5</sup> Such traits, Postman contends, are the direct products and benefits of what he calls a “Print Culture,” which requires these aforementioned traits to make sense of one’s world.

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<sup>3</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York, NY: First Vintage Books Edition, 1993), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Postman, *Technopoly*, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 63.

Postman, working from his Jewish background, connects the nature of the Age of Exposition and the nature of the God of the scriptures. “The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception [at that time] requiring the highest order of abstract thinking.”<sup>6</sup> This, Postman says, was no arbitrary decision on the part of God, but rather an intentional one. The Decalogue itself bears out the need for abstract conceptualization, he observes, in its forbidding of the making of concrete images of God; “It is a strange injunction...*unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture [sic].*”<sup>7</sup>

Of the many denominational traditions in the history of the church, the Reformed tradition is perhaps the one most characterized and shaped by a commitment to expositional preaching.<sup>8</sup> Notable exemplars include the legendary Reformers. Luther credited his very salvation to the exposition of Scripture<sup>9</sup>, and John Calvin, who “in his first edition of the *Institutes* wrote, concerning ministers, ‘Their whole task is limited to the ministry of God’s word, their whole wisdom to the knowledge of God’s word: their whole eloquence, to its proclamation.’”<sup>10</sup>

But what of this expositional tradition today? Has the media ecology rendered exposition outmoded and unnecessary? Further questions follow: Is expositional

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<sup>6</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Widely acknowledged by numerous sources, but see for starters, James F. Stitzinger, “The History of Expository Preaching,” *TMSJ* 3 no. 1 (Spring 1992), 17ff.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2015), 60-63.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536 ed. reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 195, quoted in Stitzinger, 19.

preaching a biblical mandate or merely a product of a literary (Gutenberg) culture that can be replaced by preaching methods and forms more compatible with emerging digital technologies? Is expositional preaching a crucial ingredient to orthodoxy? If so, why, and how so? Or, is expositional preaching merely the preference of certain traditions and/or cultures within orthodox Christianity? If it is deemed essential to orthodoxy, how, or to what extent, will exposition best be conducted? What adjustments to emerging media ecologies must it accommodate? And what sort of expositional method(s) might emerge when preachers factor into their preparation the mindset and makeup of today's listeners, who think in fundamentally different patterns and ways?

### **Digital Ecology Challenges**

The challenges facing today's expositional preachers could be classified according to three broad categories. The first has to do with the physical effects of a technologically saturated age: decreased attention span, distraction, and increased demand for multimedia stimuli. The second has to do with the psychological impact of digital saturation: self-concept, patterns of thinking and comprehension, ability to reason and think deeply. The third category has to do specifically with the church culture itself: expository preaching's intelligibility in a church culture increasingly less literary and the trainability of pastors reared in an increasingly alliterate age. As T. David Gordon, Professor of Religion and Greek at Grove City College and author of the *Why Johnny Can't* series of books writes, "The profound shifts in dominant media...have profoundly misshaped the sensibilities of the typical American, and this in turn has led to a profound

decline in preaching.”<sup>11</sup> In a play on Marshall McLuhan’s maxim, “the media is the message,” Gordon asserts that, “the media have shaped the messengers...and [the messengers] have lost those sensibilities essential to expository preaching...They have largely disappeared.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Technological Problem 1: Physiological*

While it is certain that media impacts its users, both collectively and individually, as well as culturally, it is difficult to identify and measure those effects, particularly while undergoing its implementation. But psychologists, educational, and media experts report that digital media saturation has profound formative impact on both brain structure and function (neuroplasticity). These changes include physical habits, such as attention span and the aptitude and ability for deep, or higher-order, thinking. Mark Bauerlein, Nicholas Carr, and Jane Healy have written studies on the effects of digital media on the brain and its effects on cognitive ability and aptitude.<sup>13</sup> Healey, in her research, notes that while attention span, for instance, is difficult to measure, the “three hundred plus teachers she interviewed...in unanimity” agreed that “attention spans were noticeably shorter.”<sup>14</sup> That fact hasn’t escaped the notice of digital giants like Apple or Microsoft. In April 2015, Apple released the Apple Watch and highlighted the fact that it delivered what it called information ‘bursts...notifications [generating] user interactions, expected to take no

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<sup>11</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, 15, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation* (New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008); Jane Healey, *Endangered Minds* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Jane Healy, *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don’t Think and What We Can Do About It*, 15.

longer than eight seconds.<sup>15</sup> Why eight seconds? Because that, according to Microsoft's own research, is the measure of the average attention span of most humans living in a technological/electronic environment. The report reminded readers that, in this department, humans were now bested by goldfish, whose attention spans measure on average ten seconds.<sup>16</sup> Experts added a ominous projection -- that Apple Watch will only further exacerbate the attention-span-problem, the brain being "plastic" as it is, and subject to the shaping influences of its environment.<sup>17</sup>

### *Technological Problem 2: Psychological*

But a digital ecology does more than change the shape of people's brains and the shape of human function and habits; it also changes who they are. The effects are more than neurological or physiological and penetrate all the way down to that part of the individual which is more difficult to quantify: the psyche. Media-ecologist Maryann Wolf notes the effects of media on the shape of both the brain and the person. "The individual brain is forever changed [by these media] both physiologically and intellectually."<sup>18</sup> Sean Parker—renowned former president and co-creator of Facebook—recently arrived at similar conclusions, prompting him to express deep regret for his participation in the social media revolution, saying of those who are deeply saturated in the digital ecology; "It literally changes your relationship with society, with each other...It probably

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<sup>15</sup> Kevin Maney, "The Eight-Second Genius", *Newsweek Global* 164 no. 17 (May 1, 2015): 48.

<sup>16</sup> Darren Hopes, "Am I Normal?" *New Scientist*, 228, no. 3041 (October 3, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Nadine Schuurman, "Tweet Me Your Talk," *The Professional Geographer*, 65 no. 3 (2013): 369–377.

<sup>18</sup> Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2008), 24, quoted in John Naughton, *From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg* (London and New York: Quercus, 2015), 14.

interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains."<sup>19</sup> Or as Postman in more precise fashion explains:

Technology imperiously commandeers our most important terminology. It redefines ...all the words we live by...it changes what we mean by 'knowing' and 'truth,' and alters those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what the world is. It [technology] creates new conceptions of what is real.<sup>20</sup>

Walker Percy argues in his *Lost in the Cosmos* that technologies and tools have shaped people into something horrific, fragmented, hollow, and perhaps even devoid of knowledge and meaning altogether. Inundated with fragments of trivial information and entertainment at an alarming and ever-increasing pace, the self has become, "a voracious nought [sic] which expands like the feeding vacuole of an amoeba, seeking to nourish and inform its nothingness by ingesting new objects...but like a vacuole, only succeeds in emptying them out...[rendering them nothing more than] a grotesque...consumer."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the effects of a digital ecology appear to run deep.

### *Contemporary Preaching-Culture Problem*

A third challenge is that church culture is just as prone to the effects of digital media saturation as is the larger culture. Says Gordon:

In the movement from language-based media to image-based,...electronic media...our sensibilities [have been] altered...Exposition of a text...requires the development of certain human sensibilities which, if not developed, render the individual...incapable of preaching...[C]ultural changes, especially changes in

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew Field, "Former Facebook President Sean Parker: 'God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains,'" *The Telegraph*, November 10, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2017/11/10/ex-facebook-president-sean-parker-god-knows-childrens-brains/>.

<sup>20</sup> Postman, *Technopoly*, 8, 12-13.

<sup>21</sup> Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Picador, 2011), 21, 23.



the dominant media, have created a Johnny who can neither read nor write as he could in the early twentieth century, and who, therefore, cannot preach.<sup>22</sup>

He argues that preachers and also congregants are affected. “Our culture’s sensibility of composed, thoughtfully organized communication has disappeared as a *common* [sic] trait.”<sup>23</sup> A dangerous sign, Gordon points out, for, “A culture [so] accustomed...loses its ability [as well] as the necessary patience [for it]...As a medium, [print] cultivates a patient, lengthy attention span, whereas [the visual cultivates] an impatient one.”<sup>24</sup>

Southern Seminary’s President Albert Mohler similarly contends, “Expository preaching demands the central place in Christian worship as *the* event through which God speaks to His people...But an appetite for this [sort of] preaching has virtually disappeared among many Christians, content to have their fascinations with themselves encouraged from the pulpit.”<sup>25</sup>

Michael Cooper, writing for Lifeway Leadership, agrees with Mohler when he says, “Most preaching today is not really preaching...but more along the lines of motivation and self-help. We’ve advanced beyond preaching,” he sarcastically remarks. “In our culture, driven by tweets of 140 characters or less,...our preaching has become reduced to one-liners, quick turns-of phrase and ‘5 Simple Ways to’..., the equivalent of

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<sup>22</sup> Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, 16, 38.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, 54-5.

<sup>25</sup> [R. Albert Mohler], “Expository Preaching and the Recovery of Christian Worship”, Southern Equip (blog), Southern Seminary, accessed date, <http://equip.sbts.edu/article/expository-preaching-and-the-recovery-of-christian-worship/>.

a McDonalds Dollar Menu burger...quick, easy, and cheap.”<sup>26</sup> Os Guinness—noted Christian thinker and social critic—agrees, lamenting that, “Evangelicals,...once known as ‘the serious people,’ are today...among the most superficial of religious believers — lightweight in thinking, gossamer-thin in theology, and avid proponents of spirituality-lite in terms of preaching and response to life.”<sup>27</sup>

Theologian Klaas Runia, surveying the contemporary state of the church’s culture, wonders whether “preaching, as we are used to it, has had its time.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Geoffrey Stevenson, adjunct lecturer in Media Studies at University of Edinburgh, wonders in the introduction to *The Future of Preaching*, “What is the future of preaching?...will the preaching of our digitally immersed younger generations...become a welter of tweets and text messages launched into the blogosphere? And can that still be called preaching?”<sup>29</sup> Stephen Wright, Anglican minister and faculty member in the Masters in Theology Preaching Course at Spurgeon’s College answers Stevenson: “In the preaching of the future, the Bible will surely continue to occupy a crucial place...The way that the preacher uses the Bible, however, will naturally and rightly be responsive to specific cultural developments.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Cooper, “The Dangerous Task of Expository Preaching”, *Lifeway Leadership Blog* (blog), accessed Nov. 2018, <https://leadership.lifeway.com/2014/11/24/the-dangerous-task-of-expository-preaching/>.

<sup>27</sup> Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 77.

<sup>28</sup> Klaas Runia, *Sermon Under Attack*, The Moore College Lectures 1980 (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Stevenson, *The Future of Preaching* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Stevenson, *The Future of Preaching*, 84.

## **Problem Statement**

Expositional preaching has been viewed as critical and central to the mission and ministry of the church. Life in a digitally saturated environment, however, shapes today's congregants in ways that make expositional preaching increasingly difficult to receive. Pastors must therefore learn to navigate the challenges posed by the effects of digital saturation to effectively exposit the scriptures in preaching.

## **Purpose Statement**

While there is a significant body of literature dedicated to expositional preaching, and while there is also an emerging body of literature exploring the ways digital saturation affects people, far less literature aims at helping pastors meet the challenges of expositing the scriptures in a digitally saturated context. The purpose of this study is to examine how preachers navigate the challenges of expositing the scriptures to digitally saturated congregants.

## **Primary Research Questions**

1. In what ways do pastors describe the effects of digital saturation on the lives of their congregants?
  - a. Which effects do they describe as helpful?
  - b. Which effects do they describe as harmful?
2. What challenges do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?
3. What opportunities do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?

4. What strategies do pastors employ in meeting the challenges posed by intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?
  - a. How do pastors employ the use of scripture in preaching?
  - b. How do pastors use media in preaching?
  - c. How do pastors use entertainment sensibilities in preaching?
  - d. How do pastors use illustrations in preaching?
  - e. What uses of media, entertainment, and illustrations do pastors avoid using in preaching?

### **Significance of the Study**

Preachers are successors to the call issued by the Apostle Paul to his young disciple Timothy, to “Preach the word.” (2 Tim. 4:2) Therefore, scripture calls them to be faithful in doing so in every age until the Son returns.<sup>31</sup> Currently there is little in the way of the literature to aid preachers in understanding the effects of digital technology upon parishioners, nor is there sufficient literature available to guide preachers in how to faithfully, creatively, and effectively exposit the scriptures to those steeped in a digital ecology. Such literature would be significant for the church in the following ways: 1. It could help preachers better understand the widespread cultural shifts which have occurred as a direct result of changes in media. 2. This understanding should contribute to preachers coming to better understand and know the mindset and sensibilities of digitally saturated congregants and the culture around them. 3. The literature would help provide

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathan I. Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 58.

preachers with strategies for expositing the scriptures in ways that take digitally saturated sensibilities into account.

As the great preacher Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, “The most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and most urgent need in the Church, it is the greatest need of the world also.”<sup>32</sup> In typical biblical form, renewal begins from the inside out, and like good yeast, works its way through the entire loaf.<sup>33</sup> It is thus crucial for the health and well-being of parishioners, for the church as a whole, and for the world, that preachers proclaim, expound, and exposit the word of God.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Expositional Preaching:** the approach or philosophy of “preaching that takes as its central purpose the presentation and application of the text of the Bible.”<sup>34</sup>

**Expositional or Typographic Age/Mind:** the mindset, or sensibilities, developed as a product of saturation in an age dominated by print media. The term was coined by Neil Postman, who describes it further as:

a mode of thought, a method of learning, and a means of expression...  
[characterized by]: a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively, and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 17.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 13:33.

<sup>34</sup> [Mohler], “Expository Preaching.”

<sup>35</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 63.

**Media Ecology/Digital (Electric) Ecology:** the concept that media are not merely tools wielded by a culture, but tools that shape the environment of a culture.<sup>36</sup>

**Technopoly:** “Totalitarian Technocracy,”<sup>37</sup> Postman’s definition of life dominated by technology and the sort of totalitarian influences it wields in terms of a human being’s, and society’s, thinking and being. “Technopoly deprives us of the social, political, historical, metaphysical, logical, or spiritual bases for knowing.”<sup>38</sup>

**Discarnate Man:** Marshall McLuhan’s term for the sort of person produced under a digital/electronic ecology, mechanical in his thinking and concept of self, as well as his view of others and society.<sup>39</sup>

**Medium is the Message:** Marshall McLuhan’s maxim that content is communicated not merely explicitly, but predominantly implicitly, by its very form or medium.

**Gutenberg Moment:** the term given to refer to a culture-wide shift in thinking and being as a direct result of the widespread use of new media.<sup>40</sup>

**Cultural Liturgies:** the recognition—originally owing to St. Augustine—that cultures and ecologies exert formative power over our hearts and minds, through the rituals, repetitions, and patterns of life that surround us.<sup>41</sup>

**Psychical:** of or relating to the soul or mind, and essential personhood.

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<sup>36</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion and Media*, eds. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szkiarek (Eugene: OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), xx; cf. Postman, *Technopoly*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> McLuhan, *Light*, 48.

<sup>38</sup> McLuhan, *Light*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> McLuhan, *The Light*, xxviii, 46, 50, 55, 63.

<sup>40</sup> John Naughton, *From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You are What You Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 39.

**Neuroplasticity:** the malleable and changeable nature of the brain, including its effects on personhood and development.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Healy, *Endangered*, 49; Naughton, *Zuckerberg*, 20.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to examine how evangelical and Reformed preachers use expositional sermons to engage digitally saturated congregants. Three areas of literature were reviewed in order to provide a foundation for qualitative research.

First, the study examines Jesus as a preacher in the expositional tradition by examining expositional preaching in Old Testament ministry, Jesus as an expositional preacher in that Old Testament tradition, and the apostolic ministry as a continuation of the expositional preaching ministry of Jesus.

Second, the study examines the shift in the dominate media culture from print to digital. It explores its effects on both the mind and the psyche, including observable changes in learning habits and its resultant impacts on media users.

Finally, the study reviews homiletics in a digitally saturated age, surveying what pastors and theologians had to say about how preachers approach the task of preaching to digitally saturated congregants.

#### **The Expository Preaching Tradition of Jesus**

Bryan Chapell, pastor-theologian and former president of Covenant Theological Seminary, defines expository preaching as, “a message, whose structure and thought are derived from a biblical text, that covers the scope of the text...that explains the features



and context of the text, in order to disclose the enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended by the Spirit who inspired the text.”<sup>43</sup>

Tim Keller agrees with Chapell but further nuances his definition, emphasizing that the text itself ought to bear significantly on the final shape and structure of the sermon itself: “Expository preaching grounds the message in the text so that all the sermon’s points, [even], are points in the text, and it majors in the text’s major ideas.”<sup>44</sup> Keller goes on to indicate that interpretation of the text must also be faithful to the context of the entirety of the scripture. “It aligns the interpretation of the text with the doctrinal truths of the rest of the Bible...And it always situates the passage within the Bible’s narrative, showing how Christ is the final fulfillment of the text’s theme.”<sup>45</sup>

To be sure, consensus on exactly how to define “expository preaching” remains subject to much debate. One popular conception holds that it must entail a rigorous, line-by-line, word-by-word, explanation of the text. But as Irvin Busenitz, professor of Old Testament at The Masters Seminary, explains, “Just as preaching verse-by-verse is not necessarily expository, so also, preaching that is not verse-by-verse is not necessarily non-expository.”<sup>46</sup> Busenitz explains, “Jesus expounded the Scripture powerfully (Mark 1:22) but not always verse-by-verse.”<sup>47</sup> And yet, Busenitz insists, it remained thoroughly expositional in nature. While some — such as Hughes Oliphant Old — would contend

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<sup>43</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 31.

<sup>44</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching* (New York, NY: Viking, 2015), 32.

<sup>45</sup>Keller, *Preaching*, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Irvin A. Busenitz, “Must Expository Preaching Always Be Book Studies? Some Alternatives,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 2 no. 2 (Fall 1991): 139.

<sup>47</sup> Busenitz, “Must Expository Preaching”, 139.

that such preaching then falls into a separate and distinct category —e.g., topical — others, like Keller, say:

the two types of preaching are not mutually exclusive...[but] are actually overlapping categories or two poles on a spectrum...that even the most careful verse-by-verse exposition will usually refer to other places in the Bible that treat the same topic...so that all expository preaching is partially topical.<sup>48</sup>

Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Seminary, agrees with Keller. “I am convinced that we add to the confusion by discussing expository preaching as merely one *kind* [sic] of preaching—or even as the *best* [sic] kind...Let’s be clear. According to the Bible, exposition is preaching. And preaching is exposition.”<sup>49</sup> Or as John Piper puts it, “The goal of preaching is the glory of God,” and the means of that preaching is “the exposition of...the God-centered Bible.”<sup>50</sup>

For this study then, Piper’s definition will serve as a helpful starting point, and the ideas of Keller and Chapell will lend additional help. Expository preaching is preaching which has as its goal the preaching of the glory of God as the final goal of faith and discipleship, drawing upon the scriptures and their exposition as the chief means, as those scriptures reveal the aforementioned glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ, from start to finish. In this case then, it need not necessarily be performed line-by-line, or verse-by-verse, or even book-by-book nor need it fear avoiding what is often categorized as “topical,” for as Keller has noted, “all expositional preaching is, “unavoidably, partially

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<sup>48</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Al Mohler, *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2008), 50.

<sup>50</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 78.

topical, as it interacts with the rest and whole of Scripture.”<sup>51</sup> What all who contend for expository preaching seem to hold in common is that the foundation of preaching is the text of the Bible and the preacher is to unfold its meaning, and from it, instruction for faith and life.

A key issue in discerning the role of expositing the scriptures to digitally saturated congregants lies in establishing the biblical basis for expository preaching. Writing for the *New Studies in Biblical Theology* series, pastor and theologian Jonathan I. Griffiths, writes, “Many...would share the conviction...that the [expository] preaching of the word of God is at the heart of God’s plans...for the [mission] and the health of the church...that it is the central task of the pastor-teacher.”<sup>52</sup> Late pastor-theologian John Stott agrees. “The preaching and teaching of God’s word is both ‘the most important part of divine service,’ and the ‘highest and only duty and obligation’ of every bishop, pastor, and preacher.”<sup>53</sup> Mohler, agreeing with Griffiths, writes, “According to the Word of God itself, the pattern of preaching is for the Word to be read and for the Word to be explained.”<sup>54</sup> Andy Stanley, pastor of North Point Church in Atlanta, however, takes direct aim at Mohler when he said, “Guys who preach verse-by-verse through books of the Bible are cheating...because it’s easy.” And that further, “That isn’t how you grow people. No one in Scripture modeled that; there isn’t one example.”<sup>55</sup> Stanley contends—

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<sup>51</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 31.

<sup>52</sup> Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), 9.

<sup>54</sup> Albert Mohler, “As One with Authority,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 89-90.

<sup>55</sup> “Andy Stanley on Communication (Part 2),” interview by Ed Stetzer, *Christianity Today*, March 5, 2009, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2009/march/andy-stanley-on-communication-part-2.html>, quoted in J.D. Hall, “Andy Stanley Trashes Expository Preaching; Calls

against Piper, Keller, Chapell, Mohler, and others—that, “while all Scripture is equally inspired, it is not all equally applicable or relevant, and that the challenge is to read the culture and determine the felt need.”<sup>56</sup> Griffiths likewise acknowledges the sentiment popularized by Stanley, prompting him, he says, to examine whether the expository sermon might be merely the product of a particular church culture, or simply a leftover bias of the print age; “Could it be that such convictions concerning the distinctiveness and centrality of [expository] preaching are simply grounded in a blend of history and a heavy dose of pragmatism?” The vital question, however, says Griffiths, “lies neither [with] history nor pragmatism, [but with] what Scripture says about the issue.”<sup>57</sup>

Pastor-theologian Hughes Oliphant Old agrees with Griffiths and says that the biblical basis for the centrality of expository preaching is, “rooted in [none other than]...the ministry tradition/school of Jesus and the apostolic ministry that succeeded him.”<sup>58</sup> Olds further adds that Jesus found precedent for his own preaching practice in the traditions of the Old Testament tradition. Says Old, “We have to look then at the...tradition of preaching from which *his* preaching comes,...[namely] the preaching of Israel.”<sup>59</sup> When one looks at the Old Testament, he says, “One thing should certainly be[come] very clear,...the Word of God was read...explained...and preached.”<sup>60</sup>

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it ‘Easy’ and ‘Cheating,’” Pulpit and Pen (blog), updated May 12, 2015, <https://pulpitandpen.org/2015/05/08/andy-stanley-trashes-expository-preaching-calls-it-easy-and-cheating/>.

<sup>56</sup> “Andy Stanley.”

<sup>57</sup> “Andy Stanley.”

<sup>58</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 19.

<sup>59</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 28.

This section of the literature review will focus on three particular areas: first, the word-centered nature of the Old Testament's ministry and preaching tradition; second, Jesus' preaching as rooted in that Old Testament tradition; third, the apostolic ministry as a continuation of the ministry of Jesus in that same expository tradition.

### *The Expository Preaching Tradition of the Old Testament*

The purpose of this literary section will be to examine the word-centered nature of the ministry belonging to the Old Testament era. As Old points out, "We know that in the time of Jesus, the Torah...was regularly read and preached in worship...as a cardinal characteristic of Jewish worship."<sup>61</sup> But from where does this first-century Jewish tradition find its roots? Old and others insist this was not a convention introduced into later, or Second Temple, Judaism but was foundational to Judaism from its beginning.

Professor and Theologian Michael Horton, taking Old's lead, illustrates how the word of God, declared and explained, is essential to Israel's very identity. "From the very beginning, the Israelites regarded themselves as a coalition of tribes... 'called out' by 'the God who speaks,' to belong to Him by means of a covenant."<sup>62</sup> This belonging, he explains, drawing on the work of Meredith Kline,<sup>63</sup> follows a pattern where the terms of the covenant relationship are spelled out in many ways that resemble those seen in ancient Hittite, suzerain-vassal arrangements. Israel's existence, Horton says, is grounded

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<sup>61</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 22.

<sup>63</sup> Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 27. cf. Kline's work, esp., *The Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963); *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968); and *Kingdom Prologue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

in a “suzerainty treaty...a, ‘Do this and you shall live” kind of arrangement!”<sup>64</sup> The words of this treaty would have been, of necessity, written down, canonized, and then read, with the conditions expounded and explained. As Old insists, this reading was not merely occasional, but regular, and what’s more, this reading and explaining was the focal point of Israel’s life and worship. “The ministry of [reading and explaining] the Word is the [established] means of opening up and maintaining communion with God...the worshipping assembly is called together at the foot of Mount Sinai to hear the Word of God.”<sup>65</sup>

Meredith Kline concurs with Old. In the preface to *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, Kline contends that preaching necessarily involved expounding on the meaning of God’s words declared in his covenant, and that it was an early and central part of Israel’s worship. Commenting on noted German theologian Gerhard von Rad’s critical assessment of the book of Deuteronomy, Kline notes von Rad’s insistence that “the trend...in Deuteronomy...is towards exhortation, [and is] *the real* {sic} characteristic of its presentation of the law, [and further] reflects a *history of homiletic* embellishment of earlier cultic...tradition.”<sup>66</sup> More simply put, Deuteronomy reads like a sermon and reflects a tradition of “covenant ratification” practice as a pattern for worship, wherein the stipulations [of the Law] are set forth and explained.<sup>67</sup>

The consensus on the centrality of expository preaching in ancient Judaism

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<sup>64</sup> Horton, *God*, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 25, 23.

<sup>66</sup> Kline, *Structure of Authority*, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Horton, *God*, 138, 152-159, 170.

however is not universal. William Scott Green, Professor Emeritus of Religion and Judaic Studies at the University of Rochester, for instance, cautions that those of the Western literary tradition—particularly Protestant scholars and theologians—tend to categorize ancient Judaism “far too much in our image and after our likeness” and to reduce it to a “book-religion model,” which he says fails to represent accurately the fluid nature of its early form.<sup>68</sup> While not doubting the “fundamental” role scripture played in ancient Judaism’s practices, Green also warns that “to depict...Judaism as principally a religion of biblical exegesis...is to both oversimplify and overstate the evidence.”<sup>69</sup> He favors instead a more liturgical model, where the Levitical-priestly role, consisting of prayers and repeated behaviors and “disciplined engagement with God,” took center stage.<sup>70</sup>

The late Abraham Zevi Idelsohn, Professor of Jewish Music and Liturgy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati agrees with Green. He points up the sacrificial and liturgical roots of Judaism, noting the emphasis on prayer as a pattern established by Moses and sacrifice as a pattern established with Abraham.<sup>71</sup>

Michael Graves, Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, likewise argues for caution when it comes to reconstructing precisely the place of scripture-reading and exposition in early Judaism. “Out of new research has arisen greater awareness of the diversity and the flexibility in the early stages of [Judaism’s] development...particularly when attempting

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<sup>68</sup> William Scott Green, “Scripture in Rabbinic Judaism,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 9, vol. 1 (January 1987): 27-40.

<sup>69</sup> Green, *Rabbinic*, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Green, *Rabbinic*, 31.

<sup>71</sup> A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and its Development* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1967), 6.

to describe the [role of] public reading of Scripture in early Judaism.”<sup>72</sup> Graves does say, however, that a strong case for the primacy of scripture-reading in the life and worship of Israel can be made from the scriptures of the Old Testament themselves, “The first allusions to the public reading of Scripture are found in the Biblical materials themselves,” he says, pointing to Deut. 31:10-13; 2 Kings 23:1-3, and Neh. 8:1-8. He adds that, “The Levites and others gave the sense of what was read, interpreting and translating for the people.”<sup>73</sup>

Unfortunately, there is little extra-biblical historical evidence to decipher precisely what early Judaism looked like. And as Graves points out, the synagogue alone will not give us a complete picture; there is the temple worship to consider, of which, “Torah reading did not form an integral part.”<sup>74</sup> The earliest external data providing insights into Jewish worship are comments by Philo and Josephus, who speak to a synagogue tradition devoted to the public reading of scripture. There is, in addition to these, the discovery of an early synagogue inscription, known as the “Theodotus Inscription,” specifying its being dedicated to “the reading of Torah and study of the commandments.”<sup>75</sup>

From these there emerges a picture that many biblical scholars say corresponds to the New Testament and the Gospels, with its strong emphasis on the centrality of

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<sup>72</sup> Michael P. Graves, “The Public Reading of Scripture in Early Judaism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 3 (September 2007): 468.

<sup>73</sup> Graves, *Public Reading*, 469.

<sup>74</sup> Graves, *Public Reading*, 472.

<sup>75</sup> Graves, *Public Reading*, 472.



scripture in the role of Jewish religious life. Ellis contends—disagreeing in part with Moore and Idelsohn, saying, “The gospel traditioners organized, and...explained, events in Jesus' ministry...[including] his use of Scripture...in terms of Old Testament texts, and they did so in patterns similar to...midrash”;<sup>76</sup> midrash being the Jewish tradition having to do with interpreting, expositing, and meting out a biblical text’s meaning.

### *The Expository Preaching of Jesus in the Gospels*

As Old insists, “Jesus was preeminently a preacher of the Word...His three-year ministry was above all a preaching ministry.”<sup>77</sup> More specifically, Old clarifies, “he was an itinerant preacher.”<sup>78</sup> Jesus preached in a number of contexts, according to the Gospel accounts, including the synagogues, the temple, mountains, and countryside settings, as well as in more private settings among his disciples and public settings as well. “He did not limit himself to formal sermons in the synagogues, to be sure, but seemed to have preached wherever he could gather a crowd.”<sup>79</sup> For this reason, the picture of Jesus’ preaching—and its implications for a model of preaching in the church—will necessarily be a composite one.

The synagogue is a good place to start in constructing such a composite. As Mark asserts in his gospel account, “Jesus preached in the synagogues”, and his repeated mention of it suggests it was a frequent and regular practice of Jesus’.<sup>80</sup> As Professor E.

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<sup>76</sup> E. Earle Ellis, “Jesus’ Use of the Old Testament and the Genesis of New Testament Theology,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993): 69.

<sup>77</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 111.

<sup>78</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 111.

<sup>79</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 113.

<sup>80</sup> Mark 1:21; 1:39; 3:1-6; 6:2

Earle Ellis of Southwestern Seminary points out, “The sayings of Jesus [recorded in the Gospels] belonged to an expository (midrashic) context, . . . and the stories (parables) and sayings without a context were often disassembled midrash.”<sup>81</sup> Ellis continues, “Jesus’ teaching, like those of other Jewish religious leaders of the time, had to do with . . . instructions and controversies about the interpretation of Scripture.”<sup>82</sup>

But while Jesus’ teaching certainly contained an element of midrash, it would be limiting to confine it to only that. As Matthew asserts in his gospel, from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus came preaching the arrival of the kingdom of God in himself. Yet even that proclamation, Ellis observes, was accomplished in an expository manner. “Jesus presented his message concerning the kingdom of God . . . as an exposition of Scripture . . . he conducted himself like the Jewish Scripture scholars, whose role was to give authoritative interpretations of Scripture.”<sup>83</sup> This preaching style is visible throughout the ministry of Jesus’ preaching in the accounts of all the gospel writers but seems to be a special emphasis of Luke’s.

In particular, two of Luke’s accounts of Jesus’ teaching serve to display the importance of Jesus’ exposition of scripture as a key feature of his ministry. The first is of Jesus at twelve years of age, on return from the Feast of the Passover with his parents, who after three days discover him missing, only to find him “in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.”<sup>84</sup> Says James Edwards,

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<sup>81</sup> Ellis, “Jesus’ Use”, 62.

<sup>82</sup> Ellis, “Jesus’ Use”, 62.

<sup>83</sup> Ellis, “Jesus’ Use”, 63-4.

<sup>84</sup> Luke 2:46.

professor of theology at Whitworth University, the scene portrays Jesus here as, “No ordinary student; his mastery of Torah makes him a full conversation partner with the temple teachers.”<sup>85</sup> As “a full conversation partner,” Edwards is speaking of Jesus’ ability to engage in the Jewish practice of midrash, where interpretations and implications of the scriptural text are offered and debated. D.A. Carson, in his commentary, says that Luke is intentionally portraying Jesus as an emerging authority, able to hold his own while “engaged in midrashic discussion of biblical texts.”<sup>86</sup>

The second account is of Jesus’ preaching in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth.<sup>87</sup> According to Old, the episode is particularly instructive in that it not only portrays Jesus as a preacher in the expository tradition but that it also portrays him as a preacher aware that his own expositional preaching ministry is rooted in the Old Testament precedent. Says Old, “One could hardly find a better text on which to preach a sermon on the messianic preaching ministry. Here we see Jesus preaching on preaching.”<sup>88</sup> Of the several observations Old makes about the sermon and its structure, he highlights the fact that Jesus “uses two passages from the former prophets to interpret the lesson from Isaiah,”<sup>89</sup> a point which he says Luke uses to demonstrate “the principle that Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture. When Jesus preached in the synagogue on

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<sup>85</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans/Apollos, 2015), 94.

<sup>86</sup> Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D Douglas. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: With the New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 852.

<sup>87</sup> Luke 4:16ff.

<sup>88</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 131.

<sup>89</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 131

the Sabbath, he was an expositional preacher. His sermon was an interpretation of Scripture.”<sup>90</sup>

Kimball, in agreement with Old, points out, “Luke, alone of the Synoptic Gospels, refers to Jesus’ practice of teaching in the synagogues as habitual.”<sup>91</sup> Kimball’s point is that his teaching was habitual, and his method of preaching, in which his practice was to make “frequent use of the OT” and to make use of them, as in Luke 4, by employing a highly sophisticated “exegetical technique...of Jesus’ day... known as *gezerah shawah* (*sic*) (the joining of two texts based on a common catchword) frequently used by Jewish theologians to connect two verses from different literary contexts.”<sup>92</sup> Commentators have often noted the apparent difficulty of Jesus’ scripture quotation in the Nazareth synagogue sermon, with its conflation of Isa. 61 and Isa. 48. The joining together of these texts, Kimball explains, “is possible here only by use of the Greek text of the Old Testament, as well as an implicit midrash, an interpretive alteration of the text for exegetical purposes.”<sup>93</sup> In other words, Luke aims to show that Jesus’ preaching style was expositional and sophisticatedly so; he was an expositor par excellence.

To be sure, though, the majority of Jesus’ preaching recorded by the gospel writers takes place outside of the synagogue setting, including the Sermon on the Mount, the temple courts, in private among his disciples, among the crowds of Palestine, and often in parables. What is to be made of these?

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<sup>90</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 132.

<sup>91</sup> Charles Kimball III, “Jesus’ Exposition in Luke 4:16-30: An Inquiry in Light of Jewish Hermeneutics,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 185.

<sup>92</sup> Kimball III, “Jesus’ Exposition”, 179, 190.

<sup>93</sup> Kimball III, “Jesus’ Exposition”, 190.

Of the Sermon on the Mount, Old points out that, “for Matthew, Jesus is the preacher who completely fulfills the priestly role of teaching the Law of Moses and the prophetic role of proclaiming the Word of God.”<sup>94</sup> By “proclaiming,” Old means explaining and expositing. “The sermon [on the Mount] moves on to a series of interpretations of Scripture... interpret[ing] a number of cardinal precepts of the Law, the commandments of the Decalogue itself.”<sup>95</sup> It should be noted, however, that Old’s insistence that the sermon’s non-topical nature is unnecessary at this point; other scholars define the sermon, at least in its preserved form, as more topical in nature. James Stitzinger, associate professor of Historical Theology at The Master’s Seminary, explains, “A history of Bible expositors must include Christ who is both the model of preaching and the message preached.”<sup>96</sup>

Old and Stitzinger’s emphases on Jesus as a preacher in the expository tradition stand over and against a more popular tendency to characterize Jesus as predominantly an extemporaneous preacher, who tended to preach topically,<sup>97</sup> speaking to contemporary cultural needs rather than explaining and expounding the scriptures. Luke Geraty and Kenny Burchard, pastors and theologians who head up the Vineyard Church’s “Think Theology,” for instance, construct an argument against the priority of expository preaching by arguing that Jesus himself was not predominantly an expository preacher

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<sup>94</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 137.

<sup>95</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 139.

<sup>96</sup> Stitzinger, “The History of Expository Preaching”, 10.

<sup>97</sup> Busenitz takes issue with the “topical preaching” label, contending that it has been abused. He contends that Jesus often spoke “topically”, but that his topics were Scripture-chosen, derived from categories God had already established in the Scriptures, and not willy-nilly, ad-hoc, reactions to culture; i.e., Jesus still let the Word establish the agenda, rather than his audience. Busenitz, 141.

but was more-or-less an *ad hoc* preacher, who “drew on his immediate context and setting, . . . preaching what the people needed to hear,” and that “it’s possible to argue none of the sermons recorded in the Gospels are what can be described as expository sermons.”<sup>98</sup> As cases in point, Geraty points to the Sermon on the Mount, as well as Jesus’ extensive use of parable.

Theologians such as Craig Blomberg, professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary, and Charles Kimball III, professor and theologian at Howard Payne University, however, disagree. They point out that even Jesus’ parables were not merely anecdotal teachings gathered from contemporary or readily available occasions but instead were frequently expositions of Old Testament texts, even if they are veiled, which seems to be the case in the majority of them. Kimball points to Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants, which commentators have readily recognized as an exposition of Isaiah 5, as just one such case.<sup>99</sup> That parable, Kimball notes, is but, “one of eight pericopes in Luke in which Jesus expounds explicit Old Testament quotations.”<sup>100</sup> In his *Interpreting the Parables*, Blomberg repeatedly demonstrates a pattern of Jesus’ extensive use of either Old Testament quotes or allusions throughout the collection of his discourses.<sup>101</sup> The parallels and allusions between Jesus’ parables and Old Testament texts are strong enough to have warranted an interesting thesis by Michael Goulder, who

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<sup>98</sup> Luke Geraty, “Jesus Didn’t Seem to Preach Many Expository Sermons!,” ThinkTheology.org (blog), March 29, 2017, <http://thinktheology.org/2017/03/29/jesus-didnt-seem-to-preach-many-expository-sermons/>.

<sup>99</sup> Kimball III, “Jesus’ Exposition”, 77.

<sup>100</sup> Kimball III, “Jesus’ Exposition”, 77.

<sup>101</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 98-100.

argues that the gospels and teachings of Jesus, including the parables, are midrashic elaborations which correspond directly to a synagogue lectionary program.”<sup>102</sup>

### *Jesus’ Expository Tradition and the Apostles*

The strongest evidence for the centrality of expository preaching and teaching in the ministry of Jesus lies in the ministerial traditions evident in the apostolic tradition. Given the data of the early tradition of the church, it is evident, Old says, that, “the preaching and proclaiming and hearing of the word of God...is not an auxiliary activity to worship...it is simply in itself, worship.”<sup>103</sup> Griffiths notes the primacy of preaching in New Testament ministry of the apostles: “Preaching...is unquestionably a central part of the New Testament’s ministry...in his paradigmatic charge to Timothy, and preachers who follow him, Paul calls them to proclaim God’s word authoritatively and didactically.”<sup>104</sup> Old concurs; “Jesus was not only a preacher, but also a trainer of preachers;...Jesus sends the disciples out to do expository preaching, and to explain the [Old Testament].”<sup>105</sup>

That expository teaching and preaching is a central part of New Testament ministry is difficult to contest. Stitzinger contends, “The preaching of the apostles...contributes significantly to the history of expository preaching...The epistles are for the most part written expositions.”<sup>106</sup> And as Old summarily concludes,

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<sup>102</sup> Michael Goulder, *The Evangelists’ Calendar* (London: SPCK, 1978, 73.

<sup>103</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 189.

<sup>104</sup> Griffiths, *Preaching in New Testament*, 66.

<sup>105</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 116, 136-7.

<sup>106</sup> Stitzinger, “History,” 5.

“Christianity, like Judaism, . . . is a religion of the book.”<sup>107</sup> What distinguishes Christian religion from Judaism, where exposition is especially concerned, is in the hermeneutic Jesus taught and commanded the disciples to perpetuate; a system of interpretation that has come to be called, “the apostolic hermeneutic.”

Dennis Johnson—professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Seminary, CA—describes the hermeneutic as, “the chief characteristic of Jesus’ ministry, and subsequently the apostles.” This hermeneutic consisted chiefly in “the conviction that the redemptive events in Israel’s history . . . while real historical events . . . were [to be seen as] invested by God with symbolic significance that pointed beyond their own time and place in history . . . to Jesus himself.”<sup>108</sup> Old agrees, saying, “Jesus sends the disciples out to do expository preaching, to explain the Scriptures as he himself explained them,”<sup>109</sup> as being chiefly about himself.

Jonathan Griffiths, concurs, explaining that an examination of the preaching on display most especially throughout the book of Acts and the epistles shows the apostles doing precisely that. “Jesus sends out his disciples to preach God’s word just as he preached it, [as being about himself].”<sup>110</sup> This is the new paradigm, he contends, a point Luke puts front and center as illustrated at the outset of the book with Peter’s sermon at Pentecost. From Psalm 51—a psalm not traditionally, up to that point, associated with

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<sup>107</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 153.

<sup>108</sup> Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 137.

<sup>109</sup> Old, *Reading and Preaching*, 116, 136-7.

<sup>110</sup> Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament*, 64.



Messianic hopes—he demonstrates that “Jesus is rightly regarded as the fulfillment of the whole of the prophetic traditions of the Old Testament.”<sup>111</sup>

Keller emphasizes that this is the key to not only interpretation but also to the ministry of the apostles. “The apostle Paul spoke often from the Scriptures, and they were all Old Testament. Yet he also contends that he hasn’t preached a text unless he preaches Christ.”<sup>112</sup> Johnson thoroughly agrees with Keller but notes that in some traditions, some skepticism regarding the apostolic hermeneutic remains. He mentions by example, Walter Kaiser, who “has consistently maintained that it is both theologically and hermeneutically wrong-headed to import the completed canon of Scripture as context into the exegesis of Old Testament texts.”<sup>113</sup> But, as Johnson goes on to note, even Kaiser could scarcely resist doing precisely what he objects to:

in [his] *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament*, Kaiser offers the example of a Christ-centered exposition of Leviticus 16:1-34, which highlights . . . both the similarities and the differences between the ancient Day of Atonement ceremony and the fulfillment of atonement accomplished by Jesus . . . as a Christian preacher, Kaiser cannot help but preach Lev. 16 not only in its ancient Israelite setting, but also in light of the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ, the eschatological priest.<sup>114</sup>

As Johnson goes on to note, Paul, most explicitly, lays out the philosophy of apostolic ministry, and that that ministry consists of preaching the word of God, and of expounding Christ as the fulfillment of that word.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Griffiths, *Preaching in the New Testament*, 55, 64.

<sup>112</sup> Tim Keller and Edmund Clowney, “Preaching the Gospel in a Post-Modern World (unpublished class notes/manual),” 15.

<sup>113</sup> Johnson, *Him*, 157.

<sup>114</sup> Johnson, *Him*, 158-159.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Johnson, *Him*, 66, 75.

## Media, Epistemology, and the Digital Age

The expositional preaching tradition has been, since the time of the Reformation, dependent upon the medium of the printed word and the world that ensued from it, including a culture at large with a typographic mind. But as John Naughton, emeritus professor of the Public Understanding of Technology at The British Open University, points out, “We’re in the throes of a revolution...a radical transformation of our communications environment...And the strange thing about living through a revolution is that it’s very difficult to see what’s going on.”<sup>116</sup> This communications revolution involves not merely mediums of communication but also all sorts of technological innovations, which in concert, he observes, serve to “change the world” and “shape the cultural environment in which we grow up.”<sup>117</sup>

This section of literature review will focus on the nature of media and its relationship to epistemology; specifically, the influence of media in the print age versus that of the digital, or electronic, age.

### *Media and the Typographic Mind*

Lutheran Pastor and Theologian Richard Jensen, relying on the work of Jesuit priest and media-theorist Walter Ong,<sup>118</sup> says, “We are living through only the second communication change in the history of mankind.”<sup>119</sup> The first change, he explains, was the shift from what Ong calls an aural/oral culture, to a culture of print. The second, is the

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<sup>116</sup> John Naughton, *From Gutenberg to Zuckerberg*, 1.

<sup>117</sup> Naughton, *Zuckerberg*, 2.

<sup>118</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality & Literacy* (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 1982).

<sup>119</sup> Richard Jensen, *Thinking in Story* (Lima, OH: C.S.S., 1993), 45.

shift from print to electronic media. And as Jensen goes on to point out, culture tends to notice its media environment when it's in the midst of a media shift. But the church, he says, has been slow to realize the change or appreciate its value.

Media ecology is a young field of study, and Marshall McLuhan famously summed up its core principle. "The medium is the message." A highly dense aphorism, McLuhan—and then others after him, such as Ong and Postman—explains that the medium, or form that communication takes, shapes and informs people's sense of being. To use another McLuhan aphorism, "We shape our tools, and afterwards our tools shape us." He continues, "All media is an extension of man [which] affects the whole psychic and social complex."<sup>120</sup> As an example of the powerful effects wrought by a particular medium, or "extension of man," to borrow McLuhan's definition, Postman points to the Lewis Mumford's observations regarding the effects of the clock as a medium. "The clock," he says, "is a piece of powerful machinery whose 'product' is seconds and minutes...but which has served to make us into time-keepers, and then time-savers, and now time-servers."<sup>121</sup> Mumford is illustrating what McLuhan has said: "Any technology gradually creates a totally new human environment [resulting in] personal and social consequences."<sup>122</sup> Says Naughton, using a biological illustration, "Any change in the environment...will have corresponding effects on the organism...Change the environment, and you change the organism; change the media environment, and you change society." Or to borrow again from McLuhan, "Media, by altering the

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<sup>120</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding*, 19.

<sup>121</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 11.

<sup>122</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding*, viii, 23.

environment, evoke unique...sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think...act...[and] perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change.<sup>123</sup>

As Postman explains, print did not merely remain a form of communication; it shaped the world after its image, giving birth to a whole civilization typographic in nature, possessing what he called a “Typographic Mind.”<sup>124</sup> Gilmore adds, “The invention of the printing press brought about the most radical transformation in the history of Western Civilization...its effects felt sooner or later in every department of human activity.”<sup>125</sup> Print gave birth to the Age of Exposition, which Postman says “was a method of thought and learning...[which entails] a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively, and sequentially, a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction.”<sup>126</sup> And this value to order, he explains, fosters a “content-laden” society, which tends to be “serious” and “rational,...dominated by reason...and orderly arrangement...Whenever a language is controlled by the rigors of print—an idea, a fact, a claim,...[actual] content is the inevitable result.”<sup>127</sup>

Says former President of the Bibliographical Society of America, Thomas Adams, “The book is an artifact that during the 500-odd [sic] years since 1450 has had a more profound effect on history than any other invention.”<sup>128</sup> Nicholas Carr agrees. He points

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<sup>123</sup> McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium is the Message*, 41.

<sup>124</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 63.

<sup>125</sup> Myron Gilmore, *The World of Humanism, 1453-1517* (New York, NY: Harper, 1952), 186.

<sup>126</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 63.

<sup>127</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 50-51.

<sup>128</sup> Thomas R. Adams, review of *Books and Society in History: Papers of the Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Preconference, 24-28 June, 1980, Boston, Massachusetts*, ed. By Kenneth E. Carpenter and *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. By William

out that literary skills developed a literary ethic, and this literary ethic became the ethic of the Western and developed world, transcending all disciplines. “The literary ethic...became the ethic of the historian...and of the philosopher...and crucially...that of the scientist.”<sup>129</sup> Naughton observes, “Perhaps the most intriguing lesson of the Gutenberg experiment is...that in addition to reshaping society, dominant communications technology may also reshape us.”<sup>130</sup>

In recent decades scientists have begun to explain this “reshaping,” pointing to what they call neuroplasticity: the “plastic qualities” of the brain to grow, adapt, and take shape in accordance with the stimuli of a person’s environment. As Dr. Kenneth Klivingston, of the Salk Institute in San Diego, a pioneer in neuroplasticity, indicated in the 1990’s, “We know that environments shape brains...[in terms of] both their function, as well as structure.”<sup>131</sup> As Wolf explains, “reading develops circuits...not natural to, or hardwired in...the brain, involving input from two hemispheres, four lobes in each hemisphere (frontal, temporal, parietal and occipital), and all five layers of the brain.”<sup>132</sup> Along these lines, educational psychologist Jane Healy notes the connection between “the abilities of language-related learning (e.g., reading, writing, analytical reasoning oral expression) [in developing] sustained attention and problem solving.”<sup>133</sup>

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L. Joyce, David D. Hall, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench, *The Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America* 79 no. 4 (Fourth Quarter 1985): 578.

<sup>129</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 76.

<sup>130</sup> Naughton, *Zuckerberg*, 24.

<sup>131</sup> Healy, *Endangered Minds*, 51.

<sup>132</sup> Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2018), 20.

<sup>133</sup> Healy, *Endangered*, 46.

Nicholas Carr, acclaimed writer on technology, reflecting on recent research in the field of neuroplasticity, noted the role that literary immersion plays in developing one's ability to "follow lines of argument, or narrative."<sup>134</sup> Maryanne Wolf—professor of Human Development, former director of Reading and Learning Research at Tufts University, now at UCLA—in agreement with Carr, claims that research continues to show how "print-based mediums...develop...cognitive processes that absorb and acquire new cognitive capacities."<sup>135</sup> Her conclusion echoes Ong's own, that "writing [itself] restructures consciousness."<sup>136</sup> Naughton likewise observes, "Perhaps the most intriguing lesson of the Gutenberg experiment is...that in addition to reshaping society, dominant communications technology may also reshape us."<sup>137</sup>

As McLuhan observed, "A new medium is never [merely] an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes...for them."<sup>138</sup> Postman agrees, saying, "Technological change is neither additive nor subtractive. It is ecological...in the sense [that]...one significant change generates total change."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Carr, *The Shallows*, 75.

<sup>135</sup> Wolf, *Reader, Come Home*, 8.

<sup>136</sup> Ong, *Orality*, xiv.

<sup>137</sup> Naughton, *Zuckerberg*, 24.

<sup>138</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding*, 237.

<sup>139</sup> Postman, *Technopoly*, 18.

## *Typography and Protestantism*

Over the last couple of decades, especially, historical theologians have begun to observe and comment on the relationship between Protestantism and the print age. As James A. Taylor asserts, “The Protestant Reformation was the child of printing.”<sup>140</sup> Professor of Church History Leonard Sweet observes likewise. “Protestantism was a religion of The Book, an observation scholars are finding is more than trivially true.”<sup>141</sup> As McLuhan—one of the first to observe and comment on the print age’s effect on the shape of religious tradition—asserts that moveable print is ultimately at the heart of the “Protestant schism... Without such a technological innovation, Luther and the Protestant movement would have been literally inconceivable.”<sup>142</sup> Historian Elizabeth Eisenstein agrees with McLuhan. Quoting historian A.G. Dickens she notes, “Lutherism... was from the first a child of the printed book, and through his vehicle, Luther was able to make exact, standardized, and ineradicable impressions on the mind of Europe.”<sup>143</sup>

While the Reformation was birthed in Europe, America ultimately provided the ideal context for the marriage of the Typographic Mind and religious expression. As Sweet observes, “Protestants were masters of the printed word.”<sup>144</sup> David Paul Nord, professor of History and Journalism at Indiana University, notes, “by priesthood of all

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<sup>140</sup> Postman, *Technopoly*, 18.

<sup>141</sup> Leonard I. Sweet, "Communication and Change in American Religious History: A Historiographical Probe," in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 9.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>143</sup> Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 148.

<sup>144</sup> Sweet, "Communication," 6.

believers” the Reformation meant more specifically, “a priesthood of readers.”<sup>145</sup> Chief among the Protestant traditions that cherished the printed word were the Calvinist-Puritans, a tradition which, Sweet observes, dominated the early colonial church landscape. And as Postman notes, “The religion of the Calvinist Puritans *demand*ed that they be literate...the colonists were preoccup[ie]d with the printed word.”<sup>146</sup> James H. Moorhead, professor of American Church History at Princeton, says, “Protestantism had emphasized a theology of the Word...and used print as a major weapon in their struggle to reform Christendom.”<sup>147</sup> Richard Molard agrees noting, “Protestantism was born with printing and has been the religion in which printing has played a vital part.”<sup>148</sup>

David Buttrick, in his essay, “Preaching to the ‘Faith’ in America,” attributes this to the “cultural synthesis,” or “correspondence,” that occurred “between Protestantism and the Enlightenment”<sup>149</sup> and says in effect that the two came together in America to make for something of a perfect storm. Moorhead notes that Colonial America embraced the medium of print like no other nation has.<sup>150</sup> “Thus the colonization of America coincided with an expanded marketing of books. Enlightenment Protestantism was a

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<sup>145</sup> Sweet, “Communication,” 5.

<sup>146</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 32.

<sup>147</sup> Sweet, “Communication,” 218.

<sup>148</sup> Richard Molard, *Horizon Protestants* (June 1975) quoted in David G. Buttrick, “Preaching to the ‘Faith’ of America,” in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 311.

<sup>149</sup> Buttrick, “Preaching,” 302; 309.

<sup>150</sup> James H. Moorhead, “The Millennium and the Media,” in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 218.



typological movement.”<sup>151</sup>

Former pastor and Christian thinker Shane Hipps observes that this typological emphasis came to bear most conspicuously on the sermon, with its biases, including “a strong emphasis on objectivity, abstraction, and reason.”<sup>152</sup> These emphases, he explains, came to displace the prior oral culture’s emphasis on “tribal, mysterious, and sacramental experiences,” with its subsequent modes of thinking and perceiving, and being.<sup>153</sup> In turn, “modern sermons became extremely abstract, lengthy, and dense.”<sup>154</sup> Jensen agrees with Hipps, calling this form of preaching, “Gutenberg homiletics,” being “characterized by a linear approach to proclamation...prepared under criteria [for] written material...logical, sequential, abstract in nature...dominated by left-brain thinking.”<sup>155</sup> As an example of this sort of preaching, Hipps points to George Whitfield’s sermon entitled, “‘A Preservative Against Unsettled Notions, and Want of Principles, in Regard to Righteousness and Christian perfection.’ The title alone,” he says, “reveals the tremendous preference for complex, abstract thinking [prevalent] during the age of print; it sounds more like a doctrinal dissertation than a sermon.”<sup>156</sup> This example is no anomaly but is reflected in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards and his contemporaries, including Whitfield.

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<sup>151</sup> Buttrick, “Preaching,” 311

<sup>152</sup> Shane Hipps, *Hidden Power* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2005), 51.

<sup>153</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 51.

<sup>154</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power.*, 57.

<sup>155</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 7.

<sup>156</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 57.

## *The Digital Age and Epistemology*

But now, as Naughton observes, with the advent of digital technology, “a revolution...comparable...to that of Johannes Gutenberg...has been triggered.”<sup>157</sup> In the advent of the digital age, “we’re in the midst of a major upheaval in our information environment...and the most intriguing lesson of the Gutenberg experiment is...that in addition to reshaping society, dominant communications technology may also reshape us.”<sup>158</sup> Todd Gitlin describes the current digital age as one of saturation in media to, “an unprecedented degree...a torrent of...streaming...images, songs, and stories has become our familiar world...supersaturation...a relentless pace and pattern of interruption.”<sup>159</sup>

Postman, drawing on McLuhan, dates the beginning of the digital age with the invention of the telegraph, which as a medium, succeeded in bringing “into being a world of broken time and broken attention,” with “facts push[ing] out other facts into and out of consciousness at speeds that neither permit nor require evaluation,”<sup>160</sup> creating a public discourse more suitable to the “sensational, fragmented, and impersonal.”<sup>161</sup> Gitlin, picking up Postman’s thread, observes that the speed of the digital age becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, demanding content that conforms to its medium. “The programs, ads, songs, and stories [of the digital age] exist in passing. One by one they can be taken lightly. They are *made* [sic] to be taken lightly. To fill their moments in

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<sup>157</sup> Naughton, *Zuckerberg*, xiv.

<sup>158</sup> Naughton, *Zuckerberg*, 24

<sup>159</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Book/Henry Holt, 2016), 3.

<sup>160</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 69-70.

<sup>161</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 70.

time but yield gracefully to their successors.”<sup>162</sup> The effect is one that Gitlin insists makes for “deficits in [both] attention and sociability.”<sup>163</sup>

It is a world, Jensen says, reflecting on McLuhan, where people plug in to a wired world and live wired-up, under a state of what Jensen calls, “media hot massage.”<sup>164</sup> “Massage” is a term initiated by McLuhan, to describe the way media affects its recipients. McLuhan categorized media in terms of “hot” and “cool.” By “hot,” McLuhan means media such as television, which activates the physical senses, such as both the ears and the eyes; whereas by “cool” he meant media that tends to send the media recipient inward. Print he characterizes as a “cool” medium, meaning that it does not foist itself upon our senses; e.g., an open book does not command our attention. When a reader picks up a book, while his mental energies are activated, his physical/bodily senses are largely not. A digital world is a world of “hot massage,” where senses are constantly massaged and affected.<sup>165</sup>

This “hot-massage-world,” Postman calls “the peek-a-boo world,” and like McLuhan, notes that it creates, “its own epistemology,” one that is “uncompromisingly hostile to typography, . . . promot[ing] incoherence, . . . triviality . . . [dealing] not in the exchange of ideas but the exchange of images . . . not arguing with propositions but with good looks, celebrities, and commercials.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*, 8.

<sup>163</sup> Gitlin, *Media Unlimited*, 8.

<sup>164</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 53.

<sup>165</sup> Jensen, *Story*, cf. 49-51.

<sup>166</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 79-80.

Maryanne Wolf, reflecting on these insights, wonders at the potential impact—both seen and unforeseen—inherent in the age of electronic/digital media, and expresses deep concern about the potential dangers it might pose to those positive features developed by the literary brain. “What will happen,” she asks, “if the ‘language of books no longer fits the culture’s cognitive style, [which is]...fast, heavily visual, and artificially truncated?...Will people develop the more time-demanding cognitive skills required by print-based mediums?”<sup>167</sup> Wolf’s concerns stem in part from discoveries made about the way the brain’s neural centers function, particularly as they form habits as they interact with new media.

French neurologist Stanislas Dehaene, whom Wolf cites, points to the occurrence of “neuronal recycling...the partial or total invasion of a cortical territory initially devoted to a different function, by a cultural invention, a form of reorientation or retraining of the [neuronal pathways].”<sup>168</sup> Naughton agrees, saying, “Neuroplasticity...imposes its own form of determinism on our behavior. As particular circuits in our brain strengthen through repetition of a mental or physical activity, they begin to transform that activity into habit.”<sup>169</sup> And as physicist and psychoanalyst Norman Doidge explains, “If we stop exercising our [literary] skills, we do not just forget them; the brain space for those skills is turned over to the skills we practice instead.”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Wolf, *Reader, Come Home*, 8, 87.

<sup>168</sup> Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain* (New York, NY: Viking, 2009), 147.

<sup>169</sup> Naughton, *Zuckerberg*, 34.

<sup>170</sup> Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 59.

Patricia Greenfield wonders then if the skills developed for centuries in the literary mind might be lost for their discontinued use. “Every medium,” she says, “develops some cognitive skills at the expense of others.”<sup>171</sup> Postman agrees, “Media change does not...result in equilibrium. It sometimes creates more than it destroys. But sometimes it’s the other way around...my point of view is that the four-hundred-year...dominance of typography was of far greater benefit than deficit.”<sup>172</sup> Those skills associated with reading that Green feels are particularly at risk in a digital age include, “deep processing: mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination and reflection.”<sup>173</sup> Carr is similarly concerned, wondering if in the emergence of the digital age with its corollary digitized mind, whether the culture is not witnessing “the dissolution of the linear mind.”<sup>174</sup> He adds, “the boons are real. But they come at a price.”<sup>175</sup>

Carr and Greenfield join a growing number of psychologists, sociologists, media ecologists, and neurologists pointing to the effects of living in an digitized culture. At the head of that list of effects are those such as increased distraction and the inability to pay attention, inability to do deep thinking, poor long-term memory performance, decreased reading comprehension, and a decline in higher-order thinking skills.

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<sup>171</sup> Patricia M. Greenfield, “Technology and Informal Education: What is Taught, What is Learned,” *Science* 323 no. 5910 (January 2, 2009): 71.

<sup>172</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 29.

<sup>173</sup> Greenfield, “Informal Education,” 71.

<sup>174</sup> Carr, *Shallows*, 1.

<sup>175</sup> Carr, *Shallows*, 6.

Bruce Friedman, professor of Pathology at the University of Michigan Medical School, observes in a blog:

The research documents a new form of information seeking behaviour” ...characterised [sic] as being horizontal, bouncing, checking, and viewing in nature. Users are promiscuous, diverse, and volatile.’ ...By breaking the linear print model...of the past five centuries, the hyperlinked web seems to be instilling a hyperactive approach to gathering and digesting information, an approach that emphasizes speed, scanning, and skimming... We store lots of information, but like distracted squirrels we rarely go back to examine it in depth. We want more acorns.”<sup>176</sup>

Postman agrees with Friedman, noting that the shift in digital and electronic media’s “focus on image undermines traditional definitions of information...the [image] forces exposition into the background, and in some cases obliterated it altogether.”<sup>177</sup>

Australian educational psychologist, John Sweller, agrees with Postman. Looking at the ways in which information and acquisition and processing have shifted in the digital age, Sweller highlights “the instrumental role...that working memory plays...in the transfer of information into long-term memory.” A role, which Sweller explains, is crucial in not just storing long term facts, but also for “creating complex concepts, or schemas,...[from which] are derived our intellectual prowess.”<sup>178</sup> Carr, referencing Sweller, explains, “The depth of our intelligence hinges on our ability to transfer information from working memory to long-term memory and weave it into conceptual schemas.”<sup>179</sup> But as media expert Edie Williams explains, digital media users “show

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<sup>176</sup> Bruce Friedman, “How Google is Changing Our Information-Seeking Behavior,” Lab Soft News (blog), Education Pathology Consortium, February 6, 2008, [https://labsoftnews.typepad.com/lab\\_soft\\_news/2008/02/how-google-is-c.html](https://labsoftnews.typepad.com/lab_soft_news/2008/02/how-google-is-c.html).

<sup>177</sup> Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 74.

<sup>178</sup> Paul Chandler and John Sweller, *Cognitive Load Theory* (New York, NY: Springer, 2011), 6-7.

<sup>179</sup> Carr, *Shallows*, 124.

greater amount of activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which is overloaded by hyperattention to minute task after task, . . . and low-level decision making, leaving [little] capacity for digesting what has been read . . . or critical thinking.”<sup>180</sup> Neuroscientists call this activity of the working memory in dealing with information flow, “cognitive load.” Regarding cognitive load, Torkel Klingberg says, “A high cognitive load amplifies the distractedness we experience. When our brain is overtaxed, we find distractions more distracting,” thus creating something of a self-fulfilling prophecy feedback loop.<sup>181</sup>

Jakob Nielsen, Danish web consultant, conducted an on-line eye-tracking study aimed at probing the sort of findings Klingberg, Williams, and Carr propose. What he found seemed to confirm much of their findings: readers read online in a different fashion from the way they do a page of printed text, and the overwhelming majority “skimmed the text quickly, in a pattern that roughly resembled the letter F . . . very different from what you learned in school,” he says, reading on average “eighteen percent of the verbiage . . . spending ten seconds or less . . . per page.”<sup>182</sup> Ziming Liu, a library of science professor at San Jose State University, reported similar findings. Liu’s study consisted of 113 highly educated professions, 81 percent of whom reported spending more time “browsing and scanning,” doing far more “non-linear reading.” A mere 16 percent

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<sup>180</sup> Edie Williams, “Driven to Distraction: How Electronic Media are Affecting the Brain and the Implications for Human Resource Development in the Future,” *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 14, no. 4 (2012): 632.

<sup>181</sup> Torkel Klingberg, *The Overflowing Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72–75.

<sup>182</sup> Jakob Nielsen, “F-Shaped Pattern For Reading Web Content (Original Study),” Nielsen Norman Group, April 17, 2006, <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/f-shaped-pattern-reading-web-content-discovered/>

reported that they were giving more sustained attention to reading.<sup>183</sup> Says Liu, “While people do [in fact] spend more time reading today than they did in the print-only past, the depth and concentration associated with the reading has declined.”<sup>184</sup>

Liu notes, however, that other experts dispute her conclusion. She cites J.E. Moyer of the University of Minnesota, who in his dissertation, cites Edak and Alkalai’s study which they say reveals no “statistically significant differences in reading comprehension...regardless of format.”<sup>185</sup> Dr. Paul Howard-Jones, in his report for the Nominet Trust, notes that studies definitively demonstrate a “correlation between attentional problems and high levels of [digital] usage.”<sup>186</sup> Microsoft, in a recent internal study, revealed that the average human attention span, which in the year 2000 measured twelve seconds, today measures just eight.<sup>187</sup> Though Microsoft insists that number may not be as alarming as it might first seem. They cite that while attention over the long haul has decreased, the brain seems to be adapting, due to neuroplastic properties, by responding during those short periods with “bursts of increased attention.”<sup>188</sup>

Geoff Kaufman of Carnegie Melon and Mary Flanagan of Dartmouth agree with Microsoft, at least in part. Their studies reveal a divide along the lines of content; where

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<sup>183</sup> Ziming Liu, “Reading Behavior in the Digital Environment,” *Journal of Documentation*, 61, no. 6 (2005): 701.

<sup>184</sup> Ziming Liu, “Digital Reading: An Overview,” *Chinese Journal of Library and Information Science (English Edition)*, 5, no. 1 (2012): 88.

<sup>185</sup> Ziming Liu, “Digital Reading: An Overview,” 6.

<sup>186</sup> Paul Howard-Jones, *The Impact of Digital Technologies on Human Wellbeing* (Oxford: Nominet Trust, [2011]), 50.

<sup>187</sup> Alyson Gausby, “Attention Spans: Consumer Insights,” Microsoft Canada (Spring 2015): 6, [dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf](http://dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf).

<sup>188</sup> Gausby, “Attention Spans, 19.



facts and precise figures and statistics are the goal of reading, the digital platform and the online reading pattern it fosters have the advantage. But where fiction and abstract, “big-picture” thinking is required, those habits fostered by linear, print-reading proved vastly superior.<sup>189</sup> Still, Flanagan remarked that while numerous studies point to the correlation between digital media use and attention deficit and distraction, relatively fewer studies have researched the impact of digital media on overall cognition.

The news isn't entirely bad where digital media use is concerned. Jones notes that scientists have observed multimedia and digital media use, especially gaming, tends to lead toward “increases in visual processing and motor-response skills...which may represent an effective way to maintain brain plasticity across the lifespan.”<sup>190</sup> One of the real upsides, however, Jones points out, is that the internet and other digital media's multimodality—its incorporation of auditory, photographic, video, textual information—is “regarded as an considerable educational benefit and enhancer of memory...as memory enhancement may be linked to the additional brain activity produced by multimodal stimulus over and above that produced by each mode separately.”<sup>191</sup> Another benefit from extended digital media saturation is increased information processing speed. Research by Gary Small indicates, “Many of us are developing [due to increased digital media exposure] neural circuitry that is customized for rapid and incisive spurts of

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<sup>189</sup> Geoff Kaufman and Mary Flanagan, “High-Low Split: Divergent Cognitive Construal Levels Triggered by Digital and Non-digital Platforms,” *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (May 7-12, 2016), <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=2858036.2858550>.

<sup>190</sup> Howard-Jones, *The Impact*, ” 7.

<sup>191</sup> Howard-Jones, *The Impact*, 24.

directed attention.<sup>192</sup> Media Theorist Steven Johnson agrees with Small; he sees the sensory demands stimulated by multimedia not as regressive but as progressive, as part of the evolution of the brain, and that complexity of multimedia exposure as tools has sharpened and expanded the mind, contributing to “making us smarter rather than dumber,”<sup>193</sup> serving to function as a “form of cognitive calisthenics.” Futurist author Jamais Cascio, agreeing with Johnson, notes by way of example, how:

Even pulp-television shows and video games have become extraordinarily dense with detail, filled with subtle references to broader subjects, and more open to interactive engagement. They reward the capacity to make connections and to see patterns—precisely the kinds of skills we need for managing an information glut.” This skill, he says, scientists refer to as “fluid intelligence...the ability to find meaning in confusion and to solve new problems, independent of acquired knowledge.”

Cascio adds that, contending with Carr’s and other claims, “building [fluid intelligence] up may actually improve the capacity to think deeply.”<sup>194</sup> Anecdotally, former Baltimore Ravens quarterback and current NFL analyst Trent Dilfer notes the difference in today’s generation of quarterbacks, noting that they have “a significantly higher capacity to process information,” and that “they play the game at a level of depth and complexity that far outstrips those of past generations.” Dilfer attributes this shift to technology, specifically the use of film and interactive video gaming.<sup>195</sup> Dilfer’s

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<sup>192</sup> Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan, *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* (New York: Harper, 2008), 21.

<sup>193</sup> Steven Johnson, interview by Steve Inskeep, “Everything Bad Is Good for You’,” *NPR Morning Edition*, May 24, 2005, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4663852>.

<sup>194</sup> Jamais Cascio, “Get Smarter,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2009, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/07/get-smarter/307548/>.

<sup>195</sup> “Trent Dilfer on Why Young QB’s are More Pro-Ready Than Ever,” *The Dan Patrick Show*, September 28, 2018, 5:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FevczIUzmrE>.

observations mirror those of military specialists, especially fighter pilots, for whom video simulated training has become a central feature.<sup>196</sup>

While it may be the case that information processing speeds are evolving, media specialists observe that it may come at a cost. Increased media saturation appears to negatively impact beneficial traits associated with the “linear brain,” traits important to the development of mature personhood and one’s psycho-social development: essential human core capacities, such as empathy,<sup>197</sup> the ability for contemplation and reflection, . . . imagination and expectation (health & well-being),<sup>198</sup> and that it erodes what psychologists and scientists call “Theory of Mind,” or, “the ability to attribute and understand mental states, beliefs ,and desires not one’s own.”<sup>199</sup>

Quentin Schultze, professor of Communications Arts and Sciences at Calvin College agrees. He notes, along the lines of McLuhan, the relationship between technology use and its ability to conform people to its image, asserting that it creates a whole culture unto itself, “what I call Cyberculture,” he says. “the technique-laden values, practices, beliefs of people who spend a great deal of time in cyberspace.” Cyberculture, he explains, “fosters information-intensive, technique-oriented habits . . . that rely on speed and pervasiveness of information technologies . . . [which] socialize [us] in

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<sup>196</sup> Howard-Jones, *The Impact*, 38-39.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 13; 6, cf. also Boris C. Bernhardt and Tania Singer, “The Neural Basis of Empathy,” *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 35 no. 1-23 (July 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-neuro-062111-150536>.

<sup>198</sup> Morten Kringelbach, Peter Vuust, and John Geake, “The Pleasure of Reading,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 33, no. 4 (December 2008): 324.

<sup>199</sup> Christopher Bergland, “One More Reason to Unplug Your Television,” *The Athlete's Way* (blog), *Psychology Today*, November 23, 2013, [https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201311/one-more-reason-unplug-your-television#\\_\\_=2](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-athletes-way/201311/one-more-reason-unplug-your-television#__=2).

technological values.”<sup>200</sup> In the age of digital high-tech he says, “We wrongly let instrumental practices unravel the moral fabric of our lives. The habits of our hearts become high-tech instead of virtuous.”<sup>201</sup>

While there is much that media-ecologists, ethicists, and others such as Schultze lament regarding the dominance of digital media, Sweet is good to point out tendencies to romanticize the past, especially while in the midst of an information-ecology upheaval. He points to Martin E. Marty, American Lutheran Religious Scholar, who points up the unintended consequences of print media, and the irony of how “the reading worlds of biblical and individual literacy created a choice culture in which the seeds of subverting community loyalties and identities were in the very plantings designed to stabilize [them] in the first place.”<sup>202</sup> Sweet points up the tendency of “all technologies[abilities] to willy-nilly produce contradictory meanings.”<sup>203</sup>

### **Homiletics and the Digital Age**

In the wake of this transition from a typographic to a digital media culture, preachers are left to wrestle with its implications for the practice of preaching. How do preachers remain faithful to the task of expositing the scriptures to congregants whose “mindscapes and soulscapes have been created by postmodern electric communications technologies?”<sup>204</sup> This section of literature review focuses on what theologians,

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<sup>200</sup> Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 18.

<sup>201</sup> Schulze, *Habits*, 14.

<sup>202</sup> Sweet, "Communication," 5.

<sup>203</sup> Sweet, "Communication," 6.

<sup>204</sup> Sweet, "Communication," 1–2.

preachers, media ecologists, and other Christian thinkers and leaders say about how preachers intentionally adjust their preaching methods to the emerging digitized mindset of their parishioners while maintaining fidelity to the preaching task.

### *The Expository Challenges in Shifting Epistemology*

As Jonathan Griffiths notes, “any who are reading this book would share the conviction that the preaching of the word of God is at the heart of God’s plans...is vital for the health of the church...and is the central task of the pastor-teacher.”<sup>205</sup> But there is a growing dissensus regarding the shape and form that preaching should take. Pastors, theologians, and communications experts question whether, or to what degree, the traditional sermon has been tied to the cultural preferences of the typographic era and subsequently to what degree the mode of preaching ought to adjust to the contours of a digital age. Buttrick, speaking of the differences between the oral culture which preceded the print-based culture of America, says:

the differences are not merely either/or options...Rather they are differences of mind. Two very disparate ways of thinking are involved...In American religious history...writing was the epistemology that presided over its three-hundred-year period...People not only read books; they sounded like the books they read. They spoke a literate, linear language.<sup>206</sup>

But now, Buttrick points out, a cultural as well as epistemological upheaval is occurring, as what McLuhan called “The Gutenberg Galaxy” gives way to an electronic and digitized universe -- a universe dominated by new mediums that shape the way people think, perceive, communicate, and understand. “The perceptive apparatus of people in our pews has been changed by electric media.” Because the hearers have

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<sup>205</sup> Griffiths, *Preaching in New Testament*, 1.

<sup>206</sup> Buttrick, “Preaching,” 312-13. See also Postman, “Media as Epistemology,” *Amusing Ourselves*.

changed, preaching must change.”<sup>207</sup> Jensen adds:

there are really only two alternatives... We can assume that electronic culture does not... fundamentally... affect people, so that no change is needed. Or, ... we can decay change as inimical... to the Christian message and work to change people back to the way they were in the world of print.<sup>208</sup>

Pierre Babin, the late media ecologist and psychologist, former director of the Center for Research and Communication, in Lyon France, agrees:

The Christian message in different cultural epochs [has been] characterized by different media,... introduc[ing] not just a new way of transmitting a message but a new form of Christian existence and a new form of church. Unless there is this continual transformation, the Christian message and Christ himself are not communicated.<sup>209</sup>

As technology changes, and people with it, the church must keep pace in adapting its methods and modes of communication if it is to effectively communicate the message of Christ. Preaching, says Buttrick, will not cease. “In the new age of electronic media, people will still speak, and preachers will still preach. But what kind of speaking will we hear? And how will electronic media reshape [its] configurations?”<sup>210</sup>

The new emerging electronic/digital culture, is a world that, in McLuhan’s words, “moves at the speed of light.”<sup>211</sup> A world that moves at this pace, Thomas Boomershine, professor of New Testament, indicates, begins to “no longer value literacy and its modes

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<sup>207</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 54.

<sup>208</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 54.

<sup>209</sup> Pierre Babin and M. Iannone, *The New Era in Religious Communication*, trans. David Smith (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>210</sup> Buttrick, “Preaching,” 313.

<sup>211</sup> McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light*, 50.

of thought.”<sup>212</sup> As Hipps explains, the electronic/digital age “gave rise to [not only] image-based communication [but also its subsequent] concrete, holistic, non-linear approaches to the world.”<sup>213</sup> Hipps also points out the interactive nature of digital media with its forums and participatory nature and how that interactivity—in conjunction with the democratization of information, with its natural erosion and distrust of authority—displaces an emerging culture’s patience with the monologue. As such, it prefers “dialogue and consensus... as well as grayscale gradations of mystery [over] typography’s black-and-white categories.”<sup>214</sup> As Hipps explains, the new medium of communication gives rise to subsequent epistemologies, new ways and patterns of thinking and knowing, so that where once, “philosophers of the modern era used the metaphor of a building with foundations...to describe knowledge,...postmodern philosophers employ the metaphor of a web —beliefs are connected in a myriad of ways.”<sup>215</sup>

Jensen observes that this sort of epistemological shift has largely been lost on the church and in particular its preaching. “One of the great problems with preaching in our day is that...it is...formed under the conditions of a literate [and literary, modernist] culture...which is in difficulty in a post-literate culture.”<sup>216</sup> Hipps agrees with Jensen, noting how the image-laden communication of the digital matrix “actually

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<sup>212</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 13.

<sup>213</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 72.

<sup>214</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 72.

<sup>215</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 69.

<sup>216</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 29.

reduces...capacity for abstract,...critical reasoning skills” and that the West is coming to increasingly “embrac[e] elements of Eastern thought patterns...as the left-brain bias of the printing and modernity begin to dissolve.”<sup>217</sup> Dr. David John Seel, cultural analyst and scholar, devoted to understanding millennials and their successive generations, agrees, noting how, “millennials represent the first post-Enlightenment, post-modern generational cohort...having largely abandoned the foundations on which modernity was formed.”<sup>218</sup> This new mindset, he says, poses a real problem for Protestant churches, whom, he accuses of being, “the global standard bearers of Enlightenment.”<sup>219</sup>

This realization of the impact of this electronic/digital communications shift is beginning to cause a good deal of alarm throughout the church, worried that it may either be speaking an un-intelligible language, or even more pessimistically, concerned that an electronic age leaves either no epistemological room for the content of its message or, with its monologue and implicit authority, any room to talk at all. Mohler notes, with alarm, that, “there are numerous influential voices even within evangelicalism ...suggesting that the age of the expository sermon is now past.”<sup>220</sup> Are such fears founded? Is there epistemological room for expositional preaching in the digital age? And if so, what might that look like?

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<sup>217</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 175.

<sup>218</sup> David Seel, *The New Copernicans: Millennials and the Survival of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 21.

<sup>219</sup> Seel, *Copernicans*, 21.

<sup>220</sup> Mohler, *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World*, 16.



## *Strategies for Traversing the New Sensorium*

As Walter Ong has indicated, regarding media forms, “different media accomplish different ends.”<sup>221</sup> Buttrick agrees and concludes that given the specific nature of preaching, “speech may be [the] singularly appropriate medium for the proclamation of the Gospel.” Still, he goes on to say, “all our speaking will be shaped by the ‘epistemological metaphor’ of the electronic media. So, we will preach; but, of course, we will preach very differently in an electronic age.”<sup>222</sup>

While some in the traditionalist camp take exception to Buttrick’s admonition (cf. Mohler, McCarthur, and others), and rally the church to push back against the tide of technopolization at all costs, in an Ellulian fashion,<sup>223</sup> a growing contingent within the church recognize preaching as a communication event, with a long history of accommodating itself to—as well as influencing—technological advancement.<sup>224</sup>

Jensen has coined the term, technopolization to refer to “a shift in the human sensorium.”<sup>225</sup> By “sensorium” Jensen means a set of faculties and sensibilities that make for self-understanding and locating oneself in the world; what noted clinical psychologist Jordan Petersen calls “mapping.” To ignore this shift in sensorium would be, according to Seel, willfull disobedience to the global nature of the church’s mission, effectively

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<sup>221</sup> Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), chaps. 4 and 5, referenced in Buttrick, “Preaching,” 314.

<sup>222</sup> Buttrick, “Preaching,” 314.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964).

<sup>224</sup> Cf. David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

<sup>225</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 29.

resigning the church to be content with a relationship to the world tantamount to “ships passing in the night...restricted to construction of sub-worlds,” coming to one day “exist only as a quaint Amish curiosity.”<sup>226</sup> Seel sees the present challenge not with trepidation and fear but as “an incredible opportunity for the Church.”<sup>227</sup> Hipps and Seel both see the electronic age reintroducing a healthy corrective to the epistemology of the typographic age, noting, “the importance it places on following Jesus in a more holistic manner, rather than simply knowing Jesus cognitively.”<sup>228</sup> Specifically, what are the implications then for preaching, and what approaches might preachers take in lieu of this new sensorium?

Hipps is adamant that the preacher’s approach to crafting preaching to accommodate the new digitally derived sensorium must be done with critical discernment and that mere mastery, or use, of current technological mediums is hardly the point, or even, he argues, necessary. Rather, he insists that the underlying principles at work in those mediums must be comprehended and then skillfully and prudently navigated. At the same time some of the assumptions that are corollary to the medium must also be challenged where need be. Hipps says that the preacher must at least “speak the language of the electronic culture.”<sup>229</sup> He points to Jesus by way of example, noting that he “came into the world speaking the language, living the customs, and using the [current] *forms* [emphasis mine]... Yet at the same time,...challenged and inverted many of those same

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<sup>226</sup> Seel, *Copernicans*, 65.

<sup>227</sup> Seel, *Copernicans*, 65.

<sup>228</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 90.

<sup>229</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 156.

forms, customs, and symbols.”<sup>230</sup> Thus, no one-size-fits-all technique can be presented for preachers to master or for seminaries to mass produce. Instead, principles will be employed and patterns discerned to guide preachers as they wade into the milieu of the digital epistemology and learn how to communicate while remaining faithful to the task of expositing the scriptures.

Pastor and Theologian Fred Craddock, author of the pioneering *As One Without Authority*, was very much aware of the shifting media terrain, even in the 1970’s. He advocated an inductive—rather than deductive—approach to preaching, with an emphasis on narrative preaching and homiletical plot forms, an approach now recognized as “the New Homiletic.” A deductive approach, Craddock explained, had been the dominant mode of preaching in the modernist, print-age, church, styled after the Greek Rhetoric, and is the style most popularly taught and modeled in the seminaries, with its heavy emphasis on proposition and doctrine.<sup>231</sup> But it is a form, Craddock notes, entirely inconsistent with the world that people live in, and is as such, an alienating and foreign way to communicate. “Either preachers have access to a world that is orderly, neat, and unified, which gives their sermons their form, or they are out of date and out of touch with the way [life] is. In either case, they do not communicate.”<sup>232</sup>

Eugene Lowry, United Methodist preacher and former professor of preaching at St. Paul School of Theology, agrees with the inductive approach and asserts that the key to all preaching lies in narrative...that narrative is the shape intrinsic to human

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<sup>230</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 157.

<sup>231</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 26, 45, 83.

<sup>232</sup> Craddock, *As One*, 13.

constitution and native to the preaching task. “Preaching is storytelling. . . a sermon is a narrative art form.” According to Lowry, the whole trajectory of the Old Testament text entertains what he calls a “homiletical bind,” with a crisis in the human quest that awaits a resolution. That resolution, Lowry asserts, is Jesus.<sup>233</sup>

Jensen agrees with Lowry and Craddock. Drawing on the work of Walter Ong, he asserts that in the digital age we have entered what Ong called a “Secondary Orality.”<sup>234</sup> A primarily oral culture, Jensen explains, is one that is pre-print, where words are not abstracted by nature, have more immediate connection to their corresponding objects, and are inherently more action-oriented. It is a world where memory—due to limited access to printed material—is crucial, and so, sound itself becomes an important feature of language. As a corollary to the importance of sound, redundancy, repetition, phraseology, and memorability of stock phrases also take on added value. A Secondary Orality, Jensen explains, is a world of “present-day technology culture in which a new orality is sustained by . . . [various] electronic [media] that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.”<sup>235</sup> Gregory Hollifield, Assistant Academic Dean at Lancaster Bible College of Memphis, agrees with Jensen. “Current trends . . . portend an America by 2050 with secondary-orality firmly entrenched and biblical illiteracy continuing to spread.”<sup>236</sup> In this world, Jensen says, the kind of thinking that dominated

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<sup>233</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 11, 12, 14, 24.

<sup>234</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 58.

<sup>235</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 58.

<sup>236</sup> Greg Hollifield, “By 2050: Preparing Effective Preachers for an Emerging Secondary Orality” (paper presented at The Evangelical Homiletics Society 2018 Conference: Effective Preaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century), [https://ehomiletics.com/willhite/2018\\_hollifield.pdf](https://ehomiletics.com/willhite/2018_hollifield.pdf).

the print age is quickly becoming outmoded and foreign, as are sermons of the print age with their linear, idea-centric, propositional, analytical, left-brain tendencies.<sup>237</sup>

Instead of preaching towards the linear mind, with its “cool massage,” Jensen says that preaching ought to come more to reflect the world we live in, with its “polymorphic massage of our senses.”<sup>238</sup> The type of preaching the current media age requires is “narrative” in nature, of the sort advocated by Craddock and Lowry, he says. Jensen gives five specific rationales for his assertion: 1. “Thinking in story is a valid way of communicating Biblical text because that is the way Biblical texts were stitched together in the first place.” On this point Hollifield entirely agrees. “The Bible is steeped in orality...it is the record of a God who speaks creation into being...and many of its books stand on oral tradition.”<sup>239</sup> 2. “The stories of the Bible invite us to participate in their reality.” 3. “Stories work by indirection, which allows a chance to break through cultural filters that work in the heads of [listeners].” 4. “The people in stories come to live in [listeners’] imaginations,” and thus endure far longer than abstract ideas or propositions. 5. “Stories are in sync with the way that electronic media work...that [electronic] media seldom attempt to communicate ideas...but almost always work through story...[and that] people are accustomed to experiencing reality through” them.<sup>240</sup> Hipps agrees, saying, “The emerging gospel of the electronic age is moving beyond cognitive

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<sup>237</sup> Cf. Jensen, *Story*, 40-42.

<sup>238</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 47.

<sup>239</sup> Hollifield, “By 2050,” 5-6.

<sup>240</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 60-63.

propositions and linear formulas to embrace the power and truth of story.”<sup>241</sup>

Ralph Gore Jr., professor of Systematic Theology and Ministry at Erskine Theological Seminary, interacting with the work of Lowry and Craddock, agrees with the New Homiletic in large part but warns a penchant on the part of its advocates may throw “the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.” He proposes what he calls, “a third way,” which, while relying on the core assertions of the New Homiletic, reminds that portions of the scriptures are propositional in nature and hence require a more deductive approach. But he also notes that even these deductive moments can be pursued in an inductive fashion in part.<sup>242</sup> Gore is also good to remind, like Jensen, that “Narrative preaching does not mean simply telling stories,” for while it may include stories, it primarily has to do with structuring preaching after narrative qualities.

Gore Jr. draws further on the work of Paul Scott Wilson<sup>243</sup> as he fleshes out what this narrative quality of preaching looks like, noting that it includes “movements, rather than transitions and points,” à la Buttrick, “as the preacher spirals in and out of the text, to the congregation, and back.”<sup>244</sup> This pattern, he says, creates a “beat, rhythm, tempo and the like...as the preacher switches even from narrative to doctrine as needed” and determined by the text, “striking an overall balance between story and doctrine.”<sup>245</sup> In

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<sup>241</sup> Hips, *Hidden Power*, 90.

<sup>242</sup> Ralph J. Gore Jr., “Deductive, Inductive...and a Third Way” (paper presented at the Conference on Sermon Studies: Text and Performance, Huntington, WV, October 2018), 13, [https://mds.marshall.edu/sermon\\_conference/2017/All/9/](https://mds.marshall.edu/sermon_conference/2017/All/9/)

<sup>243</sup> Cf. Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

<sup>244</sup> Gore Jr., “Deductive,” 17.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

this way, “preaching is Biblical,” and for that matter expositional, as “the Bible governs the content of the sermon,”<sup>246</sup> a point Mohler insists is key to expository preaching.

Mohler, in particular, takes issue with the New Homiletic. In a talk he delivered at a denominational preachers’ workshop, which he entitled, “As One *With* [emphasis mine] Authority,” he took deliberate aim at Fred Craddock and the New Homiletic, indicating that it is precisely the “lack of authority” that is missing from contemporary preaching and that the last thing the church needs at this time is more “lack of authority” from the pulpit. In almost point-for-point contrast to Craddock, Mohler says that effective preaching ought to be “declarative,...doctrinal...confrontational...and corrective.”<sup>247</sup> Of the state of contemporary preaching, Mohler says, “there are question marks where there should be exclamation points, hesitation where there should be boldness...advice where there should be teaching...ideas where there should be doctrine...impressions where there should be imperatives.”<sup>248</sup>

Hollifield would disagree with Mohler. Paying careful attention to cultural sensorium, he advises preachers take a different tack in preaching, especially where non-believers are concerned. His counsel would fall under the category of what Eugene Peterson, after Emily Dickinson, calls, “Telling it Slant.” To “tell it slant,” Hollifield says, is to tell stories as a means of changing worldview. “To evangelize is to present an alternative story—God’s story....to change the world, one must change its narrative.”<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Gore, “Deductive,” 18.

<sup>247</sup> Mohler, “As One with Authority.” 9.

<sup>248</sup> Mohler, “As One with Authority.” 9.

<sup>249</sup> Hollifield, “By 2050,” 11.

He advises the following principles be observed in secondarily oral cultures: 1. Sermons be prepared for hearers, as opposed to readers. 2. Concrete images used as opposed to abstract theological concepts. 3. Symbols and rituals integrated. 4. Sermons made verbally memorable by use of mnemonic and other oral devices. 5. The stories of the Bible preached as stories, as opposed to propositions and life-principles, so as not to “remove it from what Zack Eswine calls its ‘context of reality.’” 6. Preach in story to ensure that sermons move with the movement of a story. 7. Preach the backstory to biblical passages; even propositional portions have a backstory and a context.<sup>250</sup>

Jake Hovis, Ph.D. candidate at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary—paying attention specifically to the digitally cultivated sensorium of today’s culture—in a paper delivered at EHS 2018, says that preachers who want to speak the language of the culture would do well to take their cues from the form of the popular TED Talk. The TED Talk, he points out, is “viewed at a rate of 1.5 million per day,” and is, according to Tim Keller, “evidence that the monologue, far from being obsolete, is more popular today than ever!”<sup>251</sup> Quoting Carmine Gallo, author of the book, *Talk like TED*, he says, the medium of the TED Talk is so prevalent that “the next time you give a talk, you’ll be compared to [it].” The TED Talk, Hovis says, operates according to seven basic principles—six of which he says preachers ought to obey: 1. To “unleash the master within,” speaking with expert passion on your subject. 2. To “master the art of storytelling...[for] storytelling stimulates the brain and makes it more likely that hearers will identify with your point of

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<sup>250</sup> Hollifield, “By 2050,” 6-11.

<sup>251</sup> Jake Hovis, “Preach Like TED: What TED Talks Can Teach 21<sup>st</sup> Century Preachers” (paper presented at The Evangelical Homiletics Society 2018 Conference: Effective Preaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century), 1, <http://ehomiletics.com/conference/papers/7/>. cf. Tim Keller, *Preaching*, 64.



view.” 3. “Have a conversation...because disconnect between content and presentation,” as well as presenter and audience, tends to disengage hearers. 4. “Teach me something new...or present a new take/angle on an old problem.” 5. “Deliver jaw-dropping moments...something so memorable or impressive that it grabs attention and imprints on the memory.” 6. “Lighten up...humor lowers defenses and makes a speaker more likeable.” 7. The only rule Hovis discourages: “stick to the 18-minute rule.” TED Talks are limited to eighteen minutes, which researchers are continually finding is the approximate duration of attention span for a given topic. Instead of capping sermons at eighteen minutes, Hovis recommends breaking the sermon up into movements of ten to twenty minutes.<sup>252</sup> Hovis on this point quotes John Stott. “It doesn’t matter how long you preach; it should *feel* [sic] like twenty minutes.”<sup>253</sup>

To be sure, many would take issue with Hovis’ unapologetic usurpation of a secular model for preaching. But as Hipps is good to remind, “Like it or not, our theology and interpretation of Scripture have a long history of mirroring our forms of media.”<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Hovis, “Preach Like TED,” 1.

<sup>253</sup> Brian Biedebach, “How Long Should a Sermon Be?” (blog), The Master’s Seminary, April 21, 2015, <http://www.tms.edu/preachersandpreaching/how-long-should-a-sermon-be/>.

<sup>254</sup> Hipps, “Hidden Power,” 88.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine how preachers navigate the challenges of expositing the scriptures to digitally saturated congregants. The assumption of this study is that pastors have learned important principles involved in preaching expositively to digitally saturated congregants through their own experiences. In order to address this purpose, the research identifies four main areas of focus. These include the areas of understanding the effects of digital saturation, homiletical practice in lieu of changing media ecology, and Jesus as both a practitioner and modeler of expository preaching. To examine these areas more closely, the following questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research:

1. In what ways do preachers describe the effects of digital-saturation on the lives of their congregants?
  - a. Which effects do they describe as helpful?
  - b. Which effects do they describe as harmful?
2. What challenges do preachers experience in preaching to their digitally saturated congregants?
3. What opportunities do preachers experience in preaching to digitally saturated congregants?
4. What strategies do preachers navigate the challenges of expositing the scriptures to digitally saturated congregants?
  - a. How do pastors use scripture?

- b. How do pastors use media?
- c. How do pastors use entertainment sensibilities?
- d. How do pastors use illustrations?
- e. What uses do preachers avoid using?
- f. What role does narrative and story-telling play?

### **Design of the Study**

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, says that general qualitative research is about achieving an understanding of “how people make sense out of their world and the experiences they have in it.”<sup>255</sup> Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research: “the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive.”<sup>256</sup> This method of research is particularly advantageous, as it allows insight into many practitioners’ experiences and what they have learned, and are learning, in an environment that is fluid and rapidly changing.

This study employed a general qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data-gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of the most comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives in the narrow phenomena of expositional preaching to digitally saturated congregants.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 13.

<sup>256</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 13.

<sup>257</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 22.

## Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants who are able to communicate in depth about expositing the scriptures in preaching to digitally saturated congregants. The participants were selected because they have at least ten years of experience in expositional preaching, preach to congregants across multiple generations (including especially Generations X, Y/Millennial, and Z), and demonstrate an ability to accommodate teaching methods to the learning styles of attributed to digitally saturated persons. The researcher sought out help from ministry colleagues and congregants in identifying these participants, as well as from the participants themselves. Therefore, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of pastors who exposit the scriptures in preaching while intentionally accommodating their methods to digitally saturated congregants.

Participants were chosen for a unique type of sample in order to provide for unique attributes associated with the data collected.<sup>258</sup> Participants were purposefully chosen to provide variation in age, in tradition, and in experience in preaching. The researcher felt that by varying the age and experience of his participants he would gain a broader sample, and thus avoid limitations in insight that could arise from perspectives or positions that might be particular—and/or limited to—specific generations. For similar reasons, the participants also varied in the type of ministerial setting (urban, suburban, metropolitan, university town, small town), ministry tradition (Reformed, broadly evangelical, Eastern Orthodox), and congregation size, which provides a wide spectrum of experience within the scope of the aforementioned criterion for the study.<sup>259</sup> The final

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<sup>258</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 78.

<sup>259</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 123-124.

study was conducted through personal interviews with eight pastors and teachers who serve either as the primary, or significant and regular contributor to, the regular preaching and teaching of their congregation. They all were invited to participate via an introductory email, followed by a personal phone call. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate.

Each participant was given a basic overview of the research topic, as well as a series of questions pertinent to the research. In addition, each participant was notified of their guarantee to privacy as participants in this research.

### **Data Collection**

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitated the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.<sup>260</sup> Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.<sup>261</sup>

A pilot test of the interview protocol was performed to help evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 89-90.

<sup>261</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 269.

<sup>262</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 113, 174, 269.

Eight pastors were interviewed, with interviews ranging from fifty to approximately ninety minutes each. Prior to the interview, a brief description of the research topic along with a sampling of protocol questions was sent to each participant. The researcher taped the interviews using Apple's GarageBand™ application. The researcher completed the data gathering in the course of five weeks. After each interview, field notes with descriptive and reflective observations were written.<sup>263</sup>

### **Data Analysis**

Immediately upon conclusion of the interview, the researcher converted the recording into an MP3 file and used the program De-script, which transcribed the file from MP3 into text. That text was then edited as the researcher listened to the recordings, editing the interview text as necessary. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.<sup>264</sup> The analysis focused on discovering and identifying common themes, patterns, insights, and methodology across the variation of participants.

The following list contains the items on the questionnaire given to each participant before the interviews. The analysis in chapter four describes the relevance of the line of questioning to the research.

1. What sort of ways do you observe digital media (internet, social media, phones) impacting the lives and habits of your people?

Sub-questions:

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<sup>263</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 119ff.

<sup>264</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 269.

How do you see digital media usage impacting the way they relate to each other, to you?

How do you observe it impacting their ability to pay attention; their ability to do deep-thinking?

What sorts of advantages do you observe digital media providing in the lives of your congregants?

In what ways has it enhanced their ability to think, problem-solve, create?

How does this plugged-in-ness change our daily behavior, this ultra-always-connectedness; living in a wired world?

2. Reflecting on the above, how do you see these things affecting them in the midst of Sunday morning preaching?

Sub-questions:

What challenges does that pose for you as you preach (and prepare sermons) expositionally?

What sorts of opportunities does a digitally immersed context wrought present to you in the task of expositional preaching?

Do you see differences along cultural/generational lines? Or is it universal?

What kinds of thinking patterns are at work in each?

What kind of attending abilities or differences in attending?

3. What do you do in your preaching to take advantage of those opportunities?

Sub-questions:

How do these sorts of changes comport with the task of expositing scripture; do they make it easier, more difficult? Why so?

What do these changes allow you to do in expository preaching that you enjoy or find beneficial?

Do you see differences along cultural/generational lines? Or is it universal?

4. What do you do in your preaching to help with those challenges?

Sub-questions:

Are there particular philosophies or rhetorical theories or practices that guide you as prepare to preach? Certain techniques or rules of thumb you observe?

What sorts of media do you employ in the task of preaching? (e.g., Visuals, graphics, outlines, film clips, audio) Why do you employ what you do?

What role does entertainment play in shaping what & how you preach?

How do you employ illustrations in preaching? How do you go about choosing them?

Are there any forms or uses of media or entertainment that you deliberately avoid in preaching? If so, why?

What role does storytelling and narrative play in your preaching?

What's different about preaching in a visual culture vs. literary?

### **Researcher Position**

In this particular type of qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument through which data is both collected and analyzed. Thus, inherent biases must be acknowledged, biases that arise out of the researcher's doctrinal convictions as a Reformed, confessing, evangelical. Other biases arise out of the researcher's passions, his professional, as well as educational, background.



The researcher arrived at conversion to the Christian faith while an undergraduate student in a secondary education English literature program. The program included a heavy emphasis on literary exposition as well as extensive overlap with studies in media ecology. The researcher also acknowledges that he came to faith in a church whose pastor maintained—and continues to maintain—a high commitment to expository preaching. Thus, the researcher freely admits a strong personal appreciation for the benefits of literary exposition, expository preaching of the scriptures, as well as an acute awareness of the effects of media upon people and the way they think and learn. The researcher believes this background and appreciation will prove advantageous rather than detrimental to the research, in that it might allow the opportunity to better evaluate participants and their experiences. It is the researcher's goal to let his experience and appreciation for literature, exposition, and media studies, deepen the research, while allowing still for maximum objectivity.

As corollaries to the centrality of the preaching of the scriptures, the researcher also affirms the inspiration, the authority, and the integrity of both the Old and the New Testament, as well as the necessity of contextualization in preaching. He is ordained to gospel ministry in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church since 2007.

### **Study Limitations**

As stated in the previous section, pastors interviewed for this study were limited to those who practiced expositional preaching, who were acquainted with—and took and demonstrated conscious account of—the challenges presented by digital saturation, and who intentionally navigated those challenges while staying committed to expositing the scriptures in preaching. Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar

settings in North America and beyond, wherever digital saturation occurs. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for other areas of education in a religious, theological, as well as educational setting.

## Chapter Four

### Findings

As stated in Chapter One, the purpose of this study is to examine how preachers navigate the challenges of expositing the scriptures to digitally saturated congregants. This chapter presents the results of the interviews mentioned in Chapter Three, first by offering a description of the research participants, second by analyzing their responses in relationship to the research questions explored in this study, and finally by presenting a summary of those findings.

The researcher selected participants for the study according to the principles of purposeful sampling and sometimes according to the more specific mode of purposeful sampling known as “network sampling,” where the researcher sought from those whom he felt were especially strong participants referrals for other candidates for participation in the research.<sup>265</sup> The following criteria were utilized in helping to identify participants:

1. Christian leaders who were either a. currently preaching on a regularly to semi-regular basis, weekly basis, or b. were currently doing some combination of preaching/teaching on a regular basis but not necessarily confined to the Sunday morning worship event;
2. Were not digital natives, i.e., were born after the fullness of the onset of digital saturation and were therefore part of the generation that experienced the shift in mass media from type to digital media;
3. Had demonstrated, according to the researcher’s observations

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<sup>265</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research*, 78.

and research, an awareness or familiarity with the concept of media ecology and a thoughtful engagement with its implications for ministry and preaching.

The interviews were conducted in a variety of fashions, including FaceTime video call; audio call; and in one case, live and in-person. The researcher studied the transcripts and interviews, looking to identify patterns and themes in the various responses in relationship to the four basic research questions:

1. In what ways do pastors describe the effects of digital-saturation on the lives of their congregants?
  - a. Which effects do they describe as helpful?
  - b. Which effects do they describe as harmful?
2. What challenges do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?
3. What opportunities do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?
4. What strategies do pastors employ in meeting the challenges posed by intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?
  - a. How do pastors employ the use of scripture in preaching?
  - b. How do pastors use media in preaching?
  - c. How do pastors use entertainment sensibilities in preaching?
  - d. How do pastors use illustrations in preaching?
  - e. What uses of media, entertainment, and illustrations do pastors avoid using in preaching?

## **Description of Participants**

In order to encourage open and honest responses from the participants, the researcher promised to conceal their identities in this report and to secure all recordings and transcripts of the interviews throughout the entire process of the research and thereafter. Subsequently, the names of the participants have been altered and in some cases specific details either obscured or omitted in order to protect their identity.

### **Participant #1: Saul**

Saul is a 39-year-old priest, in the Episcopal tradition, ministering in a multi-generational church located in a university town in the southeastern part of the United States. He is the founder and co-host of a podcast that has gained international traction and is the author of a recent book dealing with ministry in the contemporary media-saturated context. Saul is extremely collaborative and media-savvy. His father is a retired Episcopal priest, also of some renown and media-savvy, who maintains his own international podcast.

### **Participant #2: Robert**

Robert is a 48-year-old pastor and former seminary professor, in the Presbyterian/Reformed Tradition, who ministers as the senior pastor in a multi-generational church located in a major-metropolitan city in the southern part of the United States. His preaching evinces a strong understanding and awareness of the digitally saturated context and the issues inherent in it.

### **Participant #3: Harry**

Harry is a 74-year-old priest in the Antiochian Orthodox tradition, a former pastor of a highly profiled evangelical church and former professor at a prestigious evangelical

university. His move from the evangelical tradition to the Orthodox was prompted in large part by convictions and insights he experienced in the midst of discerning changes in the shift from print to digital media context. He authored a book that reflects on the shifting media, particularly as it pertains to expositing the scriptures in preaching.

Participant #4: Gary

Gary is a 31-year-old campus ministry leader for an international campus ministry at a mid-sized university located in an immediate ministry context. He is also a parishioner at the researcher's church. He demonstrates a high degree of media savvy and is well-versed in the arena of media ecology, particularly regarding learning styles of the emerging generation. He exposites the scriptures in preaching and teaching to university students on a weekly basis and provides pulpit supply in the researcher's church.

Participant #5: Andy

Andy is a 42-year old priest in the Episcopal tradition, ministering in a multi-generational church located in a major metropolitan city in the northeastern part of the United States. He is a fellow founder and co-host, along with Saul, of the aforementioned podcast that has gained international traction. He demonstrates a high level of media-savvy in both his preaching and his podcasts.

Participant #6: James

James is a 40-year-old priest in the Episcopal tradition, ministering in a multi-generational church located in a university town in central-southern part of the United States. He, along with Saul and Andy, is a fellow founder and co-host of the aforementioned podcast that has gained international traction. He demonstrates a high-level of media-savvy in both his preaching and his podcasts.

Participant #7: Mike

Mike is a 57-year old pastor in the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition, ministering in a multi-generational church located in a major metropolitan city in the northeastern part of the United States. His doctoral thesis featured an area of research which paralleled this researcher's subject matter.

Participant #8: Hank

Hank is a 46-year-old professor at a prominent Lutheran University and former youth pastor in the Lutheran tradition. He is the co-founder of a popular podcast and the author of a book, both of which interact with many of the issues pertinent to the issues and challenges presented by the contemporary digitally saturated context.

### **Effects of Digital Saturation**

The first research question explored in this study is: In what ways do pastors describe the effects of digital saturation on the lives of their congregants? During the interview a number of questions were posed to the research participants designed to help elicit good reflection, observation, and insight on the matter. These included such questions as:

- How do you see digital media usage impacting the way they relate to each other; to you?
- How do you observe it impacting their ability to pay attention; their ability to do deep thinking?
- What sorts of advantages do you observe digital media providing in the lives of your congregants?
- In what ways has it enhanced their ability to think, problem-solve, create?

- How does this plugged-in-ness change our daily behavior, this ultra-always-connectedness; living in a wired world?

The participants agreed that the digitally saturated media environment had a universal impact on their parishioners, irrespective of age or generation. The only difference between age or generations groups was in terms of degrees of usage and impact. Participants noted negative as well as positive effects of digital saturation. In some ways it detracted from interpersonal relationships, while in other ways it has served to enhance them, and while in some ways it has affected their ability to pay attention, in other ways it has enhanced their ability to process information.

### *Digi-Downsides*

Each of the participants recounted the common observation of congregants gathered together, texting or surfing their devices, apparently paying little to no attention to their immediate company. Saul recalled that, as recently as five or six years ago he could remember lobbying for funding for their podcast and “just getting eye rolls...especially from some of the older generation,” who, he says, “saw it as something subsidiary to the mission.” But that, he says, is no longer the case. “Even they [the older generation] are all completely connected to their devices...and that’s mediating their reality, 100%.”

Robert observed similarly, noting technology’s impact on the conventions and conduct of face-to-face interaction. “One of the first things that crosses my mind on this matter is how in the middle of conversations it is now expected that you will look something up...kind of this notion that there’s a piece of information I need to know that would contribute to this conversation.”



Another observation Robert noted was how it changed the rules of priority and attention -- that the device outranked the person in front of you:

There seems to be an unwritten rule that, unless we say otherwise, the phone is my first priority. So, if we're talking and I get a notification, I don't have to apologize for ignoring you for a second. I think the burden of proof has shifted; whereas like fifteen years ago, I owe you my first attention, and the phone is secondary. I feel like now it's shifted, where I'm going to break off this conversation to keep up with this text.

Robert, in similar fashion to Saul, noted that as recently as a five years ago he noted a gap in device-usage and media-saturation between the generations, but that in recent years that gap had closed dramatically; while there was still a difference in terms of degree and extent of usage, these technologies were no longer foreign, and were more readily accepted and utilized.

Gary, who works predominantly with university students, noted the differences in digital immersion even between what might be called, "half-generations."

There's my generation where smart phones and social media were very novel, and then there's the years just a after mine, whose parents handed them smartphones to distract them when they were cranky. So obviously it's really impacted them...they're really uncomfortable with being bored. The instant they feel bored they have in their hands this device to unblock the boredom.

Gary went on to describe a connection he observed between this lack of boredom and access to digital technology, which he said resulted in the erosion of boundaries in students' lives; they didn't have an "off-switch," and they were "always plugged in." These tendencies, he said, led to observable rises in anxiety on the part of his students that stem from always being able to directly access the whole world but also from being always "accessible to it and to everyone."

So, they have this weird tension that you've probably observed. They're more connected to people than ever before, because not only can they be connected to friends constantly from texting and social media, but that they can be connected to

people around the world. But at the same time, they're very lonely, right? And they don't feel very connected because it's all through their phone.

One of the more direct consequences of this hyper-connectedness and aversion to boredom, says Gary, is a noticeable "lack of attentiveness."

We do a lot of training and leadership development. So, we've had to be a lot more thoughtful, especially of the last three to four years, about "how do we make this training very interesting and engaging?" Ten years ago, we can kind of just lecture at them—and that's not great learning theory, but they were receptive to it. That would work for them. And now it's not just lecture, but small group discussion, and debrief, and practical exercises, which have to be engaging.

Gary noted that while this approach to training was effective, he marveled at how quickly, once the activities were concluded, "They were immediately checking their phones, 'Oh, what did I miss?'"

Andy commented rather negatively, overall, about the impact of digital media saturation, especially social media. "I haven't been myself on FaceBook etc. for over a year now, and it's been the best thing for me," he said. "What I think social media platforms have done is that it's slowly eroded our concept of humanity. I can just post whatever I want, and I'm never going to talk to you again. You're not really human anymore. I've seen it outside the church as well as in."

Andy spoke also about the heightened sense of shame that social media tended to induce, identifying it as a medium that tended to invite judgment, leaving little room for reconciliation and grace, leading people, he said, often to fabricate their narratives. As an example, he spoke about a parishioner of his who was an artist, and who posted a picture of himself at an out-of-town art conference, but whom he ran into at the coffee shop that same day. Confused as to whether he had misunderstood his postings, his parishioner assured him that he was not mistaken, but that the posts were falsely posted. He couldn't

in fact afford the trip but felt pressured to “look as if he was there” to keep pace with his competition and the expectations of both his present and potential future clients.

Andy, like Gary, spoke also of a type of “hyper-awareness” that digital and social media tended to foster, a constant knowledge about what other people were up to, which in turn led to a sort of self-consciousness about what you, yourself, were up to.

So, I don’t know if it’s a hyper-awareness of self, so much as what others are doing. And then it’s like “working on me.” To speak about this theologically: it almost functions like the law in my life. “Why aren’t I more like this; why isn’t my life amazing?” It’s an awareness of the self in a way but more about what maybe I’m lacking.

Hank, like Andy, was keen to mention the many detractions when it comes to what he sees as the effects of digital saturation. “I’m noticing that people are in this constant buzz of anxiety. They can be talking with their friends, but then their phone goes off on their arm, and it’s their mom, or their girlfriend, so they’re always on this sort of leash, where a walk to class isn’t just a walk to class anymore.” Harry made similar observations, noting that he thought the effects of an increasingly digitized world were “discarnating...stripping people of their humanity...making them increasingly image-driven. Harry was not hesitant to indicate what he felt was Protestant evangelicalism’s complicity in the trend.

The paradigms we have used in the western church, especially evangelical Protestantism, have moved further and further away from the paradigm of the scriptures. Today it’s all about images and creating meaning, being punchy and market sensitive, rather than the clear, perspicuous message of Christ.

Gary, commenting in similar fashion to Harry, noted that in his observations the digitally saturated climate tended to foster greater superficiality in the people he ministers to. “They want the sound bite rather than the dissertation, the headline, the chapter

assignment, whatever. Just ‘what do I have to do to pass the test?’” He spoke about how he had observed the nature of the university itself change over the last decade:

College was supposed to be more...it was supposed to teach you how to think. But especially with the rise of information technology, right, it’s a good thing for the world, and those are great majors to earn a living, but it’s not teaching people how to think critically anymore. Like, ‘tweet me your sermon, your lecture, and your news,’ and we think we’re all experts.

### *Digi-Upsides*

Despite a wealth of negatives associated with digital immersion, each of the participants observed some upsides. Hank, for instance, talked about the fact that one of the unintended, counterintuitive outcomes of the podcast was that while it was generated in the interest of brevity, the medium has turned into a place for depth, substance, and lengthy conversations, as well as fostering dialogue well beyond and outside the bounds of the actual podcast episode itself. Hank noted especially its role in helping to foster trust. “What I’ve done with the podcasts, the most profound and lasting kind, extended conversations, they tended to come from folks that had gained the sense that they could trust me, because they had this ability for an extended period of time to hear kind of where I was coming from.”

Another observation Hank made was that he felt like technologies such as the podcast had fostered what he came to observe as a desire for greater substance and depth. “People are interested in going deeper.” He mentioned the podcast by Joe Rogan, which frequently ranks among the highest listened-to podcasts, and that it runs sometimes as long as three hours. These and other podcasts, he said, are all part of a “network of social media and other ways of connecting up with that same conversation, and people get in

that weren't at first there." Another interesting unforeseen benefit of these media, Hank observed, was the creation of space that allowed for greater honesty.

A lot of our spaces, especially church spaces and small groups, they tend to cater to extroverted people, people who feel safe there and dominate the conversation. But there are often a lot of people in the room who don't have the confidence. That anonymity [provided by social media] allows them to kind of dip their feet into the water; and I think that can be very helpful.

Another observation Hank made had to do with epistemology, noting digital media's tendency for visual imagery.

If you tease out that idea, I think it's going to be huge, because it's like, to go to anthropology, we used to see pictographs and hieroglyphs and all these non-phonetic ways of communicating, and now you've got emojis and things and the kind of visual of it I think is increasingly powerful; especially when you're getting into difficult topics, like the problem of evil, or mysterious things. I think these tools are something that we as humans are built to use.

By way of example Hank referenced the fact that the printing press's contribution to the Reformation, and its popular dethroning of the Papal office, wasn't just owing to the mass circulation of the 95 Theses, but also the mass production of woodcut, satirical cartoon-portrayals of the Pope, one of which portrayed him as a donkey defecating in a hat. "That's something print just can't begin, as effectively, to communicate."

Gary noted some similar contributions on the part of digital saturation. "I do think they're very creative, having this access to a lot of different resources and viewpoints. A lot more than I did growing up for sure." Gary further noted that the collaborative nature of the media, with its exchange of ideas, also fostered a teachable nature in his students. "I think this is a real advantage for sure; they don't feel the need to have mastered a subject before jumping in, and they're willing to learn from just about anyone. It makes them so teachable, so coachable, so different from eight years ago even."

James, like Hank and Gary both, was acutely aware of the digital downsides but was able to note what he thought were some real benefits. “One thing about social media is that it has allowed people direct access, to me even, in a way that wasn’t like before. Sometimes it can be really annoying, like 73-year-old Linda can DM me at 10 o’clock at night. But sometimes it’s pastorally important, and I can be helpful.” James also mentioned some ways in which his pastoral reach had national impact, due to the fact that people, even other ministry leaders were able to contact him and receive profitable leadership insight and counsel.

### *General Consensus*

The general consensus the researcher gathered from the participants, regarding the nature of digital saturation and its effects on the lives of their parishioners, was on the whole negative. While digital media technologies allow for some connectivity—both socially and intellectually, as well as enhanced creativity in many contexts and occasions, and even serve to enhance collaborative learning on the whole—the participants were much quicker to cite the negative effects as having greater impact on their parishioners, their development of self, and their relationships with family, peers, fellow church members, as well as their pastors and leaders, not to mention its contribution to increased stress and anxiety, as well as decreased deep thinking and reflection.

### **Preaching Challenges in Digital Milieu**

The second research question explored in this study is: What challenges do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants? During the interviews, a number of questions elicited good reflection, observation, and insight on the matter. These included:

- Reflecting on the above, how do you see these things affecting them in the midst of Sunday morning preaching?
- What challenges does that pose for you as you preach (and prepare sermons) expositionally?
- Do you see differences along cultural/generational lines, or is it universal? What kinds of thinking patterns are at work in each?

### *Pastoral Challenges*

There was agreement on the part of the participants that the digitally saturated media environment posed challenges for preachers in expositing the scriptures. These challenges were irrespective of age or generation, though in particular the challenges are more pronounced in younger generations. There was also agreement that these challenges influenced the delivery and preparation of sermons to a certain degree.

Robert, commenting on what he calls “the two primary effects of impacts of living in a digital world,” said that the contemporary parishioner is predisposed or conditioned to have difficulty listening and paying attention, conditioned as he is by a fast-paced, technologically inundated world.

There is always something literally at my fingertips that is easier to do than to do deep spiritual work. So it might be Candy Crush or YouTube highlights of my favorite sports team, but there’s always something easier than the reflective meditative engagement with the word...If I’m already feeling weary, it’s just so much easier to do the easy thing at my fingertips, that doesn’t require and mental or spiritual or emotional investment.

One of the other effects Robert mentioned was technology’s invasive tendency; its refusal to honor boundaries between life and work. “We are just always ‘on’ now, especially in terms of a work mentality. Always on call, instantaneously ready to go into work mode...It’s hard to get distance from it, metaphorically and literally.” Gary spoke

of similar challenges. “My parishioners grew up with a smartphone, and it’s obviously really impacted pretty much everything about them -- their social habits, study habits, how they act in church.” Specifically, Gary noted how quickly they tended to be bored and then disengage. “They are really uncomfortable with boredom. The instant they feel bored they have their hands on their devices. Especially in preaching and teaching, I feel like if you can’t engage them very quickly, on come the screens.”

Gary also noted the amount of distraction that comes with digital saturation. “With so much clamoring for their attention, they show up not fully minded and present.” The condition made him feel like he had to be “really engaging, like my first five minutes has to be a really good five minutes, maybe the best minutes of the whole sermon. If they’re not listening in the first five minutes, they won’t be listening the next twenty-five.” One of the things Gary mentioned specifically was the need to be entertaining, noting that there was so much competition out there for content mediums, that even if they were the type of Christian hungry for content, if you fail to deliver, “They know they can always just go to John Piper or some other big-time communicator.”

Saul made similar observations to those of Gary’s, noting how the digital pace had conditioned his parishioners, and even himself, to receive and dispense information differently.

They [digital media] do shape you. I find myself starting to think in soundbites. I watch preachers who craft everything in terms of aphorisms, things that are tweetable. And while there’s always been a bit of sloganeering, especially in American Christianity, I find it a temptation to be thinking more about how I’m gonna deliver in the most clever, bite-sized way, rather than the message itself. There’s just always this felt pressure to gain traction.

Harry, remarking on digital media, lamented, “The imagery of electronic media is fleeting and has less embodiment or incarnation than print on a page. I think the



electronic age tends to make people more Gnostic and disembodied,” which he said was damaging to people’s souls. He indicated that it posed some real challenges to communicating the essence of the gospel. Harry was conscious of the fact that he was not immune to its effects, though perhaps aided by his advanced age, was able to resist thinking after its patterns a bit more adeptly than his younger colleagues.

James acknowledged that he was likely shaped subconsciously by the pressures of the current digital milieu and that he had received comments that his preaching pattern bore striking similarities to contemporary popular speakers.

Someone recently told me that my preaching style reminded them of Stephen Colbert. I think what he was saying was that Colbert uses irony a lot and that certainly irony is a very widely used currency. I think it’s social media, hashtags, memes. Their bread and butter is irony, a way of using humor to tell the truth. And that factors into a lot of what I do. These are especially effective with younger people. So yeah, that has affected how I communicate.

When asked about what challenges or pressures the contemporary digital climate brought to his preaching, Mark expressed confidence in his ability to keep his audience’s attention but did mention the pressures of remaining current and being informationally up-to-date and the palpable fear of losing credibility in an information-saturated context. Said Mark, “So you can’t just look up a quick little anecdote anymore, or tell some kind of canned joke, or make some kind of passing comment on a statistic or something. That might’ve flown before, but now you can fact check it so quickly, and you can bet someone in the pew is doing it.”

Almost all of the participants mentioned that they felt to some degree to be in competition with their parishioners’ devices or at least to be on par with the level of savvy they were digesting on a regular basis from their devices. This sort of competition likely meant they were reacting to it, even if only subconsciously. “I feel like I’m pretty

naturally captivating,” Mark remarked. “But there’s also probably a part of me which probably was honed, or maybe I didn’t even know I was honing, but the demands of this trade kind of force into that mold a little bit.”

When asked about the challenges he felt in a digital climate, Mike answered that it wasn’t something he had given a lot of thought to but probably should.

I guess I’m kinda old school. My main thing is I don’t want to lose eye contact with people. So maybe that is a digital thing, like I’m afraid to use media and screens and stuff, because I’m afraid of them being distracted and taking their eyes off me, and then I don’t know if their hands are going to their cellphones. So I guess yeah, that really does affect the way I preach to some degree.

Mike also noted, upon reflection, that he did feel pressure—being a self-described “old-schooler”—from some of his congregants who felt he should engage more with technology, particularly social media. “And I hate that,” Mike said. “I don’t really want to be in that world. But I do feel the need to keep up in order to keep people’s attention.”

One of the things that each of the participants cited as challenging was their parishioners’ decreased attention spans. “Gone it seems are the days of the long sermon,” they said. Said Andy, “Nobody’s listening to thirty-five-minute sermons anymore, and very few people are preaching them. Very few can pull it off. Maybe Tim Keller. He’s about the only guy that comes to my mind.” A few of them noted the oft-quoted statistical finding that “Humans can’t really attend well beyond twenty-minutes.” On the heels of that, Andy remarked humorously:

This works out well for me, because I only have about twelve minutes worth of stuff to say! The worst thing though is when someone—and most of my colleagues can’t preach their way out a paper bag -- can’t hit the gospel to save their lives—but the worst thing is when someone only has twelve minute worth of stuff to say, and they say it in thirty.

While Andy remarked that the digitally saturated environment posed challenges for preachers, in naming them he located the challenge not so much in the sphere of attention or distraction but in the work required to get behind those mediums, which he said served to shield parishioners from their pastors. “This generation, social media, they’ve bought into a sense of self-worth that is just nonsense, you know, a real sense of entitlement, and this is causing huge depression.” Andy went on to voice what he believed to be the exegetical task facing preachers today.

So here’s my analogy. Remember in the old days, there was this quest for the historical Jesus? And the guys were all saying the task was to get behind the text? Which is a terrible thing to try to do with Scripture by the way; I hate that. But in a way, that’s what we’ve got to do with our parishioners; we’ve gotta get behind the Facebook, read between the lines of what their social media feed is saying. And so, what does God have to say to *that*? So, you see so many people putting up b#\$% s\*&#, all these amazing photos on Instagram, and I know these people are having a hard time in their marriages and with their children and their finances. And so, we can talk about *that*.

Harry similarly noted that the underlying imagery of the contemporary digital climate serves as a significant hurdle in the preacher’s task. Today’s imagery-heavy culture, he says, presents a “psychologized gospel, that identifies what people are feeling, but doesn’t give any orientation as to how or where to find relief from the morass in which they find themselves. Instead of being light, there’s fright!”

One note worth mentioning however. Five of the eight participants ended up coming out of the more liturgically heavy traditions, and each of these five voiced a definite reliance and gratitude for the liturgy. They didn’t “feel [their] sermon needed to carry the entire weight of the preached word,” to quote Andy. Or to quote Harry, he “knew that the Holy Spirit was at work in the sacrament and the liturgy. There are two

parts to worship and both equally necessary.” Those two parts he called, “spiritual prose [sermon]” and “spiritual poetry [liturgy and sacrament].”

Mike lamented much of what the digital milieu did to contribute to the overall consumer-driven mentality that characterizes not just the secular world, but also the Christian, especially its tendency to isolate people. He spoke of his own brother-in-law who had for years been part of an up-and-coming, thriving church plant, only to learn that he was now consuming service from the privacy of his own home, thanks to the church’s recent launching of live-streamed services. He used a common illustration: “What is that analogy? A frog in a kettle. Yeah, that’s probably me; I’ve probably been reading the cues from my people and the culture and adapting without even really thinking about it.”

While most of the line of questioning focused on those to whom preachers preach, Mike considered how it had affected those who do the preaching. He said:

So yeah, we’re in the midst of some real shift and change. I’m wondering about the way that media, the whole internet age, is changing us as creatures, changing us as hearers, and also changing us as individuals. All this checking your laptop for the latest pair of sneakers—and not just guys in the pews, but us; I see so many preachers blogging all day. I think, “How can you possibly do that and drink deeply from the Holy Spirit and scripture?” That has to affect the way the Holy Spirit speaks to us through a text, even us preachers. There’s got to be somebody that drinks deeply from the wells of salvation. So how do we, even, as preachers, guard ourselves?!

### *General Consensus*

While all of the participants were seasoned preachers, voicing confidence in their trades and their rhetorical abilities, each of them nevertheless indicated a fair deal of concern when it came to facing the challenges that congregants saturated in a digital milieu presented in the task of preaching. Of special concern were not only the physical manifestations of digital saturation, e.g., attention deficits, distraction, reductionistic

tendencies, but also those of the more psychological nature, such as a soul conditioned by consumer imagery, towards narcissism, as well as a lack of soul-depth, for lack of a better word. The participants noted difficulty in knowing their parishioners due to their tendency to hide behind the facades that social media and ease of access to information afford. They also identified the difficulty of breaking through those digitally erected walls. The participants voiced awareness that they had been shaped by the digitalized culture more than they realized or intended. This being the case, the participants acknowledged the need to discipline themselves as paramount.

### **Preaching Opportunities in the Digital Milieu**

The third research question explored in this study is: What opportunities do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants? Questions posed included:

- What do you do in your preaching to take advantage of those opportunities?
- How do these sorts of changes comport with the task of expositing scripture; do they make it easier, more difficult? Why so?
- What do these changes allow you to do in expository preaching that you enjoy or find beneficial?
- Do you see differences along cultural/generational lines? Or is it universal?

#### *Expository Opportunities*

While the participants were in consensus that the digitally saturated media environment posed certain challenges for preachers in expositing the scriptures, the researcher found a shared enthusiasm and eagerness to embrace those challenges. The

researcher also found agreement that, paradoxically perhaps, the digital environment presented just as many, if not more, opportunities and in-roads as it did challenges.

Saul, while commenting significantly on the downsides of digital media saturation, seemed far more encouraged by the possibilities it affords.

So yeah, technology right now, it's not engineered for human flourishing at all. But the opportunity for preaching in this regard is enormous, because I think you have more people actually listening to things and reading. That's one of the things we don't talk about—people are pretty much reading all day. The amount of input is just so much greater than when I was growing up.

As examples of the types of listening people are doing more of, almost every participant mentioned the success of TED Talks. Half of the participants referenced the resurgence of stand-up comedy. Said Saul, “Stand-up comedy is more popular than ever; it's really just preaching now; I mean it's almost become secular preaching and even less about humor per se. There's just a huge appetite for preaching actually everywhere.” Saul went on to talk about the explosion in recent years of documentarian forms of entertainment. “Here you have Netflix, that's just putting out special after special of someone sitting there with a microphone for an hour. And what they're finding is that people of all generations are finding that mostly compelling. So, I think maybe reports of our distractibility are a little exaggerated.”

Hank, like Saul, felt more encouraged than discouraged. Like Saul, he saw the high amount of information input as something that enhanced the task. “People want to go deeper. If you're not willing to go deep, if everything's just surface level anecdote? They've already seen that before.” Saul indicated that while this certainly put pressure on preachers in general, he saw it as an opportunity. “The possibilities are really strong.”

Andy also commented positively on the volume of input his parishioners are receiving in a digital age, noting the constant flow of Twitter feeds and the like tended to “train our brains to just past everything. And that’s how people are often approaching church.” But Andy also perceived an advantage. The gospel, if presented right, really had the power to “break up the Twitter feed” and the sort of malaise that it engenders. He referred to the documentary film *Fyre*—about a music festival that turned out to be in the end a hoax and non-event—but how the marketers had discovered this digital malaise and a subsequent strategy to break it. “They created this fire icon that just broke up the trigger, broke up the whole Instagram, Twitter Milieu that people were just skimming through. I think they were on to something. I think we’re at a real advantage in a sense, if we can do this right. We can get behind the fake feed.”

Harry likewise saw digital saturation, somewhat paradoxically, as an enhancer to the task of expositing the scriptures in a hyper-paced digital age. He remarked on the nature of a sermon and preaching, noting how its radical slowness and deliberateness created the ripe “moment for perspicuity and clearness” amidst the “digital buzz and onslaught of marketeering.” Saul noted likewise that he sensed his people “really looked forward to a little bit of non-device time, just sitting still, not having to do anything and just receive. They may not even articulate it that way, but there’s a measurable relief.”

Robert’s remarks bear a striking resemblance to Saul’s.

You know so many people are running out there to try to change their sermons to sort of fit the communication style of the day, and I think it was Will Willimon, a United Methodist leader, who said, “We don’t do that.” He said, “Think about how refreshing it would be, if you’re surrounded all day long by digital stuff that is primarily trying to manipulate, trying to sell you something, trying to get you to click. And after a day of being constantly manipulated like that, you come in and you hear a godly preacher stand up and just tell you what is true and speak it as

something he's deeply committed to. How refreshing is that!"

Robert went on to add, "So I think people were assuming he'd (Willimon) say the old ways of preaching were no longer relevant. And he was going, 'Oh man, more relevant now than ever! Because we can be the one place you can cut through the clutter.'" Hank echoed Robert on this, noting how at first the popular cry among the church was "Try to make everything snazzy, compete, and keep pace. But we're never going to. The church is rarely good enough at competing exactly on the same level, with style and that sort of thing." What he said he was finding, instead of competing, was that the "non-flashy" sermon was effective as a kind of "decanting experience. To decant you know is almost an exotic experience for people. But it can be so enjoyable. Like a Martha versus Mary thing, you know," he said, referring to Jesus' lauding of Mary, who sat at his feet rather than Martha who busied herself with errands. Mike commented similarly.

We can try to join the game and try to play really well. Let's be as good as everyone else at tweeting and posting and all that stuff. Or maybe we can just say, "No, let's keep doing what we're doing because we're gonna be the last ones doing it." And there's something hard-wired into humanity that needs this, that needs community, just this idea—it's not very sexy—but of walking into a room, and we're singing together, and we're shaking each other's hands, and then some old guy with a dusty book opens it and reads and begins to talk to us about what it means. Who does that anymore?! Nobody. So maybe we shouldn't be ashamed of that. We should just do it, and I'm wondering if, especially the younger generation, will run to, will want that.

Saul's remarks along this line of questioning echoed Mike's. He said that while he certainly felt a good deal of pressure to preach in ways that resonated with the contemporary digital culture, that from his perspective:

Younger people are basically looking for something that's authentic, and that so long as the person who's speaking does it in a measured way, effervescent and engaged, that it really doesn't matter then whether or not they're flashy. I think maybe this is the *je ne sais quoi* that no one is able to name. Again, it's not



marketable, but I think it's what people really respond to.

Saul spoke of another unforeseen opportunity afforded by digital media, one that related specifically to a Reformed perspective of law and gospel. One of the things that a digital world does, he said, is

not only to make us more aware of what's going on out there, far and distant, but also to remind us of our complicity in it. We're constantly being told of our privilege and this enormous burden of guilt before we even wake up. I find I don't preach, as much, the law. (By law, the participant meant not the explicit reading of the Law of Moses, but the conveying of the general sense of obedience to a divine moral standard.) I can pretty well assume people are already aware of this burden of guilt on their shoulders.

Saul went on to indicate how that set him up for preaching the gospel. "If I can acknowledge the burden's there not by chance, but that they really have played a role, then I can also talk about the burden that Christ has taken on for them. And that's incredibly powerful." James indicated similarly, noting that while the "always-connected and always-on" context posed a real challenge, he also indicated that "the online world as a preacher gives [him] a stream of richer and more current illustrations," and was:

a good way to take the temperature of the Zeitgeist at any given moment, a significant advantage over the way we used to do it. There's just a giant sea of pop culture conversation, little conversations going on all the time, that you can pull examples from. Twenty years ago, you would've had to read *Time*, *Newsweek*, *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* to try to come up with something everybody's talking about. Today we're all sort of swimming in different parts of the same ocean. And so, it gives you this currency to deal in.

James indicated that his Colbert-like manner of communication is "especially effective with younger people," and he finds irony both an especially effective and present spoken-word device, as well as effective strategy in expositing the scriptures. "There's certainly an irony, very widely used in popular currency, and social media,

ironic hashtags; memes' bread and butter is irony; a way of using humor to tell the truth by saying the opposite, and that factors a lot into what I do.”

And though James is quick to make cultural allusions throughout his sermons—often at a pace matching those of many late-night talk and daily show monologuers—he adds that technology is virtually absent in his sanctuary. “There are no evocative slides, no change in lighting or powerful visuals, no bullet point on a screen, nothing visually exciting.” Yet James sees that not as a hinderance but an advantage.

This makes it, I think, refreshing, actually, for a lot of people. It's the whole thing where all the Millennials and Gen Y and Z people, they're all actually starting to flock to vinyl records. I think because it's just really nice to listen to one album by one person, and it's hard to skip tracks. I think people are relieved by sometimes the simplicity of it. And I think the fact that, hey, you're gonna be looking at me talking to you for about fifteen to twenty minutes without change or interruption, I think that's refreshing to people actually.

### *General Consensus*

Among the participants, the researcher noted an enthusiasm for preaching in the digital age, and an optimism. Despite the challenges presented by the digital matrix, the participants all felt that it presented numerous opportunities. The researcher also noted that the participants were aware of the nature of the challenge before them, namely, the choice to either compete and keep pace with the digital culture, and make the sermon into a multi-media event, or to move a bit in the opposite direction and pay homage to the nature of preaching as an oral event. The majority of the participants indicated preference for the latter. The majority of the participants also spoke favorably of popular culture and media, indicating how they felt it gave them “currency” whereupon they could capitalize in reaching their congregants. And despite complaints by cultural critics that the current media-saturated environment detracts from literacy and the ability to perform deep-

thinking, the majority of the participants found the opposite to be the case. Their congregants were reading more and becoming better informed, and they could follow and make connections in their thinking more readily. Almost unanimously, the participants indicated that they felt their congregants demanded them to “preach deeply.” Despite feeling their congregants capable of and eager for deeper content in preaching, the participants did unanimously indicate the need for sermons of shorter duration, indicating that people seem to be conditioned to paying attention in “bursts” rather than extended and lengthy periods of time. Also, a number of the participants remarked that the digital environment had likely affected and shaped their preaching in ways that they were unaware of and that this line of questioning had helped to make them aware of this.

### **Expository Strategies**

The fourth research question explored in this study is: What strategies do pastors employ in meeting the challenges posed by intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants? A number of questions elicited good reflection, observation, and insight on the matter. These included:

- What do you do in your preaching to help with those challenges?  
Are there particular philosophies or rhetorical theories or practices that guide you as prepare to preach? Certain techniques or rules of thumb you observe?
- What sorts of media do you employ in the task of preaching? (e.g., Visuals, graphics, outlines, film clips, audio) Why do you employ what you do?
- What role does entertainment play in shaping what & how you preach?
- How do you employ illustrations in preaching? How do you go about choosing them?

- Are there any forms or uses of media or entertainment that you deliberately avoid in preaching? If so, why?
- What role does storytelling and narrative play in your preaching?
- What's different about preaching in a visual culture vs. literary?

### *Strategic Adjustments*

All the participants agreed that the current digitized environment demanded the development of deliberate strategies for preaching. Preaching to congregants in this media-saturated, visual age, which is specifically crafted to grab and retain attention and is almost always entertaining and narrative in nature, demanded strategic adjustments. While strategies among the participants varied, some common threads appeared.

As Gary earlier indicated, “I have to be really engaging, especially in the first five minutes. There are just so many things clamoring for their attention; they don’t have to listen to me.” Saul remarked similarly:

I think that’s kind of the biggest shift. Folks can be so much more easily entertained. And like, Ben Franklin, he wasn’t even really a believer, but he would go to church to be entertained. Like maybe the sermon or the music was entertaining, with a couple of little funny jokes. But you can always now, at your fingertips, find better music, or funnier stuff, YouTube videos, better sermons. I might be a good-looking pastor or professor, but I’m not a model. And you could be a funny pastor but not necessarily funny as a comedian. Because you’ve just got so many options!

Mike said that he didn’t feel the need so much to compete, but when pressed said, “I do really fear losing eye contact, however. For some reason I always want to maintain that. Like maybe I’m afraid they’re gonna reach in their pockets for their cell phones the minute I’ve lost it.”

James spoke similarly as Mike about the difficulty of maintaining attention, which he said led him to certain convictions about duration of preaching. “You know people’s attention span is about twenty minutes, so I’m always shooting for around eighteen, give or take a few, because studies have shown that after twenty minutes people don’t remember anything you say. Or either they do, but they remember incorrectly.”

Every one of the participants indicated an acute awareness regarding the length of sermons and the attending capabilities of their parishioners, indicating that they had been conditioned by a sitcom-YouTube-sound bite-Twitter generation. James likewise said he felt pressure to arrest attention from the beginning. He recounted some strategic conclusions, including a specific method of sermon introduction he called “Benign Violation,” a term he says he stole from comedian Pete Holmes:

You have to violate the rules of what people expect to hear from the preacher the second you get in the pulpit, because what people are expecting is for you to be boring and judgmental. And if you can violate both those things within about thirty seconds, you’ve surprised them, and now you have their attention. So that’s why I might sing Guns N’ Roses from the pulpit.

James indicated similarly, that he “without a doubt” felt like he was having to compete with contemporary media. “I’m just trying not to suck; I’m trying not to be boring; I’m trying not to be lame.” He was one of three participants who mentioned stand-up comics as models he has learned from in mastering the art of what he calls “how not to be boring,” and how to “maintain attention.”

In regard to keeping attention, every one of the participants mentioned the high premium that the culture placed on genuineness and authenticity, an importance they each said was owing to a media-saturated culture. Mike said that while he thought style and rhetorical principles were important, “What’s most important for people is that you

mean what you say, from the heart.” James indicated similarly, “You have to speak in a way that is from the heart, in a way that really makes people feel like they’re not alone. Pathos, a lot of pathos, people who speak conversationally. The old style of preacher who spoke like a preacher, long dramatic pauses and that sort of stuff, that’s over.” Said Gary, “They have all this virtual community. What they lack is real people who they know actually care.”

“Brevity is absolutely crucial,” said James, “you have to maximize time. I listened to preachers who preach forty-five minutes. If you can’t boil a sermon down to twenty minutes, it shouldn’t be preached. And if it can be boiled down to twenty minutes, why are you preaching forty-five?” He cited Martin Luther in making his case. “Martin Luther’s hymn, ‘A Mighty Fortress is Our God:’ One mighty word shall fell him, not a 5000-word sermon! I think the gospel is pretty simple: Jesus Christ, friend of sinners; that’s what we preach.”

In the way of maintaining attention, the most common technique mentioned among the participants was the role of narrative in preaching. Saul remarked on the nature of contemporary media and explained the narrative nature of it, and how that impacted his strategic approach to preaching:

I think this generation is much more focused on belonging and the core human needs, so they’re going to gravitate towards whatever voices are affirming or absolving or allowing them to justify themselves. And so there’s a lot more people driven by—you hear this word ‘narrative’ used all the time—different stories that will tell us who we are and that we’re enough. The story is more important even than any of the truth of the story or the factual content. I think people are much more captive to that.

Gary remarked similarly in his work with predominantly college-aged students:

I’ve just found narrative connects a lot more in terms of genre with students than something like an epistle; they really struggle to follow an author developing an

argument. But a narrative they understand, implicitly. I think because of things like Netflix, they watch and consume so much more story than a lot of generations. And so, things like character development, motivation, action, and irony, they all get that intuitively, much more than a logical progression of ideas or sustained argument.

Robert noted similarly to Gary.

I used to preach almost always deductively, but now I have shifted to almost completely inductive preaching style here. I don't know that the shift is directly related to technology issues, but it certainly has to do with what our culture considers authentic communication. If you begin a sermon with, "I want to talk to you about this proposition," that's just far too formal and stilted.

Each of the participants indicated that they preferred preaching narrative scriptures to any other genre of the Bible, especially epistles. Said Gary, "Techniques that were kind of highly touted in our day—the four-spiritual laws, heavily systematic sort of approach—they just tune out, glaze over. But narrative, even complex narratives from say Samuel, they understand, they're interested right away because it's story." Gary mentioned he utilized narrative not just as a catchy tool or trick but as an overarching philosophy. "Every time I preach, I locate the story in the grander story of God; I want them to always hear how God has been good and how he's been good in this story and drive home that you find yourself in this story. That's just so much more natural to where they're at."

James indicated likewise, in his own preaching as well as the coaching he provides his junior colleagues:

Our assistant pastor's learning to preach, just a year out of seminary. And one of the things I've worked with him on is the importance of including stories in his sermons. And I've cued him to pay attention to when he preaches: when he's just talking about scripture or making some theologically explicit point, he's a little boring, but when he starts telling a story, his whole demeanor changes, he gets more engaged, and the congregation gets more engaged!

A few of the participants, when they mentioned story, wanted to clarify that by no means did they mean something “cute” or “light.” Each took pains to explain that “people sniff that stuff out. They don’t want light; they want deep, said Gary. “They’re not looking for some kind of story to tell as a motivational speech. They’re looking for something good, a meaningful, good story they can then use to make sense of their own story, their life.” Said Saul:

I think if you really want to teach the most amount of people today, you make a movie or a television show; I think you’d become a script writer. I really do think that’s the most effective. And we can talk in terms of narrative, and overarching narrative. They even talk in terms of narrative. I don’t think you would have heard that twenty years ago. But it’s the language they speak now.

Saul went on to say that many of his sermons “flow very much like a story with a beginning, middle, and end.” A few indicated likewise. Some of the pastors, however, mentioned the need for techniques that shaped the sermon not as a narrative itself but much more straightforwardly.

Two of the participants specifically quoted the “old speech 101 rules: tell ‘em what you’re gonna tell ‘em; tell ‘em’; tell ‘em what you told ‘em.” Andy said, “So I just do specifically three points. It’s something I picked up from Tim Keller; I’m always doing it a little bit differently, because people tune out if they catch on, but I always tell them at some point in the sermon, ‘this is my first point; this is my second point, this is my third point.’” Harry indicated similarly, noting that in this era of media and information saturation, it was increasingly difficult to discern what the actual messages were, and that he “feel[s] the need to be extremely perspicuous. I just want to be real clear about what the scripture’s point is, trying to say.” Mike indicated likewise:

I just want to be real clear. If I have a choice between sounding scholarly or sophisticated or clear, I’m gonna go with clear. Martin Luther said something



like, I can't quote it word for word, but 'I can preach to the milkmaid and the plowboy. I aim to be understandable to them, and if the philosophers and doctors don't like it, they know where the door is.'

Andy agreed noting a favorite preacher who specialized in clarity:

She was like, "I'm going to do this, and then I'm going to do that, and then this." And then she said "that" she did "this," and she did "that." It flowed. And ten years ago, that presentation would've been like two hours, and this year it was thirty minutes. So, she knows social media, and the importance of just repeating, repeating. She knows how to keep people engaged. You gotta tell 'em, or they tune out.

One of the themes that emerged throughout the interviews was the acute awareness of the need for variety in preaching and for "shifts," as well as deliberate engagement. Andy said that he deliberately aimed for a "particular cadence. We call them Pew-robics, liturgy. I just think that works; it creates a good cadence, like the prayer book. There's a flow to it that is constantly transitioning. It really works for people in our day and age; sit-down, kneel, stand, sit; it breaks things up." James indicated that while he hadn't given a whole lot of specific thought to his preaching as it related to media sensibilities, he did note, "I think if you analyzed my sermons, if you were somehow were able to quantify the number of cultural references, the time between jokes, and try to map how communication happens, it would probably mirror to some degree the way communication happens in the digital world."

When it came to media tools that preachers utilized in their preaching, some had examples, and some preached in traditions that prohibited visual media altogether. Still, even those who were unable to use visual media said that they often made visual references or thought in terms of "imagery and in word pictures." Said James:

The visual nature of our culture -- I do try to paint pictures with my words. Visual culture influences a lot of what we do overall. Our website and online presence

and our paper bulletin. First thing I did when I arrived at my church five years ago was pay somebody to redesign our website, our logo, help craft our bulletin so that it looks user friendly, so that you can enter into worship rather than be confused. It's important that we're not just drowning in a sea of text.

Andy, who ministers in a liturgical setting that allows for limited screen use, said they use it primarily for the demonstration of songs, but that he considers himself, "very visual," and often utilizes the screen to depict images. "I do like images; like last year during Good Friday, we put up the image by that Spanish painter with the Lamb of God, bound to the alter, dead. Once I put up an image by the painter Hans Holbein of the dead Jesus on Good Friday. I use them as preaching illustrations."

Andy said however that he, "never used video clips. What I find sometimes with technology in the service, like if it goes wrong, in our liturgical tradition, it really highlights that everything has fallen apart. But an image, I feel like, really hammers home the point. And I like to use like medieval imagery and the great works of art." Hank noted that he frequently used images because they "can be very powerful. You can handle some very difficult topics with imagery that you can't with text. The visual is an increasingly powerful medium for communicating in this age." Gary as well cited image as "an immediate way to command attention, especially if it's an image their all familiar with."

Both Harry and Mike, however, were less inclined to use images in preaching, as they felt it "broke the message up too much." Robert said that he didn't think of himself as a visual person, but that he did "from time-to-time put an image up. I create word pictures more than I do actual pictures."

All participants agreed on the use of illustrations as key to preaching to digitally saturated congregants and that they all were keen to be on the lookout for them in the midst of their preaching preparation. Harry told about how he once preached an entire

message on the gospel built around the story from one of his bishops, who recounted “how good it felt to be at home in a hotel, but how he knew that in a few days they’d be asking him to check out. And what I did was I took that and ran with it. That’s the gospel, the Father calling us to a place where they’re never telling us we have to check out!” “I’m always looking for illustrations,” said Andy, “any new way I can get to tell the story of the gospel.” He talked about how he recently used “the death of Luke Perry in a sermon to illustrate how we no longer regard anyone from an earthly point of view.” James said that while he was always on the lookout, “illustrations shouldn’t be forced or contrived. They should come really naturally.”

James spoke constantly of illustrations and that the “online world provided him with far richer current illustrations” than anything the print world offered. “So like Barth who said to ‘preach with your Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other,’ and we’ve got the newspaper, only now it’s an iPad.” Andy did add, however, a cautionary note when it came to illustrations, especially those derived from popular culture. “I can remember feeling particularly enslaved to them. You have to have a certain freedom from that,” he said, fearing that the search for illustrations could begin to exert an undue influence on the shape of the exposition of a text.

While most of the participants voiced mining the internet for illustrations, pop-culture references, especially films, were frequently mentioned, because they offered accessible story-lines and helped connect characters and plot lines to the scriptures. Mike, however, mentioned that he was wary. “There’s just so much in movies today that is so offensive, and I don’t want to lead anyone into betraying their consciences or mistaking an illustration for an endorsement. If I use a movie, it’s a really old one.”

Of the eight participants, seven said they felt pressure to be entertaining. Three of them explicitly mentioned taking cues from stand-up comedians, and each of them named specific ones, without prompting, as being especially influential. All of the participants talked about the need to be humorous to some degree, because humor was important. Andy said, “There’s nothing wrong with being entertaining. It’s what people pay attention to. The most powerful movies, yeah they have good story lines and acting, etc., but the reason they’re powerful is because they’re entertaining.”

### *General Consensus*

All agreed that the current digitized environment demanded the development of deliberate strategies for preaching. These strategies varied among the participants, but the researcher also noted a good deal of commonality as well. The participants all acknowledged the influence of entertainment on the preaching task and indicated ways in which entertainment sensibilities had come to shape their preaching, especially in having to “compete for their congregants’ attention.” Participants also acknowledged the impact of living in a visual culture, and how it had affected their preaching habits and strategies, though few of them employed extensive or regular direct use of media in the preaching event. The participants also noted the resurgence of narrative in the digital culture and its value in preaching, as well as the value of the internet and pop-culture as fodder for illustrations. The participants also emphasized the need to be clear and concise in an age of information glut.

### **Summary of Interview Results**

The purpose of this study is to examine how preachers navigate the challenges of expositing the scriptures to digitally saturated congregants. Given the interviews with

pastors across denominational lines and traditions, as well as ages, the data affirms the relevancy of the topic. Each of the eight pastors interviewed articulated a substantial degree of concern, each acknowledging the immanent, seemingly-always-present nature of the challenges posed by preaching and ministering in a digital age.

All of the participants evinced having thought about the challenges of digitization and were at least somewhat aware of its detrimental effects, as well as the patterns and learning tendencies it tended to foster. As well, the majority of the pastors had thought somewhat intentionally about effective communication to those whose epistemologies had been digitally shaped. The participants varied in terms of the degree to which they were willing to accommodate those digital epistemologies, with some being willing to include various media in their preaching, and others abstaining altogether, not necessarily because they were Luddites, but because they thought it was strategically advantageous in reaching their digitally saturated congregants—which almost all participants described their congregants as, irrespective of age or generation.

Still, as aware as most of them were of the effects of digital saturation, more specific study of the topic is needed. Apart from its largely negative tendencies, the participants had little knowledge of precisely how digital saturation had affected the epistemology and learning patterns of their congregants. The physiology, or inner-workings, of digital saturation could be better understood also, so preaching methodology could be more precisely adjusted and the preaching opportunity maximized.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion and Recommendations

This study was conducted in order to discover how pastors navigate the challenge of expositing the scriptures to digitally saturated congregants. In exploring this topic, several key questions were asked about the digital culture in which we live, including how it affected the way people behave, listen, learn, think, and how they engage their world and look for meaning. With this in mind, I explored how preachers adjusted to the challenges posited by digital-saturation to discover and develop more effective approaches to expositing the scriptures.

In order to examine this topic, I conducted a review of literature from three areas of study, including biblical material pertinent to the subject. That review showed that exposition was an essential feature of Jesus' preaching. He was always explaining who God is in accordance with the scriptures of the Old Testament. But the way Jesus expounded those scriptures differs somewhat from some of the definitions and parameters applied today. Jesus, for instance, would likely fail to satisfy the likes of Al Mohler at many turns, because while Jesus often alluded to sayings from the Old Testament and the stories contained in it, even interpretations of these, he rarely expounded scriptures verse-by-verse. While Old makes a case for Jesus as an expository preacher in every instance depicted in the Gospels, his definition of "exposition" is far less confining than the sort advocated by others. Still, the example of the apostles—particularly of the epistles, if they are indicative of the type of preaching common to

them<sup>266</sup>—if it is representative of the sort of preaching characteristic of the earliest church, then it is safe to say that, at the very least, they contain a good deal of Hebrew midrash and/or exposition of scriptural text.

And while lectionary system may have been active in the synagogue<sup>267</sup> and even used for preaching—as is common in the more liturgical traditions—it is difficult to prove that a consecutive, book-by-book, line-by-line expositional preaching method was in effect. Paul’s command to “preach and teach the word of God” could have well taken a variety of forms and strategic approaches, even topical.

According to literature examining the effects of digital-saturation, the medium exerts a tremendous influence on the brain itself, being “plastic” as it is, and even minimal exposure affects its physical shape and neuropathways, as well as influencing learning patterns. The literature demonstrates that people think and learn in ways that differ, often dramatically, from those of the previous print-age, resulting in a decreased linearity, as well as a subsequent lack of reasoning skills, different approaches to constructing meaning, and attending and paying attention differently or attending differently. McLuhan and other media-ecologists have demonstrated a profound relationship between media, as well as both intellect and psyche. Media shapes its users into fundamentally different sorts of people. As to which particular media and shape is preferred, scholars, educational specialists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and theologians disagree. What is agreed is that all media tools have both positive and negative attributes. As one of the participants remarked, “A hammer is not

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<sup>266</sup> See Hebrews, which some contend is a sermon manuscript.

<sup>267</sup> See Goulder, *The Evangelists’ Calendar*.

an inherently good or evil tool. A person can use it to build a house, or bludgeon someone to death.”

According to the literature examining what preachers and theologians recommended by way of expositing the scriptures in a digitally saturated context, there was no universal consensus. Some recommended catering entirely to the digital sensibilities that characterize today’s congregants, while others recommended something akin to keeping pace with the sensibilities without entirely caving. Others recommended outright resistance to digital sensibilities as well as the utilization of the actual tools of digital media in preaching, altogether. Most, however, merely cautioned preachers, while advocating that the one, time-tested, constant characteristic of preaching has always been narrative. A few, such as Mohler and McArthur, sternly advocated a stricter method of exposition, preaching line-for-line, book-for-book, through a simple explaining of scripture. They decry narrative preaching on the whole as a timid and unbiblical approach and philosophy of preaching. On the opposite end of the spectrum of Mohler and McArthur, some in the emerging church have experimented with doing away with the sermon altogether, contending that it is an outdated convention from a bygone era. Its very form, they decry, is authoritarian and anti-dialogical in nature and thus fundamentally opposed to contemporary sensibility and epistemology.

In order to explore this matter further, I followed the approach known by practitioners as qualitative research and interviewed eight people who serve the church in some sort of regular preaching capacity, who were likely to provide insight into this topic. I then analyzed the participants’ responses in accordance with four basic research questions:



1. In what ways do pastors describe the effects of digital-saturation on the lives of their congregants?
  - a. Which effects do they describe as helpful?
  - b. Which effects do they describe as harmful?
2. What challenges do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?
3. What opportunities do pastors experience in intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?
4. What strategies do pastors employ in meeting the challenges posed by intentionally preaching expositionally to engage their digitally saturated congregants?
  - a. How do pastors employ the use of Scripture in preaching?
  - b. How do pastors use media in preaching?
  - c. How do pastors use entertainment sensibilities in preaching?
  - d. How do pastors use illustrations in preaching?
  - e. What uses of media, entertainment, and illustrations do pastors avoid using in preaching?

The responses revealed that pastors are indeed aware of the fact that digital immersion impacts their parishioners, both in terms of habit as well as psychological makeup and that it effects not only the way people behave but also the way they think, learn, and construct meaning. Their responses indicated that they felt increased pressure from our entertainment-driven, distracted culture, and that it had shaped and altered the way they approached the preaching task. At the same time, however, each of the participants,

rather than finding the challenge discouraging, found it stimulating, and expressed a great deal of joy, as well as opportunity, in expositing the scriptures to the digitally immersed.

While the participants used a variety of approaches and tacks, there was a good deal of commonality as well. There is no one-size-fits-all method of preaching to digitally saturated congregants, yet as there are many facets to digital saturation, there are just as many effective way to address them.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

When considering the insights gleaned from these preachers, as well as the literature reviewed, I reached two conclusions: 1. While it is evident all media change and shape users—physiologically, habitually, socially, and psychically—media do not fundamentally alter or violate their essential anthropology. As McLuhan explains, “All media is an extension of man.”<sup>268</sup> As his son Eric McLuhan explains, “My father’s idea of media as extensions of man was that they were analogues to our limbs and organs.<sup>269</sup> What McLuhan means, is that all media, as powerful as they are or may become, are but “extensions” or “amplifications” of humankind, products that bear his image. As his son Eric McLuhan explains it, while they may in fact “create new environments,” as McLuhan contends, those environments remain fundamentally human nevertheless. By way of illustration, McLuhan notes that, “The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it [merely] accelerated and enlarged the scale.”<sup>270</sup> And while media ecologists have, and currently do speculate about

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<sup>268</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 19.

<sup>269</sup> McLuhan, *The Media and the Light*, xx.

<sup>270</sup> McLuhan, *The Media and the Light*, 24.

humankind reaching a point of “technological singularity,”<sup>271</sup> for the time being, at least, all media remain human in their origin and nature.

While human beings of the current digital age are in fact shaped by that digital media, this media merely amplifies certain features of their humanness. Theologically speaking, this means that the *imago dei*—diminished though it is by the fall, as orthodox Christianity acknowledges—is not fundamentally altered by humanity’s own media innovations. Practically speaking, this means that the challenges preachers face today in expositing the scriptures are not altogether different from those experienced in previous ages and by previous generations. The same can be said also for recommended practices in confronting those challenges.

In other words, there doesn’t appear to ever have been a time when people could easily pay attention to uninteresting sermons that ran too long, perhaps a phenomenon even the great apostle Paul knew on a first-hand basis, having bored a “young Eutychus to sleep, as he talked on and on,” resulting in a “three-story plunge to his death.”<sup>272</sup> The challenges frequently documented in association with the digital age—difficulty with attending, diminished reasoning skills, the desire for story, cultural relevance, sincerity, or to be entertained—do not appear to be traits exclusive to the digital age, but in fact appear to be traits characteristic of humankind in general of most likely every age. Martin Luther remarked in September of 1352 on the difficulty parishioners experienced with attending, saying that he, “hate[d] a long sermon, because they...destroyed...the desire

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<sup>271</sup> Cf. S. Jason Cunningham, *Approaching the Singularity* (New York: Reinhardt & Still Publishers, November 4, 2012).

<sup>272</sup> See Acts 20:9, where “a young man named Eutychus sunk into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on,” (NIV) subsequently plunging “from the third story to his death below” (ESV).

on the part of the congregation to listen...and the preachers hurt themselves.”<sup>273</sup> By way of counsel he recommended that preachers “preach carefully, [to be] understood by all, and not burden [their] listeners with too much verbosity.”<sup>274</sup> George Whitfield once quipped that “to preach for more than half an hour, a man should be an angel himself, or have angels for listeners.”<sup>275</sup> John Stott famously remarked, regarding sermon length, that regardless of how long the preacher spoke, “It should feel like a twenty-minute sermon.”<sup>276</sup>

Charles Spurgeon’s own rules for preaching would seem to indicate a strong similarity between the challenges of his day and our present age. His counsel on preaching sounds a good deal like the counsel offered by those who participated in this research. As for sermon length and attending issues, Spurgeon wrote “brevity is a virtue” preachers would do well to aspire to lest they “lose the opportunity of gaining the credit which it brings.”<sup>277</sup> As for gaining the attention of his hearers, he advised that “the introduction should have something striking in it...a startling shot like a signal gun to clear the decks!”<sup>278</sup> His counsel included everything from paying attention to style to

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<sup>273</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Table Talk*. (Kansas City, MO: Gideon House Books, 2017) Talk 2643a.

<sup>274</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Table Talk*. Talk 5171A.

<sup>275</sup> “John Chapman, Mark Twain and the Twenty Minute Sermon,” Letting Grace Flow (blog), Sydney Anglicans, November 20, 2016, <https://sydneyanglicans.net/blogs/graceflow/john-chapman-mark-twain-and-the-twenty-minute-sermon>.

<sup>276</sup> Chapman.

<sup>277</sup> Brandon Hilgemann, “12 Preaching Tips from Charles Spurgeon,” Pastors.com, January 19, 2017, <https://pastors.com/12-preaching-tips-from-charles-spurgeon/>

<sup>278</sup> Hilgemann, “12 Preaching Tips.”

leading a life that genuinely matches one's preaching to the admonition that the preacher be a teller of stories and that the preacher appeal to the self-interest of their listeners.<sup>279</sup>

As Zach Eswine illustrates, it is nothing new for preachers to “wake up to find that the world around them has suddenly changed.”<sup>280</sup> Pastors of every generation find themselves inevitably “waking up” into some new cultural moment. In one sense then, the situation preachers find themselves in at this present moment is not entirely new or unprecedented. Perhaps it is safe to say, however, that given the rate and pace of technological innovation, the night has seemed a little longer, and the proverbial Rip van Winkle overslept and woke to find the world had changed at a more accelerated rate of change. In McLuhan's words, “the extensions of man” are stretched as far as they have ever been and are approaching “the final phase.”<sup>281</sup>

Nevertheless, 2. It follows then that as “all media are extensions of man,” each developmental shift in media tends to amplify certain characteristics and senses, to favor certain features of humanity over certain other features that perhaps characterized a previous age. Or as McLuhan has also demonstrated, it may combine these certain features in a new way. New media—rather than simply supplanting older media—combine them in some way, giving preference for the new. Media ecologists, for instance, point out that in our current digital era, characterized by image and its preference for the visual, the average person actually reads exceedingly more than the

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<sup>279</sup> Hilgemann, “12 Preaching Tips.”

<sup>280</sup> Zack Eswine, *Preaching in a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 98.

<sup>281</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding*, 19.

average person at the height of the print age. To be sure, today's readers read in a non-linear manner; nevertheless, they read more.

What this means is that the preacher needs to be especially aware of these shifts in media, with their accompanying preferences and epistemological shifts, as well as able to accommodate or adjust communication in lieu of them. For instance, in regard to the electronic/digital era, Marshall McLuhan tended to think that in some sense we had “sped the clock up”—technologically speaking—so far as to have almost gone “back to the future.” Information comes at people so rapidly, and from so many mediums, that people are living in what he called an “all-at-once-ness, similar to the type of world pre-print man knew,” with man's technological lack of means to “nail information down like a butterfly.”<sup>282</sup> Such an information-rich environment, he theorized, meant that people of this digital age would find the visual senses so bombarded by information of that sort as to become almost immune to them, almost like a burnt out retina, and would begin to favor those senses characteristic of the oral age, with its preference for auditory. The reversion is not a pure one, McLuhan explains, in that humanity does not go simply go back to his “old biases.” It goes back to the old with a consciousness of the new, as in James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.<sup>283</sup>

Walter Ong suggested similarly to McLuhan, noting what he believed to be the resurgence of the power of orality in an age of visual sense-bombardment. Conclusions such as these, arrived at by Ong and McLuhan, gain further credence when weighed

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<sup>282</sup> Cf. McLuhan, *Medium and the Light or Understanding Media*, 47: “The stepping up of speed from the Mechanical to the instant electric form reverse explosion into implosion.”

<sup>283</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 47.

against the responses of the participants I interviewed, where a strong majority spoke explicitly—and without explicit prompting—about what they believed to be the refreshing nature of the sermon, as an oral and auditory event, largely free from visual encumbrances. The success of the podcast form and TED talks would seem to confirm that Ong, McLuhan, as well as the majority of the participants in this research, are perhaps onto something.

Given this nature of the digital matrix and the way listeners attend, some recommendations are in order. As David Seel expresses in his work, he feels a sense of gratitude to the current generation and the emergence of the digital age, that it is a healthy “corrective to three hundred years of distorted thinking, a corrective to our own blindness offering a healthy critique of the previous generation’s misguided privileging of certain communication tools and epistemologies, the West’s... bias toward the left hemisphere of the brain to the exclusion of the right.”<sup>284</sup> When one considers the variety of literature evident in the scriptures—the wide spectrum of genres employed, from historical narrative, to poetry, wisdom, apocalyptic, to name a few—not to mention the variety of forms of worship ordained therein, it is readily apparent that God’s own communication to us is multimodal. If worship of the previous generation, influenced as it was by the print age, is guilty of a hyper-intellectualized faith, worship, and preaching—in short, reductionistic in its anthropology—then the emerging digital age offers the church an opportunity to be moved to more fully access and recover the full scope of God’s own modes of communication evident throughout the canon of scripture.

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<sup>284</sup> Seel, *The New Copernicans*, 18.

As Eswine asserts, in the midst of “fresh cultural challenges...the key is to find the form best suitable for translating truth for our cultural moment.”<sup>285</sup> To that end then, practically speaking, the following practices might be recommended.

The first is that of media savviness. The typical congregant is exposed to an unprecedented stream of media, kept constantly informed by an up-to-the-minute, twenty-four-hour newsfeed, exposed to expert opinions at the touch of their finger-tips on every subject matter available. They do more reading and are simply better informed about everything. At the same time, they feel overwhelmed and anxious about the world they live in and psychically “ill-at-ease,” to use theologian and commentator Mark Sayer’s words. Their expectation, though often unspoken, is that their pastor and shepherd be capable of helping them navigate the stormy terrain of the digital landscape. This anxiety subjects pastors—perhaps unfairly—to what is increasingly known as “the expert syndrome,” where they are expected to be, at the bare minimum, as competent and informed as their parishioners are, on just as many matters. My research indicated that while pastors do not necessarily have to be social-media and digital experts, they must at least be competent and able to demonstrate that competency before their parishioners. A failure to do so will undoubtedly result in a loss of confidence on the part of the parishioner, which is particularly fragile in a world where the ubiquity of knowledge casts aspersions on matters of faith.

The second recommended practice involves narrative preaching. The literature insisted, and the participants confirmed, that their listeners attend to and construct meaning more inductively than deductively. They engage most intuitively with the non-

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<sup>285</sup> Eswine, *Post-Everything*, 98.



linear nature of narrative rather than the hyper-linearity of the epistles, or at the least the way the previous age has preached them, with an over-reliance on deductive reasoning. As both Ong and McLuhan have asserted, narrative is a valuable method of communication that transcends all ages of media, and it is currently enjoying a resurgence in a digital age. What's more, as Jensen, Lowry, Caddock, Eswine, and a host of others have refreshingly pointed out, knowing-through-narrative is a valid part of our anthropological makeup in the *imago dei*.

We would do well here to remember that literarily speaking, the Bible is itself a narrative, the story of the redemption of the world, and it is mostly narrative, in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>286</sup> Preachers, in this cultural moment, have an opportunity to be faithful to the narrative nature and shape of the scriptures themselves by recovering a form of preaching more narrative in its style and structure. This emphasis would not mean—as some preachers and theologians might fear—the abandonment of deductive approaches to exposition or a deliberate avoidance of deductive portions of the scripture. Instead it would advise preachers—as Lowry suggests<sup>287</sup>—to preach those portions of scripture in a more narrative structure or fashion or to at least recover and bring to the surface the backstories behind them. Backstory in particular is one of the features of Ben Witherington III's series of socio-rhetorical commentaries. What's more, as the current cultural moment has demonstrated with the unprecedented popularity of the documentary form of film and television, those of the digital age do in fact “have the stomach” for deductive teaching. It's just that that deductive teaching is best packaged in the narrative

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<sup>286</sup> Jensen, *Story*, 14.

<sup>287</sup> Lowry, *Homiletical Plot*, 12-13.

form. And as David Seel reminds, this current generation is “a world where story trumps worldview and experience trumps theology.”<sup>288</sup>

The third recommended practice is that of perspicuity and brevity. Media specialists have long pointed out the limitations of the human mind and attention span. It can attend to only so many things before it becomes overwhelmed and shuts down. As Aldous Huxley has said, “Life is short and information endless: nobody has time for everything. In practice we are forced to choose between unduly brief exposition and no exposition at all. Abbreviation is a necessary evil, and the abbreviator’s business is to make the best of it.”<sup>289</sup> How much more amplified is the situation than now, in the age of information glut. So, while it has always been important that preachers be direct, clear, and to the point, it is all the more imperative in this digital age. The preacher might here take advantage of effective verbal cuing skills, common in a more deductive age of preaching, such as is common to Tim Keller; a technique more than a few of the participants in this research noted; e.g., “my first point is, my second point is.” Even a narrative approach need not exclude principles of good deductive reasoning and vice-versa. One need not be done in exclusion to the other.

As a corollary to that, while preachers have always had to be mindful of sermon length and duration, in this era, with its diminished attending skills, preachers need to be especially conscious of it. That does not mean that all preachers, in all contexts, must not preach lengthy sermons because many preachers maintain the attention of their congregants despite long preaching. The preaching of Tim Keller, John Piper, and Matt

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<sup>288</sup> Seel, *The New Copernicans*, xix.

<sup>289</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958.), Foreward.

Chandler is testament to the fact that lengthy preaching endures in a digital age, and we are not even beginning here to account for various non-European cultures, where tolerance and expectation even for lengthier sermons remains part of the skillset and culture of that culture. Still, I would note that Keller, Piper, and Chandler are the exception rather than the rule. They are noteworthy precisely because they succeed in their preaching despite their lengthy sermons. They are skillful in captivating listeners with either rare rhetorical skill, unique passion, or the ability to be especially salient. So, as a rule of thumb, perhaps given the current culture's trending down of the attending ability, the preacher would do well to be especially conscious of the length of their sermons, and above all things, if they are going to preach at length, they would do well to keep it lively, in both form and content.

The fourth recommended practice is to be memorable or salient. With the glut of information and decreased attending capabilities, preachers should say something that, to quote one participant, "interrupts the Twitter feed." While it is certainly not new for listeners to quickly jettison what they've heard to the dustbin of irrelevancy, the temptation is only heightened in a culture where email inboxes remain full to overflowing and notifications constantly light up our cell phones.

The fifth recommended practice is that of expertise and preparedness. In an information-saturated age, people are increasingly exposed to expert opinion and commentary. The contemporary culture is more broadly informed than any previous generation and is capable of accessing expert opinion and commentary more easily than ever before. Preachers need to be at least as equally well informed.

The sixth recommended practice is that of genuine-ity, sincerity, and personal connectedness. It's not that these traits haven't always been important; it's that this current age amplifies the need of them. As Ellul and Postman have both adeptly pointed out, the technocratic culture mechanizes people's everyday lives and hence mechanizes them, leaving people starved for personal, sincere, and personal encounter. Thus, they are suspicious of that which is not. If it was important for preachers in the previous age to establish sincerity and rapport with their listeners, it is more crucial today. To quote one of the participants, "This generation can smell phony coming at them a mile away."

The seventh recommended practice is that of relatability and humility. While the West has always been characterized by a disproportionate degree of anti-authoritarianism, it is heightened in an obsessively egalitarian, digitized culture. Postman and McLuhan argue this is one of the inevitable consequences of the increased access to information. It by nature spurs a more democratic ethos, to the point of, eventually, making everyone an equal authority. Parishioners in this digital age—coupled with an increasingly deconstructionist climate, particularly in the university system and the press—are increasingly apt to be resistant to authority. To that end, religious authorities, particularly preachers, are viewed increasingly and instinctively, with suspicion. Fred Craddock's counsel to come across "as one without authority, who points to the one to whom all authority belongs" may prove especially helpful in our cultural moment.

The eighth recommended practice can be considered a subset of the sixth: establishing a dialogical feel to their preaching. Though preaching is monologue-ical by nature, preachers who hope to be effective in this age would do well to establish at least the feel of a dialogue so that parishioners feel as if they are conversing with the speaker,

even though—especially in cool-culture, Euro-influenced church cultures—they are likely not speaking aloud, but only silently, back to the preacher. While listeners have always been in some sense eager for dialogue—even in monologue-ical contexts—that is especially true in a digitized culture that invites participation from its users constantly. Simply put, today’s listener is more accustomed than ever to being an active participant in virtually everything. Monologue-ical speaking events are no exception.

The ninth recommended practice is that of the use of cultural illustrations. The literature as well as the participants’ insights confirm that illustrations, especially of the pop-cultural sort, are effective in arresting the attention of their parishioners and helping them make sense of what the Bible and the preacher are saying. While the use of illustration has always defined effective preaching, it is especially important today. In an age where narrative learning is the dominant mode, illustration is no longer simply an add-on to logic and argument but is in and of itself a mode of argument, one that the current generation intuitively recognizes as such. So, while it has always been useful for the preacher to preach, as Spurgeon first famously said, “with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other,” today, as one participant put it, “the newspaper is an iPad.”

The tenth recommended practice is that of movement or flow. Given the way that parishioners in a digital age attend, consume, think, and process information, preachers should ensure that the form, shape, and delivery of their sermons accommodate them accordingly. A variety of approaches were voiced by the participants and the literature, including using media that engage parishioners and help them “switch gears,” as well as creative sermons that flow narratively, with plot and progression as a story-plot progresses. The preachers from the more liturgical traditions spoke of sermons that

mirrored liturgical elements, something that breaks up the time and respects the attending capacities of parishioners, a more multi-modal and multi-focal form. They refrain from hyper-linear, hyper-logical trends of the print-age. As Buttrick explains, “There is a kind of simultaneity of experience...that characterizes the electronic media...We are no longer bound by the linear logic of the typographic age.”<sup>290</sup>

The eleventh recommended practice is that of depth. Many of the participants indicated that parishioners were capable of internalizing depth of meaning, and that despite the negative press about the current age, preachers reported hearing, and sensing, a desire and aptitude for deep and complex preaching. They were capable of processing information deeply and quickly at the same time, and they were “hungry for deep things,” having spent the majority of their week living in a superficial, media-saturated environment. This depth comes not more multi-focally, but through connections made across the stratum of mediums available in preaching and teaching. As Buttrick explains, “Our speaking assembles on the basis of a fairly sophisticated perceptual logic, the same logic employed by electronic media.”<sup>291</sup>

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In the course of this research, a number of related and tangential topics emerged that could prove fruitful in further research. These emerged primarily through the course of the interviews, but some emerged from the literature as well.

The first topic is the role of media, specifically, in worship: how can preachers and various traditions utilize media in the course of worship and preaching and what are

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<sup>290</sup> Buttrick, “Preaching,” 317.

<sup>291</sup> Buttrick, “Preaching, 316.

the short and long-term formative effects; how may the use of such media accord with some of the forms depicted in the scriptures themselves; and whether these are descriptive or normative and to what degree.

The second topic is educational strategy in a digital age: how, exactly, do those immersed in a digitally saturated environment learn, and what specific lecture methods that are more effective than others? How exactly does deep learning happen for the digitally immersed, and at what points does it differ from that of the learning that typified the print age?

The third topic is digital epistemology, meaning-making, and the Self. In conversation with the participants, as well as with the literature—especially that of Walker Percy and Charles Taylor—I became acutely aware of how “buffered the self is” and what “a voracious nought” the contemporary concept of Self had become, such that the gospel is in many respects categorically unintelligible. The researcher has in mind primarily the Lordship of Jesus and dying to self, as concepts so foreign to the contemporary self-understanding of the age that it might well render the gospel almost too foreign to be conceptually grasped.

A fourth topic is the role of liturgy and its compatibility with the make-up of the contemporary person’s epistemology, learning style, and spiritual formation. How, or to what degree, can liturgy comport with biblical spiritual formation and anthropology, as well as the historical development of worship in the early and medieval church?

A fifth topic is technology as a medium and how the church might master it—or whether, or to what to degree, it should—as it did with print. How does the church effectively enter into the digital milieu in a way that is biblical and consistent with the

gospel? Andy mentioned specifically that he was “impressed with Hillsong. Those guys really know how to stop the Twitter Feed. I’d really like to hear from someone like yourself and other experts on media what they have to say about how to break in there.”

A sixth topic is the mega-church and whether its form and its willingness to cater, seemingly uncritically and unapologetically, to entertainment sensibilities, as well as consumerism, is a counterproductive form, and whether it might be, by its own medium, sabotaging its explicit content, as participant Harry indicated he suspects, having observed in the recent decades the unravelling of many of these sorts of churches and the downfall of their leaders.

A seventh topic is the current generation’s radical attrition rate. If, as Drew Dyck contends, “Roughly 80 percent of teens in evangelical church high school youth groups will abandon their faith after two years in college,” it would serve the church well to undertake a vigorous pursuit in understanding the core the roots of this exodus. Such understanding must take seriously its epistemological roots and not merely its superficial characteristics. I suspect the shift lies in the fact that, as McLuhan pointed out, this age is less and less “Protestant” in its anthropology and is increasingly closer to what accords with an “Orthodox” one. The contemporary person is less and less a “conceptual” being and more and more a “perceiving” one. In a letter to his friend Bill Kuhns, McLuhan wrote, in response to their dialogue on Lk.8:18:

“Heed how you hear.” The entire context depends on understanding that; those who get the word of God as an idea or concept soon lose it. Those who get it—get it as a percept, a direct thing, interfacing and resonating—are those who represent the “good ground.” All those who are having difficulty with their Catholic faith today tend to be the victims of a post-Renaissance conceptualized theology and



catechism.<sup>292</sup>

McLuhan's distinction here between "percept" and "concept" is an especially insightful one. The use of the word "interface" seems, in itself, especially apt for the age. "Man in the electronic age," in McLuhan's estimation, "has been pushed into pure process by electronic technology,"<sup>293</sup> meaning that our very nature is changed from a conceptual being to a perceiving being, who feels his way rather than thinks his way, in and through the world.

### **Discussion of Topic**

My interest in this subject was prompted by my reading of two books: Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* and J.K.A. Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom*. Postman's book was at the top of my 'Books I Should Read' list. I was familiar with the subject of media ecology, about which Postman writes, having read excerpts from Marshall McLuhan and Jacques Ellul. But my primary education in media ecology is owed to my undergraduate film professor, Brian Fuller, MFA, who became a life-long mentor and friend, and a constant source of thinking in terms of the marriage of form and content, or to put it McLuhan's way, "Medium as Message." The concept that media is formative, above and beyond the literal content of its message, is foreign to the majority of my pastoral colleagues.

Postman, in particular, got me to thinking more specifically about the shift in media from print to image and the digital age—a shift he was militantly opposed to—and how it was affecting preachers. Questions arose as to whether they were aware of this

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<sup>292</sup> McLuhan, *Medium and the Light*, xx.

<sup>293</sup> McLuhan, *Medium and the Light*, xx.

palpable shift in media and its effects on their parishioners and how it had reshaped their epistemologies, whether pastors realized that they had either shifted epistemologies with them, or whether they were (as I think is often the case) typographic-holdouts of the Age of Exposition, and hence communicating in ways that were archaic and increasingly unintelligible to emerging generations and digital natives.

I also began to wonder whether Postman's cautions were warranted, and if the craft of exposition itself was in real danger, whether it had effectively already succumbed, and was a relic of the past, and hence expositional preaching with it. If so, then, what were the responsibilities of the preacher? Was it our task to protect and nurture it, say in the way Luke Skywalker was to preserve that of Jedi Master? Or was it the task of preachers to simply keep up with the times, forgo exposition altogether, and cater to the current medium, matching its sensibilities stroke-for-stroke? I began to wonder whether preaching was in decline perhaps altogether -- an outdated form as some emerging church leaders advocate, a mere convention of our typographic age, and was there an expositional imperative at all? At the same time, I was concerned that many preachers were adapting new technological sensibilities—suffering under what Marshall McLuhan and Jacques Ellul call the “technological imperative”<sup>294</sup> and had adopted new media forms without comprehending the “inherent formative power of those media.”<sup>295</sup> In short, I began to wonder about the preacher's responsibility to exposit the scriptures—which I consider a biblical imperative—but also began to wonder about how the preacher might do it effectively, realizing that with new media comes new epistemology, and that

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<sup>294</sup> Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 14.

<sup>295</sup> Hipps, *Hidden Power*, 17.

good communication and exposition requires adapting to one's audience. The people sitting in our pews have changed—that is irrefutable. How do preachers adapt to those changes without neglecting their responsibility to exposit the word of God?

When I read Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom*, however, different concerns emerged. I began to wonder, for the first time, if the Reformed emphasis, and traditional practice of expositional preaching might be guilty of a reductionist anthropology, and whether our tradition had, in its reaction against Catholicism, unnecessarily and unwittingly jettisoned important spiritual practices, particularly its appreciation for liturgical formation inveterate to the faith. I began to wonder what preaching might look like in this age, and whether this age with its demands might be the very thing to drive the church to recover a more wholistic model of preaching, one that accorded better with our anthropology in the *imago dei*, one that better corresponded to God's own multi-modal preaching presented in the scriptures.

When it came to the literature review, I was unable to find much material that recognized this shift in epistemology. Quentin Shultz and Leonard Sweet's collection of work, featuring various authors as they interacted with the history of the church and its relationship to media, especially that of print, appeared to be in small company. I also encountered ubiquitous cautionary literature on the effects of digitalization, although almost all of it—until very recently—was written by those outside the church, though Cal Newport and Andy Crouch have emerged on the scene, as has John Piper. Cultural critics, ex-pats from the social media world, founding entrepreneurs even, educational specialists, and the like had overwhelmingly negative things to say about the effects of digital-saturation. A few researchers pointed out some of the upsides, which even they

acknowledged were few, and which were mostly confined to hand-eye coordination, information access, creative enhancement, and certain “brain-games” designed to help in delaying the onset of dementia and other mentally-disabling conditions.

What seemed to be in short supply was literature geared specifically at helping preachers to navigate the digital matrix, and effectively exposit the scriptures in preaching to those of the digital age. A few of the participants mentioned Zack Eswine’s, *Preaching in a Post-Everything World* as helpful because while dealing with the postmodern matrix as a whole, it does devote some time to the digital-technological challenges that are part and parcel of it. Quentin Schulze talked about the values of those in the digital age but mostly talked about how to avoid falling prey to them. Overall it was difficult to find much in the way of “how-to” or technique-books when it came to preaching effectively and biblically.

Still, there was a good deal of literature that acknowledged the fact that media sensibilities had shifted in a visual and information-gluttonous society and that preaching would necessarily have to adapt to the shift. Among those writers, narrative preaching of the kind espoused by Eugene Lowry and Richard Jensen, as well as Robert Craddock, was the most popular suggestion. They argued that story transcends both culture, generation, and Age. It predates the modern era with its print, and it is ubiquitous in the postmodern era. The participants agreed. Narrative, as far as we can tell, is an essential characteristic of our anthropological makeup, irrespective of culture or race, part of the universal human condition and the way we make meaning and learn. A number of the participants spoke in explicitly narrative terms, such as meta-narrative and micro-narrative. These terms, once the intellectual property of scholars and academics, are readily becoming the

language not just of the preacher but also the parishioner. What parishioners had in mind, and meant, by “narrative preaching” varied, with some advocating that the sermon itself be shaped like a running narrative, with all the features of a novel: beginning, middle, and end, climax and anticlimax included. But others simply advocated illustrations as a means to connect parishioners’ lives and stories to the lives and stories of the scripture. Others spoke of the necessity to regularly communicate the Story, with a capital S, of the Bible and its Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration schema, and to help parishioners locate themselves along that spectrum.

Some writers advocated something they were calling Liturgical Preaching, which I found interesting and compelling, almost the sort of thing Robert Webber was advocating in his *Ancient Future* series and the sort of thing that resonated with J.K.A. Smith’s thesis and book-series based on an Augustinian model of liturgical formation. Writers like these offered, I think, a refreshing and objective perspective on some of the hyper-modernist tendencies of our Reformed tradition, revealing that we might be guilty of wedding the Christian faith to typography and its attendant sensibilities.

While on vacation recently I attended church, and I was immediately conscious of the heavy textual nature of the worship, swimming in a sea of words, both print and spoken. Afterwards I characterized it to my wife as “worship with the mind.” She agreed. We both felt mentally fatigued, and the worship felt culturally incongruent. It had a reductionist anthropology, and it treated us, to use Smith’s term, “like brains on sticks.” Even I—a second-generation digital user, who admittedly loves books to a fault, an undergraduate English Literature major, certified English teacher, Presbyterian, Reformed, highly educated, pastor pursuing his doctorate—found myself awash in a sea

of verbal glut, unable to recall little more than the preacher's lackluster illustration, which he repeated *ad nauseum*, throughout the way-too-long sermon. I noticed, not surprisingly, that the congregation was older; very few thirty-somethings. While this could be owing to a complex set of factors, it was clear to me— at 46—that the digitally saturated would find such worship burdensome and largely unintelligible, falling far short of what the twenty- and thirty-somethings I minister to would term “meaningful.” To borrow an illustration from McLuhan, “as numb as the native (primitive) would be in a literate, mechanical culture.”<sup>296</sup>

I suspect that as worship and preaching evolve to meet the context of the emerging ages, it will have to become more intuitive and multi-sensory, less abstract and theoretical in nature. Seel points to research conducted by neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist who “argues that language is derived from music and not the other way around...which helps us understand for the first time that poetry evolved before prose.”<sup>297</sup> The implications for this, if true, are monumental, especially if as McLuhan and Ong suggest, humanity is returning, in an electronic age, to sensibilities more akin to that of the oral age. It means that truth is more effectively “caught” in singing than “taught” in didactic explanation, and that our “pedagogy of, head, heart, and hand (observation, interpretation, application) [ought to be] just the reverse [in accordance with] how we

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<sup>296</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 31.

<sup>297</sup> Seel, *The New Copernicans*, 18.

actually learn: hand, heart, and then head.”<sup>298</sup> The latter, asserts Seel, “is a more accurate assessment of human nature and reality.”<sup>299</sup> The picture Smith paints is an apt one:

The liturgy is a “hearts and minds” strategy, a pedagogy that trains us as disciples precisely by putting our bodies through a regimen of repeated practices that get hold of our heart...Before we articulate a worldview, we worship...Before we theorize the nature of God, we sing His praises. Before we express moral principles, we receive forgiveness. Before we codify the doctrine of Christ’s two natures, we receive the...Eucharist. Before we think, we pray. That’s the kind of animals we are, first and foremost...we worship *in order to* <sup>300</sup>[sic] know.

It became apparent throughout the course of this research that in dealing with digital saturation, we are dealing with a complex matrix of social being, for whom digital media is both a formative medium as well as a product reflective of them, and reflective therefore of a great many and complex social things. Among these things is both the inherent distrust of authority—especially in the West—and the paradigm of self with its attendant goal, or meaning of “the good life,” as self-actualization. Walker Percy’s *Lost in the Cosmos* helped me appreciate how psychically different and maladjusted this current age is. The digital matrix is a world characterized by consumerism, an Amazon culture, trending to what experts are now terming, “loner-culture,” increasingly isolated and failing to thrive for want of purpose and meaning; a sound-bite, call-out, fragmented, tribalized, anxiety-ridden culture. I am concerned that the gospel sounds utterly foreign and unintelligible to the ears of this culture. They don’t have the schema to handle or assimilate it. It sounds to them much like adults in the Charlie Brown cartoons.

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<sup>298</sup> Seel, *The New Copernicans*, 19.

<sup>299</sup> Seel, *The New Copernicans*, 19.

<sup>300</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 34.

But I also came to realize, thanks to the more liturgically minded participants, that sometimes the foreignness of a thing can be a powerfully attractive agent. Six of the eight participants explicitly mentioned feeling that the worship in the church—especially of the liturgical variety—was a distinct advantage for preachers and the future of Christianity. They had “confidence because (liturgical worship) deals with fundamental human needs that can only be met by the church and the gospel. And so, where else can they go to get these? Nowhere.”

I was encouraged throughout the literature and the interviews to hear the need for expository preaching vigorously affirmed. It was the essential task of a preacher, and as Martin Lloyd Jones reminds us, “the most urgent need of the Church.”<sup>301</sup> To that end, preachers must remain vigilant to “hold the iPad in one hand,” so as to speak in a way that connects with the concerns of people in the pews and their mindset, and simultaneously labor to ensure that parishioners not confuse the iPad, with its worldly concerns and remedies with those found in what the preacher holds in the other hand: the Bible, with its eternal, supernatural concerns and remedies. We should remind ourselves of Harry’s phrasing, saying, “The metaphors of our culture, especially the digital one, speak in metaphors that are completely contrary to those of Scripture.”

Though much was said by the participants in the way of technique, the strongest case I think was made for use of narrative. I am convinced—by both the writers as well as the participants—that “story is king,” as some film critics have insisted. In the digital age it is the paradigm we think most intuitively and naturally in, and, in the words of Leslie Newbigin, it is the ground on which the church must compete, by “telling a better

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<sup>301</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers*, 17.



story.” Story, in Newbigin’s framework—as well as in that of the participants—is not an advocacy for mere storytelling or for more illustrations in preaching. It is the understanding that this is the epistemology of the age. People have and always will think, by virtue of human nature, in terms of story as meaning-giver. As Gary indicated, it’s the role of preaching to “tell that story, and invite people into God’s story, and see that story as their own now.”

While a good majority of the participants indicated they were influenced and had adopted entertainment techniques, all indicated that this “entertainment” was not an end in itself. “Entertaining” had far more to do with arresting the interest of their entertainment-conditioned parishioners because it was the language they spoke. The purist may object here—John Piper is on record criticizing his father’s preaching because he almost always included a joke or tried to get his people to laugh. Martyn Lloyd Jones famously critiqued preachers of his own generation, accusing them of “turning the form of preaching into entertainment.”<sup>302</sup> I think if one lets “the tail wag the dog,” then the criticism and caution are certainly warranted. But just because something entertains does not mean that it isn’t serious business. One can do, and a thing can be, both. The important thing is that it not become entertainment for entertainment’s sake. Such would indeed cease to be preaching.

The next several years will provide compelling successes and failures as the pulpit will be filled with digital natives, who don’t have to breach the technological chasm between Gutenberg to Zuckerberg. Their task will be one of checking how they have been conditioned by the digital media, so that they remain fresh and biblically grounded

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<sup>302</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers*, 22.

in speaking to parishioners who are just as digitally saturated as they are. As Kevin DeYoung said in the opening to his preface of Lloyd Jones' *Preaching and Preachers*, "For as the pulpit goes, so goes the church...there is no more vital task."<sup>303</sup> I pray the Lord's mercy, that he would outfit his preachers with the zeal and skill to pursue the high and holy call to preach greatly.

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<sup>303</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers*, 10.

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