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THE IMPACT OF ONLINE AUDIENCES

ON PREACHING MINISTRIES IN LOCAL CHURCHES

By

JOHN DAVID ELLIS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF
COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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THE IMPACT OF ONLINE AUDIENCES
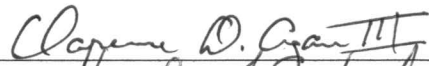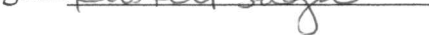ON PREACHING MINISTRIES IN LOCAL CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore ways that pastors whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings address the needs and concerns of their local congregations. The growing practice of podcasting audio recordings of sermons preached by pastors to their church members creates an online audience for their preaching and the possibility that their awareness of this audience may impact the way they address the people who hear them preach live.

This study employed the techniques of qualitative research, interviewing seven pastors selected according to the principles of purposeful sampling. In selecting participants for the study, the researcher sought to interview Christian pastors whose ministry assignment includes regularly preaching to a local congregation, whose weekly sermons have been posted online for at least two years, and whose online sermons are frequently accessed by at least half as many people as those who normally listen to them preach live. The review of literature and the analysis of the interviews focused on answering three key questions:

1. To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online aware of their online audience as they prepare and deliver their sermons?

2. To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online concerned that this practice may affect the way they address their local congregation?

3. What steps have been taken by pastors whose sermons are posted online to ensure that their sermons still target the specific context of their local congregation and community?

The responses of the participants revealed that, though they may not give much conscious thought to the people who hear their sermons online, they all receive sufficient feedback from this audience to be made aware of its existence. Though the preachers interviewed seemed unconcerned that their awareness of this online audience would impact the way they address their local congregations, an analysis of literature from communication theorists revealed that such concern might be merited. Ministry practices followed by these preachers point to ways pastors can stay relationally connected to their congregants. These practices might prevent pastors whose sermons are podcast from being influenced by their awareness of their online audience to the neglect of the needs of their church members.

This study concluded that there are valid reasons to be concerned that posting audio recordings of pastors' sermons online might distract pastors, specifically in their preaching, from effectively addressing the lives of their congregants. However, it also revealed that there are specific practices that can be employed by pastors whose sermons are podcast that can enable them to continue preaching effectively to their church members.

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CHAPTER ONE

Brief Introduction to the Problem

Those who have been called to preach on a regular basis to a local Christian congregation know that one of their primary responsibilities in this task is to address the needs, concerns, and questions of the people who gather to hear them. Preaching "is not exposition only but communication, not just the exegesis of a text but the conveying of a God-given message to living people who need to hear it."[1] Applying the truths of scripture to the specific situations of one's listeners requires great skill, effort, and insight. When successfully accomplished, it is of lasting benefit to a church. Indeed, the preaching of God's word to God's people within the context of a local church worship service is considered by many to be a God-ordained means of grace.[2]

The development of the internet in recent decades has opened up a whole new world of opportunities for churches. The appearance of this technology has been called "the most portentous development for the future of religion to come out of the twentieth century."[3] One opportunity churches now have is the ability to post audio recordings of their preachers' sermons online. By doing this, thousands of people all over the world are able to listen to a church's sermons, at almost no cost to a local congregation. Ministers in churches around the world stand behind their pulpit every Sunday, knowing that their

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[1] John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds – The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 137.

[2] Michael Horton, *A Better Way – Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 156.

[3] Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 17.

sermon will be heard by many more people than merely those whose faces they see in front of them.

Of course, by broadening its preacher's audience, a church inevitably changes the context into which that preacher speaks. One author, advising congregations how to use the internet to enhance their ministries, notes that it "is especially important for the pastor to consider that if his sermons are online, he is speaking not only to his congregation on Sunday morning."[4] In many churches today, hundreds or even thousands of unseen, unnamed listeners "eavesdrop" on every congregational preaching event through their access to these sermons online.

Students of communication theory have long noted that speakers' perceptions of the audience they are addressing will invariably affect both the content and the format of their speech.[5] In their seminal work on rhetoric, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrects-Tyteca observe, "Every speaker thinks, more or less consciously, of those he is seeking to persuade; these people form the [true] audience to whom his speech is addressed."[6] Communication theorists would think it almost impossible, therefore, to add thousands of unseen listeners to a preacher's audience without, in some way, affecting the sermon that is delivered. Though online listeners are not visible to those seated in the pews, their existence is real and the preacher is aware of it.

This new reality presents a challenge to ministers whose sermons are posted online. The chance to share their message with thousands of listeners outside the walls of

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[4] Rob Haskell, "eVangelism: The gospel and the world of the internet," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34, no. 3 (July, 2010): 284.

[5] Michael J. Hostetler, "Constructing Audiences for Ecumenism: A Rhetorical Perspective," *World Communication* 27, no. 3 (1998): 39.

[6] Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrects-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric – A Treatise on Argumentation,* trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 19.

their church seems, to many preachers, to be an opportunity too good to ignore. At the same time, many pastors understand that their primary preaching responsibility is to proclaim God's word to the specific needs of the people in their local church and community. How can preachers broaden their audience, through the use of the internet, without losing their ability to address the men and women in their local church? How can they balance their awareness of their online audience with their responsibility to proclaim a message suited to the people of the congregation that called them to be its minister?

Review of Selected Studies

In order to answer this question, it is important to review selected studies from three distinct bodies of literature. First, one must examine works that address the subject of Christian preaching in general and in particular the relationship between a preacher and a congregation in the context of a preaching event. Secondly, it is important to review studies that explore the extent to which churches are posting audio recordings of their pastors' sermons on the internet, and the ways in which these recordings are being used by online listeners. Finally, one should review the writings of communication theorists to explore the effect that speakers' perceptions of their audiences have on the communication process as a whole.

Literature About Preaching

Much has been written about the importance of preaching within the context of the life of a local Christian church. In this context, the relationship between preacher and congregation is a vital component of the overall preaching event.

Some writers, for example, have pointed out that preachers have a responsibility to minister the proclaimed word in a way that is meaningful to the congregation they

serve. John R.W. Stott, an Anglican clergyman and scholar long viewed as one of the

pioneering leaders of the modern evangelical movement, explains this responsibility thus:

"It is [the preacher's] privilege to have been put in charge of God's household and

entrusted with the provisions they need. These are 'the mysteries of God', meaning God's

revealed secrets. [The preacher] is expected above all to be faithful in dispensing them to

God's family."[7]

In a similar way, Christian author Peter Adam writes, "If we are servants of God

and of Christ, and servants of his Word, then the call of the preacher is also to be a

servant of God's people."[8] He points out that the Apostle Paul, in Colossians 1:23-25, in

describing his role as a preacher, identified himself as "as a servant of the church to make

the Word of God fully known."[9] Adam explains,

> Paul's relationship to his hearers is not one of remote academic isolation (a model
> of teaching which is now powerful in the West and is a product of Enlightenment
> thinking about autonomy, free enquiry and independence). Paul continually
> describes himself as being in the closest relationship with those to whom he
> ministers…. [He uses] the language of deep personal commitment, indicating the
> style of servanthood and service Paul has in mind.[10]

Adam's point is that if the apostolic ministry is to serve as a model for ministers, they

should place a high value on relating personally with the people to whom they preach.

Dennis E. Johnson, Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological

Seminary California, also holds up the preaching of the apostles as a pattern that ought to

be followed by all Christian preachers today. Regarding this apostolic preaching, Johnson

observes, "The apostles adjusted the presentation of their message not only to the

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[7] Stott, 136.
[8] Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words – A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 130.
[9] Adam, 130.
[10] Adam, 130.

language of their hearers but also to the issues raised by the hearers' worldviews and experience, yet without compromising the central message of Christ and his saving work."[11] This approach, according to Johnson, is one which all ministers ought to take toward preaching.

The need for preachers to understand specific details of the lives of their hearers, according to Charles Bugg, points to a responsibility that ministers must not ignore. Bugg is a highly respected scholar, minister, and author, who has served as dean for the Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity. He contends that those who regularly proclaim God's word to the people of a local congregation need to be personally interacting with their congregants on a continual basis, in order to know how to address them effectively. "Speaking to the needs grows out of listening to them." [12] Preachers who fail to listen to their congregants, Bugg insists, will "wind up being noisy but without much really important to say."[13]

Sidney Greidanus, the emeritus professor of preaching who taught at Calvin Theological Seminary, emphasizes the importance of "congregational involvement" in the preaching event.[14] He makes the point that congregations are just as involved in preaching as preachers are: "Although most sermons are in the form of a monologue, the monologue ought to be a dialogue with the hearers, that is, it ought to respond to the reactions of the hearers as these might come up during the sermon."[15] In order to enhance the involvement of the congregation in the sermon, Greidanus contends, the preacher

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[11] Dennis E. Johnson, Dennis E. *Him We Preach – Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures (*Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 31.

[12] Charles B. Bugg, *Preaching & Intimacy – Preparing the message and the messenger* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1999), 47.

[13] Bugg, 46.

[14] Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text – Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 184.

[15] Greidanus, 185.

ought to focus on "aiming the sermon at specific needs in the congregation, by addressing the sermon, as the text before it, to specific questions."[16]

Another author who highlighted the role that a local congregation plays in helping a preacher to speak effectively was the influential Welsh preacher and author, David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. In his book, *Preachers and Preaching,* Lloyd-Jones refers to preaching, when done correctly, as "a transaction between preacher and listener with something vital and living taking place."[17] The non-verbal "interplay" between the preacher and the congregation, particularly those members of the congregation who are "filled with the Spirit," provides the preacher with needed feedback that guides the proclamation of the sermon. [18]

Because of the important role the congregation plays in preaching and because of the mystical presence of Christ in the gathering of his people, Lloyd-Jones held a low view of the idea of broadcasting sermons via radio or television.[19] (The internet did not exist during his lifetime.)[20] When sermons are broadcast, he wrote, "the whole notion of coming together, and sitting together round the Word, and listening to an exposition of it, is seriously damaged."[21] According to Lloyd-Jones, the public broadcasting of a sermon removed something vital from the preaching event, namely the "direct contact between the people and the preacher, and [the] interplay of personalities and minds and hearts." [22]

Other writers have emphasized the corporate nature of the preaching event as an essential element of God's work in the church. For example, Jay Adams, a well-known

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[16] Greidanus, 184.
[17] D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preachers and Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 54.
[18] Lloyd-Jones, 84.
[19] Lloyd-Jones, 42-43.
[20] Ironically, hundreds of recordings of Lloyd-Jones' sermons can now be heard online.
[21] Lloyd-Jones, 251.
[22] Lloyd-Jones, 227.

pastor, seminary professor, and author of many books on Christian ministry and counseling, notes that "God ordained regular preaching in His church" in a gathered assembly of a local body of Christians. [23] Preaching in this context aims "to effect *changes* among the members of God's church that build them up individually and that build up the body as a whole."[24] Michael Horton, Professor of Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary California, also emphasizes the important role that preaching plays in the context of congregational worship. In that context, preaching, he maintains, is "the chief means of grace."[25] Horton insists that proclamation of God's word by an ordained minister to a congregation of believers who have gathered to worship their Lord is "the method ... that God has promised to use for salvation and growth. It must, therefore, be central in worship."[26] Horton bemoans the tendency he sees in the modern church for people to look for God to work through extraordinary ways and through unusual methods. He cautions us not to overlook "what the Spirit is doing every week in the *ordinary* ministry of the means that he has appointed. God works savingly then and there because he has promised to meet us then and there."[27]

These are just a few of the many authors and scholars who have explored the dynamics that take place when God's word is preached to a local Christian congregation. Their almost unanimous counsel is that, in order to fulfill their responsibility to their calling, preachers must connect with the members of their congregations in ways that allow them to direct their sermons to these people's needs and concerns.

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[23] Jay E. Adams, *Preaching with Purpose – A Comprehensive Textbook on Biblical Preaching* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982), 11-12.
[24] Adams, 13.
[25] Horton, 156.
[26] Horton, 156.
[27] Horton, 64.

Literature About the Internet

Another body of literature that is pertinent to this study is material that examines current trends in ways that churches are making use of the internet. Since this phenomenon is relatively new and constantly changing, locating reliable resources in this field is not easy to do. Nevertheless, since the internet is radically transforming our culture, many scholars have already begun to write about its impact on the local church.

Essentially everyone in this field agrees that religious communities are eagerly embracing the internet as an effective way to transmit information. Lorne Dawson, the Chair of the Department of Religious Studies and Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, has written, "Religion of every kind, big and small, old and new, mainstream and more exotic, is present online, and in great abundance. Religion is being practiced on a daily basis by ever increasing numbers of people, especially young people …."[28] Martin Carr, a Science Information Officer at the Royal Society in England, writes that in the United States, "a quarter of all Internet users use it to find religious material."[29] Religious information, he says, ranks after "pornography and medicine [as] the third most popular topic on the Web."[30] Author Brenda Brasher, Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, has made a careful study of trends in internet technology for more than a decade. She has documented the tremendous "effect that the spread of computers is having on our spiritual environment," noting that the changes being produced by this technology "are

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[28] Lorne L. Dawson, "The mediation of religious experience in cyberspace," in *Religion and Cyberspace* ed. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005), 15

[29] Martin Carr, "The Use of Online Information Sources as a Tool for Mission by Parish Churches," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 6, no. 2, (2004): 52.

[30] Carr, 53.

reaching the personal core of each of us, to touch what customarily has been called the human soul." [31]

All of this has, of course, changed the way that individuals seek to learn truths about God. Henry L. Carrigan, Jr., who has been a teacher of biblical studies and religion at Dominican College in Columbus, Ohio and at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio, and is also the Editorial Director of Trinity Press International, observes, "Rather than attending a religious institution to gather [religious] information, the contemporary generation of seekers turns to books, magazine articles, and Internet sites in its quest for knowledge." [32] He considers the development of the world wide web to be "one of the most exciting and most problematic, cultural developments of the past twenty-five years." [33]

Though it is not uncommon to find people, both inside and outside Christian circles, who are nervous about any new technological advancement, many writers are heralding the internet as presenting a wonderful opportunity for churches to extend their mission. In their book, *Christians in a .com World – Getting Connected Without Being Consumed,* respected evangelical authors Gene Edward Veith, Jr. and Christopher L. Stamper, express this enthusiasm. They write:

> [Overt] Christianity is often discriminated against in the arts, the sciences, the media, and other fields that directly shape the thought, values, and imagination of the culture as a whole. But now, with the new information technology, nothing can keep Christians out. With all of the gatekeepers knocked out, the field is wide-open. The Internet gives Christians access to the means of cultural production. Christianity has a shot at being influential in culture again. As the

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[31] Brasher, 27.

[32] Henry L. Carrigan, Jr., "Seeking God in Cyberspace: Religion and the Internet," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 4C, no. 4, (2001): 56.

[33] Carrigan, 61.

printing press was the engine of the Reformation, the Internet will be the engine of whatever comes next.[34]

Though they caution Christians to be prudent in their approach to the web,[35] Veith and Stamper note that virtually every change in communication technology has met with cultural resistance.[36] However, they note, Christians have often taken advantage of new innovations, for example the invention of the printing press, in order to advance their mission in the world.[37]

Christian author Andrew Carreaga insists that "the church – *all* Christians – must recognize that the Internet is a valuable tool to reach the generations."[38] Though he is less optimistic than Veith and Stamper that the church will actually do this, he urges Christians to make full use of opportunities that are presented by the web. The internet is here to stay, he reasons, and the church must learn to use it. He has no doubt that "other belief systems" will use this technology to spread their message. The question is whether or not the church will take advantage of this "virtual mission field." [39]

One way that churches are, in fact, already responding to the existence of the internet is by posting audio recordings of their preacher's sermons online. Often referred to as podcasting, this is being called "one of the newest – and hottest – technologies." [40] One American evangelical pastor, interviewed by authors Brian Bailey and Terry Storch, reports that over one million audio recordings (of "primarily sermons along with some

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[34] Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. and Christopher L. Stamper, *Christians in a .com World – Getting Connected Without Being Consumed* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 149-150.
[35] Veith and Stamper, 158-159.
[36] Veith and Stamper, 161-162.
[37] Veith and Stamper, 164.
[38] Andrew Careaga, *eMinistry – Connecting with the Net Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2001), 36.
[39] Careaga, 35.
[40] Lydia Lum, "The Power of Podcasting," *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* 23, no. 2 (March 9, 2006): 32.

worship music") are downloaded from his church's website each year.[41] Another pastor,

writing for a journal widely read by evangelical ministers, stated:

> How many people last month visited National Community Church? 12,771. I couldn't see them. I didn't shake any of their hands. Truth be told, they didn't really visit us. National Community Church visited them. They didn't physically attend one of our weekend services. Many of them aren't ready to walk into a church yet. Others live halfway around the globe. But all of them invite NCC into their iPods.[42]

This pastor, apparently, has re-defined his congregation to include those who listen to his

sermons online.

All of this indicates that, just as other areas of human life have been affected by

the development of the internet, the way many churches disseminate biblical information

has also been radically changed. In particular, the posting of online sermons is becoming

an increasingly common practice.

Literature About Communication

The third body of literature to be reviewed in this study indicates that the posting

of a pastor's sermons online will invariably have an effect on what and how that pastor

preaches. Those who study communication theory have much to say about this.

David S. Cunningham's book, *Faithful Persuasion – In Aid of a Christian*

Rhetoric, was winner of the 1990 Bross Prize, an endowment that recognizes important

unpublished manuscripts that relate any discipline to Christianity. In this work, he

explains the concept of a speaker's "constructed audience." These are the people, seen or

unseen, consciously recognized or unconsciously felt, for whom any communicator is

actually crafting the content and structure of the material delivered. Cunningham writes:

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[41] Brian Bailey with Terry Storch, *the blogging church – Sharing the Story of Your Church Through Blogs.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 23.
[42] Mark Batterson, "Godcasting,"*Leadership.* (Spring 2006): 81.

> From a rhetorical perspective, speakers determine their audiences just as surely as they determine the content of their speeches…. Speakers and writers construct their audiences *through the very way in which they select and deploy their arguments.* By choosing certain arguments over others, rhetors include and exclude certain people from the audience.[43]

Pastors whose sermons are uploaded to the internet may insist that they are preparing their sermons for the needs of their congregation and for the community around them. However, they may be unaware of the effect that their online audience might have on them. The audience they have constructed in their minds, as they speak to their church, may in fact include those who will access their sermons on the internet. As Cunningham observes, "All arguers construct their audiences; however, some acknowledge this fact, while others deny it."[44]

This situation can create a dilemma. A preacher addressing a congregation of postmodern secularists in California may speak in terms that will raise the hackles of Christian bloggers in Idaho but that would be totally appropriate at home. Will fear of condemnation in the "blogosphere" keep that preacher from effectively addressing the listeners in the pews? Will concern over losing out-of-state donors cause the preacher to hold back while delivering God's truth?

Scholars Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrects-Tyteca are renowned for their insights into the concept of a constructed audience. They write, "[We] consider it preferable to define an audience, for the purposes of rhetoric, as *the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation.* Every speaker thinks, more or less consciously, of those he is seeking to persuade; these people form the audience to

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[43] David S. Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion – In Aid of a Christian Rhetoric* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 69.
[44] Cunningham, 75.

whom his speech is addressed.[45] Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca would insist that

preachers would be foolish to ignore the influence that their audience will have on their

speech:

> In real argumentation, care must be taken to form a concept of the anticipated audience as close as possible to reality. An inadequate picture of the audience, resulting from either ignorance or an unforeseen set of circumstances, can have very unfortunate results…. Accordingly, knowledge of those one wishes to win over is a condition preliminary to all effectual argumentation.[46]

They note that "no orator, not even the religious orator, can afford to neglect this effort of

adaptation to his audience."[47]

When approaching the subject of Christian preaching, the ideas of secular

theoreticians may seem, to some, to be irrelevant or even irreverent. But, though

preaching is indeed a sacred act, it is still a form of human communication. To pretend

that speakers and listeners cease to be human merely because one of them bears an

ecclesiastical title would be considered absurd by communication theorists. For example,

Robert S. Fortner, Professor of Communication at Calvin College, considers it

unacceptable for those called to "get the gospel out to the world" to ignore the insights of

theorists. [48] He observes that many Christians have either "ignored [communication]

theory altogether" or have "unreflectively adopted an obsolete theoretical perspective."[49]

This response greatly hinders the church's effectiveness at proclaiming the message of

Christ.

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[45] Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca, 19.
[46] Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca, 20.
[47] Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca, 24.
[48] Robert S. Fortner, *Communication, Media, and Identity – A Christian Theory of Communication* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), xii.
[49] Fortner, xii.

For these reasons, it is important to this study that all three bodies of literature described above be allowed to interact with each other freely – literature that explores the relationship between a preacher and a congregation, reports on church's current use of internet technology, and scholarship that studies the effect of audience on a speaker.

Problem and Purpose Statement

New technological opportunities presented by the internet provide churches with an inexpensive way to make recordings of their pastors' sermons available to listeners all over the world. Preachers from congregations of all sizes can easily develop an online audience that outnumbers those who physically gather to hear them speak. Does the addition of an online audience affect the way they preach? Are they concerned that their awareness of these unseen listeners might keep them from connecting with the specific needs and questions of their congregants? Are there ways that ministers can prevent themselves from being affected by this enlarged audience as they speak to their local churches?

The purpose of this study is to explore ways that pastors whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings address the needs and concerns of their local congregations.

Proposed Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

4. To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online aware of their online audience as they prepare and deliver their sermons?

5. To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online concerned that this practice may affect the way they address their local congregation?

6. What steps have been taken by pastors whose sermons are posted online to ensure that their sermons still target the specific context of their local congregation and community?

Significance of the Study

The development of the world wide web has dramatically affected the culture in which we live. Virtually every dimension of human life has been altered by its existence. The way businesses market their products and services, the way people access entertainment, the way individuals interact with friends, the way students attain an education, the way travelers plan vacations, the way singles meet prospective dates and mates, the way political movements take root and grow – all of these and more have been irrevocably changed by the existence of the internet. The impact of this technology on our world is still being discovered, even as new technological advances continue to grow.

The church too has been affected by this new reality. Christians have apparently entered the online world with the same eagerness as everyone else. People now access theological and scriptural material in ways that could not have been imagined a generation ago. They use online resources to study the Bible. They use chat rooms to share their faith. They surf the web to find a church home. Many will review a church's website before deciding to visit the church. Some will visit the church without ever leaving their homes, by "attending" a worship service as it is streamed online. Through portable MP3 players, preachers now speak on a regular basis to Christians they will never meet. They whisper God's word into their ears during some of the most private moments of life – as their listeners do the dishes at night, as they work out in the gym, as they walk down the street, as they ride to work on the bus.

To ignore these technological changes or to pretend that they do not exist would be folly. Though they may present dangers, they also provide Christians with amazing opportunities to take their message to the world. Few would suggest that the church refuse to be involved in the new cyber-world. Yet, to a large degree, churches are embracing this new technology without much careful reflection. It seems unlikely that Christians can use this new media and have their experience of church remain unchanged. Some of the changes they encounter may prove to be deeply beneficial for them. Others may not. But to run full speed into the future without pausing to reflect on its possible impact on the church does not seem to be wise.

Because of this, a study such as this one might prove to be very helpful to Christian preachers. As the future unfolds, more and more preachers will add online listeners to their weekly audience. Yet the need for them to proclaim a specific word from the Lord to the members of their church will not diminish at all. Preachers will need to learn ways to balance their awareness of their online audience with their need to preach purposely to their local church. However, few studies, if any at all, have endeavored to look into this matter.

<div align="center">**Definition of Terms**</div>

Preaching – There are obviously many effective ways to communicate the biblical message to God's people: books, music, drama, classroom instruction, interactive study groups, etc. One could make the point that in all of these methods God's word is being preached. Though this may be true, for the purposes of this study, the term "preaching" will be used to refer to the formal act of expounding scripture authoritatively in the

context of corporate Christian worship by one commissioned by the congregation for

such a task.

Sermon – In this study, the term "sermon" will be used to refer to the message delivered

to a Christian congregation by one engaged in the act of preaching, as defined above.

Worship service – Unless otherwise explained, in this study the term "worship service"

will be used to describe a physical gathering of Christians, assembled in one location for

the purpose of corporate praise, prayer, and preaching.

Podcast – In this study, the term "podcast" will be used in the way employed by the

educational researcher Lydia Lum:

> [Podcasts] are actually homespun broadcasts that can be listened to on any
> portable digital music player, including iPod. The podcasts can also be accessed
> on any computer with audio and video downloading capabilities. Podcasting's
> syndicated audio feed makes for a greatly simplified delivery system. While the
> word "podcast" certainly works to iPod's advantage, some pioneers of the
> medium insist the term should stand for "personal-on-demand" or "personal
> option digital." Podcasts can be automatically routed through cyberspace to
> subscribers' personal media devices and consumed at their leisure, like a digital
> audio version of hard-copy magazines. And like magazines, podcasts can be
> shared and swapped over and over again. But unlike magazines, podcasts don't
> require any physical space, making the medium even more appealing.[50]

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[50] Lum, 32.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

New technological opportunities presented by the internet have provided churches with an easy and inexpensive way to make recordings of their pastors' sermons available to listeners online. Preachers from congregations of all sizes can easily develop online audiences that rival or even surpass the number of those who physically gather to hear them speak. Does the addition of an online audience affect the way a minister preaches, and if so, how? Are preachers concerned that their awareness of these unseen listeners might keep them from connecting with the specific needs and questions of their congregants? Congregations may be concerned that if their ministers are being heard by listeners over the internet, their pastors may be inclined to address their online audiences at the expense of the needs of the local church. Are there ways that ministers can prevent themselves from being affected negatively by this enlarged audience as they speak to their local churches? Is it possible that the addition of an online audience might positively affect the way ministers preach to their congregants?[51]

The purpose of this study is to explore ways that pastors whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings address the needs and concerns of their local congregations.

In order to answer this question, it is important to review selected studies from various bodies of literature as well as to analyze biblical material that may be pertinent to

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[51] Though churches often post their pastors sermons online in written form and video form, this study is focusing on sermons that are posted as audio recordings.

this subject. It is important to review studies that explore the extent to which churches are posting audio recordings of their pastors' sermons on the internet, and the ways in which these recordings are being used by online listeners. It is also important to review the writings of communication theorists to explore the impact that speakers' perceptions of their audiences might have on the communication process as a whole. In addition, one must examine works that address the subject of Christian preaching in general and, in particular, the relationship between a preacher and a congregation in the context of a preaching event.

<div align="center">Literature About the Church and the Internet</div>

One body of literature pertinent to this study examines current trends in ways that churches make use of the internet. In order to understand the significance of the question explored in this study, it is helpful to know the extent to which sermon podcasts[52] are being used, both by churches and by the broader internet community. It is also helpful to know the opinions, insights, and predictions of those who are monitoring this trend.

Though it is difficult to get accurate measures of internet usage,[53] what is clear is that more and more people around the world are relying on the world wide web for information, communication, entertainment, and commerce. By some estimates, there were over 430 million web hosts and between fifteen and thirty billion web pages in existence by the year 2007.[54] The number of people using the internet passed the one

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[52] For the purposes of this paper, the term "podcast" is being used to refer to any audio recording accessible online. For a more detailed definition of this term, as used in this paper, see chapter one.

[53] Bruce Klopfenstein, "The Internet and Web as Communication Media," in *Communication Technology and Society – Audience Adoption and Uses,* ed. Carolyn A. Lin and David J. Atkin (Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002), 365.

[54] Richard Jackson Harris, *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication,* 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

billion mark in 2007, representing more than twenty percent of the earth's population.[55]

In the United States, more than half of the population makes use of the internet, including

seventy-five percent of those between the ages of fourteen and seventeen.[56] Douglas

Estes, Adjunct Professor of New Testament at Western Seminary – San Jose and lead

pastor of Berryessa Valley Church, observes that "at no other time in history since the

time of Genesis has [such a high] percent of the world's population been in direct

communication with each other" – a fact which he finds "theologically sobering."[57]

Indeed, the impact of the internet on the cultures of this world appears only to be

increasing. Author Nicholas Carr describes this impact this way:

> "We *are* coming to live inside the World Wide Computer. It's becoming the
> default forum for many of our commercial and personal relationships, the medium
> of choice for storing and exchanging information in all its forms, the preferred
> means of entertaining, informing, and expressing ourselves. The number of hours
> we spend online every week has been rising steadily for years, and as we've
> switched from dial-up to broadband connections our reliance on the Web has
> expanded greatly. For growing numbers of us, in fact, the virtual is become as real
> as the physical."[58]

Because of these realities, according to authors Jean-Nicolas Bazin and Jerome Cottin,

the Christian church "can neither ignore the phenomenon of the Internet nor be content

just to criticize it."[59]

The rise in internet usage is reflected in a similar growth that is taking place in the

practice explored by this study – the downloading of audio podcasts. Studies in the

United States indicate that among college students over eighty percent own one or more

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[55] Douglas Estes, *SimChurch – Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 18.

[56] John P. Jewell, *Wired for Ministry – How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New Technologies Can Serve Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 161.

[57] Estes, 18.

[58] Nicholas Carr, *The Big Switch – Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 124.

[59] Jean-Nicolas Bazin and Jerome Cottin, *Virtual Christianity – Potential and Challenge for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2003), 61.

devices for downloading and playing audio recordings from the internet.[60] Close to thirty

percent of people who own MP3 players "have downloaded podcasts, totaling more than

6 million people."[61] Podcasts appear to be more frequently downloaded by younger

people, indicating that this method of accessing audio information is likely to increase in

years to come. While studies show that only twenty percent of Americans over the age of

twenty-nine years have downloaded podcasts, the number among those between the ages

of eighteen and twenty-five who have done so is nearly fifty percent. These statistics

appear to be distributed evenly between men and women.[62]

Research indicates that many people use the internet to access information of a

spiritual or religious nature. This number, though already vast, appears to be growing. A

Pew research study conducted in the year 2000 found that twenty-one percent of internet

users (nineteen-twenty million people) had used the internet to find religious information.

This was more than the number who used the internet for online banking, online auctions,

or online dating services. The study indicated that, at that time, more than two million

Americans were using the internet to access religious material every day.[63] A similar Pew

study, conducted four years later, indicated that the number of Americans using the

internet for religious or spiritual purposes had more than tripled to 64 percent

(representing eighty-two million people.)[64] These internet users were "more likely to be

female, white, middle aged, and college educated."[65] Quentin J. Schultze, Professor of

Communication Arts and Sciences at Calvin College, reports that, among Americans who

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[60] Lum, 32.
[61] Ibid., 34.
[62] Ibid., 35.
[63] James P. Wind, "Crossing the digital divide: new forms of community on the virtual frontier," *Congregations.* 27, no. 3 (May-June 2001): 9.
[64] Jonathan V. Last, "God on the Internet," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life* 158 (December, 2005): 34.
[65] Ibid.

make use of the internet, almost two out of every three have used it for some religious or

spiritual purpose.[66] "In fact, Catholics, evangelicals and 'other Protestant' tribes include

about three-quarters of the 'heavier' and 'heaviest' Internet users."[67] Among evangelical

Christians, the web is reportedly used for religious reasons more frequently than it is used

to enjoy entertainment or to access information.[68]

Among those who use the internet for religious purposes are a large number of

people who access online audio sermon recordings. These recordings are, according to

one author, "usually the most valuable content a church has to offer on the web."[69] An

article in the *National Catholic Reporter* describes how listeners access these recordings:

"To get the audio feeds, listeners connect an MP3 player to a computer, go online and

sign up for podcasting feeds. Audio content is then pushed from the original source and

makes its way through an aggregator to a subscriber who can listen to it anytime."[70]

According to this report, "among the most prolific users of this new technology" are

preachers of various religious traditions.[71]

One of the pastors interviewed by Bailey and Storch in the work cited above

described how easy it is for churches to post sermons online:

> [Podcasting] is as simple as taking the Sunday morning message that you
> probably already recorded and uploading it as an MP3 file. Anybody with a
> computer or an MP3 player can then download it and take it with them wherever
> they go. There are a lot of forms of podcasting, but a good starting point is your
> weekend message. All you need is a tech-savvy teenager to pull it off.[72]

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[66] Quentin J. Schultze, "Following Pilgrims into Cyberspace" in *Understanding Evangelical Media – The Changing Face of Christian Communication.* ed. Quentin J. Schultze and Robert H. Woods, Jr. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 138.

[67] Ibid., 137.

[68] Ibid., 140.

[69] Mark M. Stephenson, web-empowered ministry – connecting with people through websites, social, and more (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 169.

[70] "Godcasting may be the podcast's first 'killer app'," *National Catholic Reporter,* July 1, 2005, 3.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Bailey and Storch, 155.

This same pastor reported that the response to his church's online sermons was

overwhelmingly positive. He said:

> We started podcasting in the summer of 2005. We just started uploading the MP3s
> in the middle of a series. During the first two weeks, we had a grand total of
> thirty-seven people subscribe. Now, we actually have more people who are
> connected to our podcast each month than walk through our doors. The podcast
> has allowed us to reach out beyond our current congregation.[73]

Though not all churches have experienced this kind of response to their sermon podcasts,

what happened in this church is certainly not unique.

The posting of online sermons is not merely a North American phenomenon. It is

taking place among churches all over the world. A group of researchers who performed a

websphere and hyperlink analysis of 117 Protestant churches in Singapore, define this as

"a content analysis of website features, including the history, background, faith beliefs,

religious services, programs, map, location and accessibility, picture gallery, podcast,

webcast, audiovisual, and online forum." [74] They found that 49.7 percent of these

churches included an audio podcast on their congregational website.[75]

The use of the internet by congregations, including their posting of audio sermon

podcasts, is generally hailed as being of great advantage to the church. Such technology

is said to have "placed a powerful tool for ministry at the church's doorstep."[76] In order

to encourage churches to make use of this technological tool, Steve Hewitt writes:

"Spread the joy! Don't keep your sermons … just for your congregation. Podcasting

gives us a great opportunity to spread our message to the world. This is a wonderful time

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[73] Ibid., 156.

[74] Pauline Hope Cheong, Jessie P. H. Poon, Shirlena Huang, and Irene Casas, "The Internet Highway and
Religious Communities: Mapping and Contesting Spaces in Religion-Online," *Information Society*, 25 no.
5 (October-December 2009):294.

[75] Ibid., 296.

[76] Jewell, *Wired for Ministry,* 48.

to live, and the church has a unique opportunity to be involved in world missions. Spread your podcasts around the world!"[77]

Much of the enthusiasm over ministry uses of the internet stems from ways that church websites can connect members of a local congregation with their church. Mary E. Hess, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, states that the internet allows congregations to overcome "the constraints of geography and time," so that churches need no longer be "'Sunday morning only' places, where people drive quite a distance to gather for worship and fellowship."[78] John P. Jewell, an author who has written multiple books on the church's use of technology, notes that this is particularly true when it comes to a congregation's ministry to its young people. He writes: "Our church's young families and children are going to be very much involved with the new technologies. If we are going to use every means possible to reach out to and be in communication with our young folk, we would not more turn away from the Internet than we would get rid of our telephones."[79] This reason alone, he contends, gives motive enough for congregational leaders "to become computer and Internet literate."[80]

Another advantage of the internet for churches is its potential to function as "a tool that can be of use in Christian witness,"[81] a chance to reach "online seekers with a message of salvation and hope."[82] Shane Hipps, another author of multiple works on

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[77] Steve Hewitt, *Windows PCs in the Ministry,* Nelson's Tech Guides (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 214.

[78] Mary E. Hess, "What difference does it make? E-learning and faith community," *Word and World* 30, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 289.

[79] John P. Jewell, *New Tools for a New Century – First Steps in Equipping Your Church for the Digital Revolution* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 88.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Bazin and Cottin, 61.

[82] Careaga, 35.

technology and the church, explains that the usefulness of the internet for Christian witness is a result of the way this technology has changed the world. "Electronic culture has broken down major walls as we extend ourselves in a global embrace. Under these conditions, the world undergoes a kind of implosion; the barriers of time and space are abolished, greatly diminishing the scale of our world – which leads to the phenomenon of the Global Village."[83]

Making use of the internet immediately expands the audience that a local congregation can reach. "The number of people accessing church websites, blogs, or podcasts on any given day can well outnumber the drive-by traffic at a church building."[84] The internet "offers [congregations] a low-cost way to promote the church and educate the community,"[85] giving any church "the opportunity for its preaching and other resources to become 'sticky' to a larger audience for a longer period of time, thereby multiplying its audience."[86]

Many pastors are very enthusiastic about the evangelistic opportunities presented by sermon podcasts. Mark Batterson, lead pastor of National Community Church in Washington D.C., writes: "[We are] impacting more people via our podcast than we are with our weekend services. And it's refining the way I think about evangelism and discipleship. *Podcasting 101* wasn't offered when I was in seminary…. But the digital revolution has presented an unprecedented opportunity."[87] Many others, like him, are thrilled by this inexpensive, relatively easy way to expand the audience to whom they are

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[83] Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture – How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 40.
[84] Lynette Hawkins, "Blogs, Podcasts, and Text Messages: Reaching the Next Generation," *Clergy Journal* 83, no. 3 (January 2007):18).
[85] Ibid.
[86] Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church – Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 272.
[87] Batterson, 81.

proclaiming the word of God. This includes preachers who are eager to use online sermons not only to reach people who have never heard the Christian message, but also to bolster the faith of Christians who are in situations where they do not have access to the preaching ministry of a local church. One pastor writes of the positive feedback he has received from "Christian soldiers from the front lines of war," from "missionaries around the world," and from people "suffering in hospital beds with terminal illnesses" who have all benefited from hearing his sermons online.[88]

However, there are other voices that advise churches to approach their use of sermon podcasts and other internet technologies with caution. Schultze feels that evangelical Christians in particular need to be warned in this regard, since they "typically hold a *remarkably uncritical faith in media technology"* and have historically "equated technological progress with progress itself."[89] Nicholas Carr points out that "a popular medium molds what we see and how we see it – and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society."[90] This is something of which the church needs to be aware.

One frequently voiced concern is that, by relying on internet technology, congregations may actually weaken the sense of Christian community that the church has traditionally sought to build. The internet, warns Carrigan, "is the logical extension of our quest for individualism."[91] Since it is generally used in the privacy of the home, the office, or the library cubicle, it "presents an attractive option for those fleeing from …

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[88] Driscoll and Breshears, 281.

[89] Quentin J. Schultze, "Evangelicals' Uneasy Alliance With the Media," in *Religion and Mass Media – Audiences and Adaptations,* ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1996), 69.

[90] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows – What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 3.

[91] Carrigan, 61.

religious communities to seek their own … religious expression."[92] Michael J. Laney,

Chair of the Communications and Arts Department at Lee University in Cleveland,

Tennessee, makes a similar observation. After conducting research using an online

survey through forty different Christian websites, he concluded that a "key motive of the

Christian web user appears to be the value of the power of information coupled with the

anonymity that the internet provides."[93] Estes sees this as a problem inherent in the

posting of sermon podcasts. He writes, "The church with the podcast could argue that it

was creating community with the podcast, but the form of community a podcast creates

seems far away from real, healthy community."[94] The weakening of Christian community

caused by the influence of these new media, observes Schultze, "will tend over time to

make the religious speech community much more vulnerable to changes induced by

external shifts in society," thus endangering "time-honoring habits and long-standing

virtues."[95]

Jorge Reina Schement and Hester C. Stephenson, both at the Rutgers University

School of Communication, note that the "information economy" of the internet is "a

place in which messages count as distinct goods and consumers purchase information."

In such an environment, churches "are often viewed as businesses that participate in the

market economy," meaning that the Christian internet user "now assumes the role of a

'consumer' of religious messages who may shop at a variety of … churches."[96] Preachers

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[92] Ibid., 61-62.
[93] Michael J. Laney, "Christian Web usage: motives and desires," in *Religion and Cyberspace,* ed. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (London: Routledge, 2005), 178
[94] Estes, 66.
[95] Quentin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America – Toward a Democratic Accomodation* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2003), 314.
[96] Jorge Reina Schement and Hester C. Stephenson, "Religion and the Information Society," in *Religion and Mass Media – Audiences and Adaptations,* ed. Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1996), 270.

who add such listeners to the audience they are addressing will, it seems, immediately find themselves pressured to craft sermons that, in addition to addressing the concerns of their local congregants, also speak to online listeners who can silence them with a click of a mouse. To confront their local congregations with the difficult biblical calls to community and self-denial, while at the same time hoping to reach a fickle online audience not inclined to tolerate such messages, will present pastors with a challenge that some might suggest they should avoid altogether.

The concern that preachers might alter their messages because of the influence of their online audience does not seem to be unwarranted. In fact, in some circles they are even being encouraged to do so. Lynette Hawkins is the founder of Awesome Insight, an educational group that trains pastors and church leaders in ways to increase worship attendance. Her advice to pastors whose sermons are being posted online is, "[p]lan your content. Create sermon series or inspiring messages that share a theme focused on the needs of the community. When people are interested, they will listen."[97] She also adds, "Keep the length less than 30 minutes. Downloads take less time with shorter messages."[98]

Though perhaps not heeding these types of suggestions, one pastor whose online sermons have attracted a large internet audience is Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church based in Seattle, Washington. Driscoll generally takes a positive stance toward the church's use of this and other technologies, yet he cautions ministers to consider ways that the posting of online sermons might affect how they preach. He writes:

> Because my sermons are … posted on the Internet, it affects … what I can say about time and location, which audience I am speaking to (beyond just the room I

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[97] Hawkins, 19.
[98] Ibid.

am in), the lifespan of the content (which is now indefinite), and the opportunities available for critics to gather more rocks to throw since they actually know what I am saying and doing on Sundays.[99]

Even if preachers make a conscious effort not to change the sermons they deliver to their local congregations, many would argue that the very act of using a different medium to spread the message will invariably affect the message itself. Shane Hipps writes:

> When we talk about media and technology as tools for the church, we assume they are simply conduits or pipelines useful for dispensing the gospel. Thus media become like the plumbing of a house, carrying water from the water heater to the faucet. And we don't think much about the pipes unless one springs a leak…. [But] media are much more than neutral purveyors of information. They have the power to shape us regardless of content and thus cannot be evaluated solely upon their use.[100]

Changing the medium through which a sermon is delivered, he advises, will lead to "unintended changes in our message."[101]

Of course, co-opting technological breakthroughs in order to spread the message of the church is nothing new.[102] The invention of stained glass, of the printing press, of amplified sound, of radio broadcasts, of television, and of the cassette tape player have all presented the church with new ways to disseminate the Christian message and have, in one way or another, altered the way preachers address their audiences. Veith and Stamper write:

> Many different kinds of communications media have emerged over the centuries, each with its different challenges and possibilities. For the most part Christianity has made good use of them all. While the newly emerging communication technology promises to do much to change the social and intellectual landscape,

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[99] Driscoll and Breshears, 274.
[100] Hipps, 38.
[101] Ibid., 88.
[102] Reina Schement and Stephenson, 272.

Christians can use the new technology – as they have others – to multiply and promulgate the Word of God.[103]

The advent of the internet with the possibility of posting online sermon recordings is certainly not the first time the church has experimented with the use of new media,[104] nor is it the first time that critics of new technologies have voiced their concerns. Though the warnings being expressed may indeed merit attention, it remains to be seen if they are describing insurmountable obstacles that the church cannot handle.

Literature from Communication Theorists

Further insight into this question can be gleaned by examining the work of communication theorists. Researchers from a variety of disciplines have studied the dynamics of human communication. Their work has yielded insights that are relevant to the problem this paper explores. A review of their writings can shed light on whether or not churches should be concerned about whether the posting of online sermons will adversely impact the preaching of their ministers. Indeed, "the preacher who knows something about the process of communication can be enabled thereby to become a more effective instrument for God to use."[105]

The word "communication" usually has a different meaning to communication theorists than it does to the typical layperson. Unfortunately, the Christian church has often relied on a simplistic understanding of the term, resulting in an "inadequate" understanding of how communication works.[106] Marianne Dainton and Elaine D. Zelley, who teach communication theory at LaSalle University, suggest that communication be

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[103] Veith and Stamper, 162.
[104] Driscoll & Breshears, 268-271.
[105] Clement W. Welsh, "Can Studies in Human Communication Be Useful in the Study of Preaching?" *Homiletic* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 1981), 1.
[106] Fortner, xii.

defined as "*the process by which people interactively create, sustain, and manage meaning.*"[107] Fortner, however, explains that, in many Christian circles, people view communication as "a linear process, [with] a clear beginning and ending point, [and with] an identifiable set of elements that relate to one another in a definable and predictable way."[108] He refers to this view as the "transportation model" of communication,[109] since it treats information as a simple commodity that, by being communicated, is merely transported untouched from its point of origin to its point of reception. In this model, "communication is merely the means by which information is moved around."[110] Cunningham also considers such a view insufficient, noting that it "effectively neutralizes the diverse assumptions, opinions, and ideological commitments" involved in interpersonal communication, by treating people as mere "channels through which communication flows."[111] In the complicated process of communication, however, people "actively shape both the message that is 'sent' and the message that is 'received'."[112]

An insufficient understanding of communication can lead to adverse consequences for the church. Stephen K. Pickard, who teaches at St. Mark's National Theological Centre in Barton, Australia, believes that "communication is not so much a task of the church but concerns its very existence."[113] The "quality of the church's

[107] Marianne Dainton and Elaine D. Zelley, *Applying Communication Theory for Professional Life – A Practical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 2.
[108] Fortner, 44.
[109] Ibid., 66.
[110] Ibid., 78.
[111] Cunningham, 68.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Stephen K. Pickard, *Liberating Evangelism – Gospel Theology and the Dynamics of Communication.* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 22.

communicative life" is important, he writes, since it ought to reflect "the character of God."[114]

Fortner notes that the simplistic treatment of communication by many Christians not only falls short of the complex view of communication understood by theorists. It also falls short of the way communication is depicted in the Bible. In scripture, God's yearning to communicate with humankind is not described as a desire merely to transmit information to us. It is depicted as an effort to form a relationship with us.[115] "Communication … is … the means by which people care for one another, [and] share one another's sorrows, pains, joys, and accomplishments."[116] To view it simply as a process for moving information from point A to point B fails to appreciate the important relational dynamics involved.

If an inadequate understanding of communication can weaken the church's effectiveness in general, its effect might be even more adverse when the church employs technology such as online audio. Fortner notes that the communicative process is altered when "the interposition of technology in a communication exchange separates people from the contextual dynamics of face-to-face encounters."[117] This is not to say that such technology cannot be used effectively by the church, but rather that to employ it without considering its possible impact would be naïve. Fortner cautions that "[communication] theory must account for all … aspects of technological change that alter the relationships between people in communication."[118] Such an accounting would include the possible influence that online audiences might have on preachers as they address their local

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[114] Ibid.
[115] Fortner, 64-65.
[116] Ibid., 65.
[117] Ibid., 78.
[118] Fortner, 77.

congregations. Will they speak to their congregations differently if they are aware that others will be listening to their sermons online?

Though he died before anyone was asking this question, it seems likely Marshall McLuhan would have answered it affirmatively. McLuhan, a renowned educator, philosopher, and theorist, observed over forty years ago that "the medium is the message," simply meaning that "personal and social consequences" invariably result from the introduction of new forms of technology into the communication process.[119] As a devout Roman Catholic, McLuhan gave frequent thought to ways that technological innovations might impact the church, observing, for example, that the introduction of amplified sound brought lasting changes to the Catholic mass.[120] McLuhan definitely allowed that technological advances can benefit the church in accomplishing its mission. In one interview, he stated, "Today, thanks to electric information … Christianity is available to every human being. For the first time in history the entire population of the planet can instantly and simultaneously have access to the Christian faith."[121] Yet, as Fortner would later warn, McLuhan cautioned the church not to adopt technological change without first reflecting on the impact it would invariably have. He seemed distressed by how infrequently this kind of serious reflection was being done in Christian circles: "The ordinary evolutionary and developmental attitude towards innovation assumes that there is a technological imperative. 'If it *can* be done, it *has* to be done'; so that the emergence of any new means *must* be introduced, for the creation of no matter

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[119] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media – The Extensions of Man,* ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003), 19.

[120] Marshall McLuhan, "Liturgy and the Microphone," in *The Medium and the Light – Reflections on Religion,* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szlarek (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 115.

[121] Marshall McLuhan, "Tomorrow's Church: Fourth Conversation with Pierre Babin," in *The Medium and the Light – Reflections on Religion,* ed. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szlarek (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 209.

what new ends, regardless of the consequences.[122] One wonders whether McLuhan, if alive today, might be urging the church to ask what ways the posting of audio recordings of sermons online will affect the way pastors preach to their local congregations.

With regard to this question, one contribution communication theory makes comes from its study of the concept of "audience." This concept is often difficult to define,[123] and may be more complex when examined in oral communication than it is in written text.[124] However, it offers insight into ways that an awareness of online listeners might impact a minister's preaching.

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrects-Tyteca, whose pioneering study of audience was influential in the field of rhetoric, made the point that "[all] communication must be planned in relation to an audience."[125] They explain the importance of audience in regard to its impact on communication:

> How may an audience be defined? Is it just the person whom the speaker addresses by name? Not always: thus, a member of Parliament in England must address himself to the Speaker, but he may try to persuade those listening to him in the chamber, and beyond that, public opinion throughout the country. Again, can such an audience be defined as the group of persons the speaker sees before him when he speaks? Not necessarily. He may perfectly well disregard a portion of them: a government spokesman in Parliament may give up any hope of convincing the opposition, even before he begins to speak, and may be satisfied with getting the adherence of his majority. And, on the other hand, a person granting an interview to a journalist considers his audience to be not the journalist himself but the readers of the paper he represents…. It is at once apparent from these few examples how difficult it is to determine by purely material criteria what constitutes a speaker's audience….[126]

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[122] McLuhan, "Liturgy and the Microphone," 114.

[123] Douglas B. Park, "The Meanings of 'Audience'," in *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric Invention in Writing,* ed. Richard E. Young and Yameng Liu (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras Press, 1994), 181.

[124] Walter, S.J. Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," *PMLA* 90, no. 1 (January 1975), 9.

[125] Sonja K. Foss, Karen A. Foss and Robert Trapp, *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric,* 3rd ed. (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2002), 87.

[126] Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca, 19.

From this point of view, a member of a church whose pastor's sermons are posted on the internet might legitimately ask, "To whom is my pastor now speaking? Am I being addressed, or was that last thought intended for someone who will later listen online?" Though most church-goers will probably not voice these questions using the categories or terms of communication theory, they may intuitively sense that such dynamics are at play.

Many communication theorists would affirm this as a valid question that ought to be raised. Speakers may claim to be addressing a particular group of people and yet actually select rhetorical arguments designed for a completely different audience.[127] It is not uncommon for speakers to do this without being aware of it themselves.[128] Though pastors may declare that they are addressing the needs and concerns of their congregants, and may even convince themselves that they really are, their true audience is "determined not by a declaration of intent but by the arguments [they] have selected" for use in their sermons.[129] If preachers are aware that significant numbers of listeners will be following their sermons online, it is not unreasonable to expect these unseen listeners to be taken into account in the preparation and delivery of sermons. This might especially be the case for pastors whose sermons are critiqued (either positively or negatively) in the world of internet bloggers, whose ministries receive financial contributions from online listeners, or who receive speaking invitations and public acclaim because of the attention their sermon podcasts receive. Should worshipers fear that their ministers will begin to preach to online audiences rather than to the men, women, and children sitting in front of them in the pews? T. David Gordon, who teaches media ecology at Grove City College, imagines

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[127] Cunningham, 69.
[128] Ibid., 71.
[129] Ibid., 70.

that when preachers' sermons are recorded in order to be posted online "having an unseen/unknown audience might tend to make a sermon 'generic.'"[130]

Some contributions from communication theorists suggest that such fears may not be necessary. The interpersonal dynamics that are present in a live speaking event are generally so powerful in the ways they affect a speaker that the impact of unseen online listeners might be expected to be minimal. Communication expert David Holmes points out that in live speaking events both speakers and listeners are provided with "a rich range of contextual information" that arises from "body language, gestures and symbolic expressions." This type of information is not present in "extended communication" such as the type that occurs via podcasts.[131]

T. David Gordon describes the way these interpersonal dynamics are at play during the preaching of a sermon in a local church. In order to benefit from these dynamics, he advises preachers as follows:

> In the monologue of a sermon … the hearers do not speak at all, but they do reply visibly, if we are alert to notice. We can notice whether people appear to be following with interest or whether they appear to be entirely uninterested, and we can adjust our volume, our tone, our manner, or our vocabulary to be sure that they have followed the current point before we move to another.[132]

These nonverbal cues from a live audience have the potential to influence a speaker powerfully.

Author John B. Thompson makes a similar point. He distinguishes between three kinds of communicative interactions, which he calls "face-to-face interaction," "mediated

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[130] T. David Gordon, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2012.

[131] David Holmes, *Communication Theory – Media, Technology and Society,* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 135.

[132] T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach – The Media Have Shaped the Messenger* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 3, Location 588.

interaction," and "mediated quasi-interaction."[133] Face-to-face interaction is the type of

communication that takes place in a live preaching event. People participating in this type

of interaction "are immediately present to one another and share a common spatial-

temporal reference system."[134] In such a setting, non-verbal communication, employing

"various symbolic cues," enables speakers to refine their messages continuously in order

to connect effectively with their listeners.[135] Mediated interactions, as contrasted to this,

are interactions in which participants are not physically present with each other and yet in

which communication is dialogical in nature. Listeners can provide feedback to the initial

speakers in response to the information they receive. Though the feedback is not as

powerful in its impact as nonverbal cues would be among people who are physically

present with each other, it still has an effect on the way the speaker communicates.[136]

Examples of mediated interactions would include telephone conversations, online chat

rooms, and written correspondence sent back and forth by mail. Thompson's concept of

mediated quasi-interaction describes the kind of communication that occurs through

online sermon podcasts. In this type of interaction, participants are "not physically

present" with each other, and are therefore unable to exchange the "symbolic cues" that

would be at play in face-to-face communication. In addition to this, in mediated quasi-

interactions, "the flow of communication is primarily one-way." Very little feedback

from the listeners is ever received by the speaker.[137] Recipients of communication in a

mediated quasi-interaction can ignore what they hear, yawn, laugh, or even react in

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[133] John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity – A Social Theory of the Media,* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995), 82.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid., 83.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid., 84.

derision without having any effect on the person speaking. Therefore, "the responses of the recipients do not directly and immediately affect the content" of what it being said.[138]

Though preachers may be aware of listeners who will download their sermons online, they do not look into these people's faces. They do not see their smiles. They do not witness their frowns. They have no idea if these people are yawning or gently falling asleep during a sermon. They do, however, receive all this feedback on a continual basis from the congregants to whom they preach. Because of this, fear that preachers will neglect their congregations if they post their sermons online may be unnecessary.

Research in the related field of distance and online education, however, may suggest otherwise. Though "many university faculty members are reluctant to teach courses via the Internet," the use of online technology by institutions of higher education is increasing rapidly.[139] Around 4.6 million college students in the United States "took at least one online course during the fall semester of 2008," approximately double the number who did so four years before.[140]

Though online distance learning has largely been a financially successful endeavor for the institutions involved, some negative consequences have been noted. Researcher Oleg Popov conducted a study of educational programs offered in Swedish universities in which courses were taught simultaneously to students in classrooms as well as to students participating online. The results of this study indicated that both groups of students were dissatisfied with the quality of teaching they received from their instructors. The kind of interaction that took place between the instructors and their

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[138] Ibid., 97.
[139] Michael E. Ward, Gary Peters, and Kyna Shelley, "Student and Faculty Perceptions of the Quality of Online Learning Experiences," *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 11, no. 3 (October 2010): 58.
[140] Ibid.

online students is not entirely analogous to the relationship between preachers and those

who download sermon podcasts, because the online students were able to interact with

their teachers via the internet. (This example would correspond to Thompson's concept

of a mediated interaction rather than mediated quasi-interaction.) Nevertheless, the

impact that these unseen online students had on the classroom experience of others is still

worth noting. Popov reports, "Many on-campus students commented in the course

evaluations on the level of interaction with the lecturers during the classes. They

experienced that the lecturers were focusing more on the needs of the distance students

thus causing face-to-face teaching to suffer."[141] In situations in which preachers do

receive feedback from their online audience (perhaps in the form of email notes or

financial contributions to the church), it may not be unreasonable to fear that church

members will eventually feel the same way.

   All of this would point to the need for preachers who post their sermons online to

give very deliberate consideration to the audience they are actually addressing in their

sermons. This may be a new endeavor for some preachers. Author Keith Willhite notes

that "homiletical theorists have [historically] viewed expository preaching only as text-

oriented discourse and have ignored audience receptivity."[142] This is unfortunate.

Michael J. Hostetler, an ordained Baptist minister who is also Chair of the Department of

Speech and Rhetoric at St. John's University in New York, points out that a "rhetorically

sophisticated understanding of audiences demands that they not be taken for granted by

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[141] Oleg Popov, "Teachers' and Students' Experiences of Simultaneous Teaching in an International Distance and On-Campus Master's Programme in Engineering," *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* 10, no. 3 (June 2009): 6.

[142] Keith Willhite, "Audience relevance in expository preaching," *Bibliotecha Sacra,* no. 595 (July-September, 1992): 368.

communicators."[143] Preachers who do not want their practice of posting online sermons to distract them from their call to preach effectively to their local congregations will need to put forth extra effort to be informed about the people in the pews. "The essential consideration for the speaker who has set himself the task of persuading concrete individuals is that this construction of the audience should be adequate to the occasion."[144] The field of communication theory would insist that preachers who want to communicate effectively with their local congregations must strive to know and understand the people to whom they speak.

<div align="center">

Biblical Analysis

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But what does the Bible have to say about all this? Since the task of Christian preachers is to proclaim truth based on the words of scripture, they will, of course, be interested in any light that the authors of the Bible have to shed on this subject.

Though obviously ancient biblical texts do not address issues involved in the posting of online sermons, they do have a lot to say about how pastors should relate to their audiences as they preach. Basically the Bible teaches that Christian preachers are to proclaim messages that maintain a certain balance – a balance between specificity and breadth. Their messages should be specific enough to target the particular context of their immediate audience and yet, at the same time, broad enough to be applicable to any other hearers to whom the message might also arrive.

First, we see the Bible calling for preachers to address the specific context of their immediate audience. This is evident in the sermons that are recorded in the book of

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[143] Hostetler, "Constructing Audiences for Ecumenism," 47.
[144] Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca, 19.

Acts.[145] The apostles and other preachers in the early church "adapted themselves to the philosophical, social and historical background of those to whom they spoke."[146] For example, Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost begins by identifying the precise audience he was addressing and by answering a specific question that was on their minds.[147] His sermon in the temple in Acts 3 begins the same way.[148] The introductions to these sermons indicates that, as he preached, Peter was cognizant of the specific hearers to whom he was speaking and that he was consciously shaping his thoughts to focus on their concerns.

This same awareness is also evident in a sermon preached by Stephen, an early Christian leader in the Jerusalem church. In Acts 6:9 we read that Stephen was involved in a theological debate with Jews "who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia." These were Hellenic Jews raised in the Diaspora,[149] some of whom apparently "were Roman prisoners (or the descendants of such prisoners) who had later been granted their freedom."[150] One would expect such people to have been concerned with issues related to captivity, injustice, and estrangement from the Jewish homeland. In the speech Stephen delivered after these people plotted to have him arrested, he intentionally addressed these very concerns. He spoke of God's promise to give a homeland to Abraham's descendants and the accompanying prediction that, before receiving the land, they would spend four hundred years as slaves (vv. 5-6). He described the suffering of

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[145] Cunningham, 50.
[146] Michael Green, *Evangelism Through the Local Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 111.
[147] Acts 2:14-15.
[148] Acts 3:12.
[149] John MacArthur, Jr., *Acts 1-12,* The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 192-193.
[150] I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 129.

Joseph when he was sold into captivity by his brothers (vv. 9-16) and the unjust

enslavement of the generation of Hebrews that followed him (vv. 17-19). He spoke of the

indignity Moses felt over the captivity of his brethren in Egypt (vv. 23-24) and of God's

promise to bring them back to the Promised Land (v. 34). To a modern reader all of this

may seem like an unnecessarily lengthy introduction to Stephen's gospel presentation.

Yet to his original hearers these were all vital concerns. They cared deeply about

injustice, exile, and enslavement. Though Stephen's sermon failed to win his audience

over to his point of view, it does seem to have been intentionally crafted to connect with

the people he was addressing.

This approach can also be seen in Paul's preaching in the book of Acts. When

speaking to the congregants of a Jewish synagogue in Thessalonica he "reasoned with

them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to

suffer and to rise from the dead."[151] Such an approach made sense for a preacher

addressing people who were actively awaiting the Christ (the Messiah) and who viewed

the Hebrew scriptures as authoritative texts. Yet when proclaiming the gospel message to

Gentile philosophers in Athens, Paul took an entirely different approach. Rather than

reasoning from the Hebrew scriptures, which would have made little impression on

people from their background, he cited an inscription on one of their city's monuments[152]

and quoted a Greek philosopher and a well-known Greek poet. He referred to Jesus not as

the long-awaited Hebrew Messiah, but rather as the man appointed by God to judge all

the inhabitants of the earth.[153] His message to the Athenian audience "can function as an

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[151] Acts 17:2b-3a, *English Standard Version.*
[152] William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988),142-143.
[153] See Acts 17:22-34.

instructive case study in contextualizing the gospel for a specific audience."[154] His

preaching varied depending on the worldview, assumptions, and concerns of the audience

he was addressing.

In 1 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul explained that this was indeed intentional.[155]

Thoughtful contextualization lay behind his approach to ministry. In verses 20-22 he

wrote,

> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I
> became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might
> win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law
> (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win
> those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I
> have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.[156]

Paul's words here, which describe his philosophy of ministry in general, also explain the

way he proclaimed God's word. He would give intentional thought to the needs,

questions, cultural background, and philosophical worldview of whatever audience he

was addressing in any given preaching event.[157] Accordingly, he would shape his

communication to address their concerns. He would not speak to Gentiles the same way

he would speak to Jews. His communication was targeted toward the precise concerns of

the audience he intended to address.

As Paul mentored young leaders for ministry, he taught them to do the same thing

– to alter their communication to fit the audience being addressed. He told Timothy how

variously to approach older men, younger men, older women, and younger women.[158]

They were not all to be addressed the same way but in a manner appropriate to their age

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[154] Dan Fleming, "Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens: Paul's Areopagus Address as a Paradigm for Missionary Communication," *Missiology,* 30, no. 2, April 2002, 200.

[155] Cunningham, 50.

[156] 1 Corinthians 9:20-22, *English Standard Version.*

[157] David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians – Life in the Local Church,* The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 162.

[158] 1 Timothy 5:1-2.

and gender in relation to the speaker.[159] He taught him how to communicate effectively

with hearers who opposed his ideas[160] and how to speak to the very rich.[161] Likewise,

Paul provided Titus with insight into cultural characteristics of the audience Titus was

assigned to reach,[162] instructing him specifically how to contextualize his preaching

ministry for the people of the island of Crete.[163] He wanted Titus, through his preaching,

"to give the people of his congregation specific guidance for their everyday lives."[164] In

the same way, he reminded the elders of the Ephesian church of the example he had set

for them in his preaching. In Acts 20:21 he reminded them of how he preached pointed

sermons that specifically called hearers to repentance and faith rather than offering

vague, indirect messages that were merely general in tone.[165] In these ways Paul

mentored his protégés in the art of contextualization. He wanted their proclamation as

preachers to target the specific needs of their immediate hearers.

This same principle is seen, not only in the act of Christian preaching, but also in

the general nature of biblical texts. The various parts of the Bible were not written in a

vacuum, but rather were composed with specific audiences in mind. Indeed, a "reliable

principle for the interpretation of biblical texts is to inquire into the text's first

hearers."[166] By seeking to discern the identity of the original audience of a biblical

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[159] William H. Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy and Titus*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 165.

[160] 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

[161] 1 Timothy 6:7-19.

[162] William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY, 2003), 272-274.

[163] Titus 1:10-13.

[164] Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching – Redeeming the Expository Sermon,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 54.

[165] James Montgomery Boice, *Acts – An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 347.

[166] Michael D. Williams, *Far As the Curse is Found – the Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 21.

passage, the interpreter gains insight that is crucial for understanding how to apply the text today.[167]

The importance of considering a text's original audience is perhaps most easily apparent when one examines the epistles of the New Testament. Often addressed to local congregations in clearly identified geographical locations, these apostolic letters contain detailed information that focuses on the concerns of specific audiences. Thus, they demonstrate the idea that the word of God is to be presented in a way that is contextualized to the needs and concerns of the hearers.

From all of this, modern preachers might rightly conclude that, if they post recordings of their sermons for a broader audience online, they must still make sure that they preach messages that specifically target the congregation seated before them. Their sermons may be made available to anyone who stumbles upon their church website, but they must ensure that they address the needs and concerns of the people in their church. Preachers should guard against any tendency to shape their messages for their internet audience to the exclusion of the congregants in their local churches.

However, there is a need for balance. The Bible indicates that, as important as it is to target the proclamation of God's word to the context of a specific audience, Christian preaching also needs to be broad enough to be applicable to any other hearers to whom it might also arrive.

Oddly enough, this too can be seen in the general nature of biblical texts. Though the various books of the Bible were indeed written with specific audiences in mind, they were included in a canon of scripture so that they could be read by people other than the

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[167] Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories – The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), 231-252.

original audience. Their message, though specifically targeted, is broad enough to speak to God's people throughout history and all over the world. This idea is inherent in the very fact that the message of the Bible was recorded in written form. "The obvious function of writing was its capacity to communicate widely with readers unable to be present at its author's oral teaching."[168]

In fact, the New Testament epistles, some of the most specifically targeted texts in the Bible, were written to believing communities that were connected to, rather than isolated from, the broader Christian church.[169] The epistles were apparently often intended to be passed on to audiences other than the ones to whom they were originally addressed.[170] In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote, "And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea."[171] To another congregation he wrote, "I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers."[172] In fact, the sharing of documents and the spreading of news among early Christians seems to have taken place so quickly and over such widespread geographical distances that it has even been compared to today's internet. "[The] churches from A.D. 30 to 70 had the motivation and the means to communicate often and in depth with each other…. [News] and information could spread relatively quickly between the congregations in the great cities of the

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[168] Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians – Rethinking the Gospel Audiences.* ed. Richard Bauckham. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 29.
[169] Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 5.
[170] Milton C. Fisher, "The Canon of the New Testament" in *The Origin of the Bible.* ed. Philip Wesley Comfort. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 69.
[171] Colossians 4:16, *English Standard Version.*
[172] 1 Thessalonians 5:27, *English Standard Version.*

empire, and from there into the surrounding regions." [173] Though the gospel message may have been written for a defined original audience, it seems to have also been written with a broader audience in mind.

The sermons recorded in the book of Acts, though they show evidence of being contextualized to address the needs of their hearers, are, in fact, recorded for others to read. This is not to say, of course, that those who preached these messages were aware of the fact that they would later be recorded. But it does demonstrate the idea that, though contextualized preaching was practiced by the apostolic church, their sermons were general enough to speak effectively to audiences of whom the preachers themselves were unaware, audiences not physically present during the preaching event. Another example of this may be the book of Hebrews, which is considered by some scholars to be a sermon in written form rather than an epistle.[174] If this is so, then it also represents preaching that is contextualized enough to target a specific audience and yet general enough to be recorded in written form and distributed to the church at large. Thus, the preaching of the apostolic church seems to balance specificity and generality in terms of the audience being addressed.

The importance of maintaining this balance is evident in some instructions that the Apostle Paul gave to Christians in the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 14, while addressing the use of spiritual gifts in a corporate worship, the Apostle Paul outlines certain principles of communication that should govern Christian preaching. [175] He

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[173] Michael B. Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Century Generation" *The Gospels for All Christians – Rethinking the Gospel Audiences.* ed. Richard Bauckham. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 68.

[174] William L. Lane, *Hebrews – A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 17.

[175] 1 Corinthians 14:23-25. In the context, Paul is comparing the value of speaking in tongues, a form of communication meaningful only to others only when complemented with interpretation, with prophecy, a form of communication much more broadly understandable.

cautions them to make sure that their communication with each other is understandable enough to be meaningful even to unexpected, unbelieving visitors who might drop in on their worship service.[176] In other words, they were to balance the need to address the specific needs of the congregation with the need to present a message that was broadly applicable to others who were not members of their worshipping community.

This ability of Christian preaching to impact hearers whom the speaker cannot see or has not anticipated is rooted in the universal applicability of its message. The gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."[177] It brings the saving power of God into the life of anyone who responds to it with faith, regardless of their cultural background or personal situation.[178] "Preaching, according to Paul, had a very *concrete content.* It was the message of good tidings, the publishing of salvation, and the comforting of God's people with the good news of redemption (cf. Isa. 52:7, 9).[179] Whenever it is proclaimed correctly, the Christian gospel will be relevant to anyone who might happen to hear it because of the universal nature of its content. "For everyone who is saved is saved in exactly the same way, by faith."[180]

How does all of this speak to the problem addressed in this paper? Can pastors post their audio sermons online, and thus broaden the potential audience they are addressing, and yet continue to speak effectively to the needs and concerns of their local congregations? The message from the Bible seems to be that by seeking the proper balance they can do both. Preaching should seek to maintain a balance between being

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[176] Tom Wright, *1 Corinthians,* Paul for Everyone (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 194.

[177] Romans 1:16b, *English Standard Version.*

[178] John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans – The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 28.

[179] G.C. Berkauwer, *Sin,* trans. Philip C. Holtrop (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 221.

[180] John Stott, *Romans – God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 60-61.

specific enough to target the particular context of their immediate audience and, at the same time, broad enough to be applicable to any other hearers to whom the message might also arrive.

Literature About Christian Preaching

Scholars who write about Christian preaching point to the importance of this same balance. Pastors, they say, need to preach a universal message, rooted enough in scripture to be applicable to any audience anywhere. At the same time, pastors are called to address the specific needs of a local congregation through the preaching of God's word. The practice of posting sermons online may, therefore, have either a positive or a negative impact on one's preaching.

In one sense, preachers may be assisted in the preaching task if their sermons are available to an internet audience. Awareness that one may be addressing people all over the world, in a wide variety of situations, can help preachers to base their sermons on the general message of scripture rather than on the expectations of their immediate listeners. This awareness might protect them against over-contextualizing their messages to suit the concerns of their congregants.

If this indeed takes place, many scholars who write on preaching would probably consider it to be a positive result. According to Haddon W. Robinson, well-known author and Professor of Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, "Those in the pulpit face the pressing temptation to deliver some message other than that of the Scriptures."[181] This temptation may be increased by the fact that the members of a local congregation, that is, those to whom a sermon is immediately preached, are generally the

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[181] Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching – The Development and Preaching of Expository Messages,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 20.

same people who pay their preacher's salary. The pressure to preach a message that is pleasing to this one particular gathering of human beings might easily influence a preacher to be unfaithful to the biblical text. If preachers, intimidated by the possible disapproval of their local congregants, fail to "confront their hearers with a word from God," they will succumb to this temptation and "lose their authority."[182]

Pastor Zack Eswine, who formerly taught preaching at Covenant Theological Seminary, warns of the spiritual danger involved in this. He alerts preachers, "If we find ourselves wanting to avoid or minimize the preaching of the biblical text for our ministries, we move in a dangerous direction."[183] This is a danger, he says, because to "preach something other than what the biblical text says in its context is to contribute to the devilry of our moment in history."[184] If the addition of an online audience liberates a preacher from being overly concerned about pleasing the ears of a local congregation, that preacher might be spared from this spiritual danger.

In a work that was named "book of the year" in 2000 by *Preaching* magazine, Graeme Goldsworthy, lecturer at Moor Theological College in Sydney, Australia, echoes this concern. Local congregations often pressure their ministers to deliver sermons that are relevant to their own concerns. Though, in itself, there is nothing wrong with this, it can present a problem. Goldsworthy writes:

> Relevance is relative. It is relative to how we perceive a situation. Often it is based on as simple a thing as enjoyment. A sermon was deemed relevant because the preacher stimulated and entertained us. Maybe it seemed relevant because it confirmed our already formed ideas or prejudices. The preacher needs to beware.

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[182] Ibid.

[183] Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World – Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 251.

[184] Eswine, 237.

A lot of congratulations and noise about relevance and how the Lord blessed us through the sermon or talk can be very seductive.[185]

Of course, the fact that a minister's sermon is being heard by online listeners will not guarantee that the message will be biblical. However, in situations where a minister feels pressured to compromise the message in order to cater to the desires of a local congregation, the fact that a broader audience is being addressed might provide some relief. The thought that the message needs to be broad enough to make sense to internet listeners might free the preacher from inappropriately contextualizing the message to the needs of the local church.

The point, of course, is that sermons need to be "truly biblical."[186] In another *Preaching* magazine "book of the year," pastor and author John Piper notes that "preachers who take their cue from the Bible and not from the world will always be wrestling with spiritual realities that many of their hearers do not even know exist or think essential."[187] It is scripture, not the audience, which is to determine the ultimate content of any sermon.

This is true whether the audience is sitting before the preacher in the pews of a local church, or whether they are listening to that preacher on their iPods a thousand miles away. Pastor, professor, and author Sinclair B. Ferguson writes, "The preacher creates the *sermon,* he does not create the message. Rather he proclaims and explains the message he has received [from scripture]."[188] Though preachers, of course, need insight

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[185] Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture – The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 61.

[186] Goldsworthy, 12.

[187] John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 30.

[188] Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Exegesis" in *The Preacher and Preaching – Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century,* ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986), 192.

into their listeners, according to Ferguson, "our concern should be … *understanding the text.*"[189]

When it comes to understanding the text, many have observed that preachers need primarily to understand how the text points people to Christ. A preacher's most important task is "to instruct the church concerning the person and work of Jesus."[190] This task is more important than being considered relevant either by a local congregation or by listeners downloading a sermon online. "In short, what is relevant is defined by the gospel; what is helpful is defined by the gospel. The first question we all need to ask is not, 'Was it relevant?'; 'Did I find it helpful?'; or 'Were we blessed?' but 'How did the [sermon] testify to Christ and his gospel as the power of God for salvation?[191]

Sermons that meet this criteria are what Chapell refers to as "Christ-centered messages."[192] Rather than merely instructing listeners "to hunker down and try harder this week," these are sermons that "lead people to understand that Christ's work rather than their own supplies the only basis for God's acceptance" as well as "the only hope for [their own] obedience."[193] Willem VanGemeren, Professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, would add that this kind of sermon will not only focus on the finished work of Christ's life, death, and resurrection but also on the work he promises to do when he comes again.[194]

Though (as shall be noted later) D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, the highly respected Welsh preacher of the last century, had much to say about the importance of the

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[189] Ferguson, 199.

[190] Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 50.

[191] Goldsworthy, 62.

[192] Chapell, 297.

[193] Ibid.

[194] Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption – The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 471.

relationships that exists between preachers and their local congregations, he felt that when the gospel is being preached, and when the Holy Spirit is at work, a pastor does not necessarily need to know the specific needs of "the individuals who are listening."[195] Before becoming a minister, Lloyd-Jones was a medical doctor. He was well aware of how important it is for physicians to know precise information about the condition of each patient they are treating. But, he wrote, the "preacher does not need to know these details. Why not? Because he knows that all the people in front of him are suffering from the same disease, which is sin."[196] What is more important than knowing the audience is for the preacher to stay true to the biblical text and proclaim the gospel. Because of this, Lloyd-Jones writes that he "would lay it down as axiomatic that the pew is never to dictate to, or control, the pulpit."[197]

All of this points to ways that the practice of posting sermons online might actually strengthen the preaching ministry of a pastor. The message of Christ is universally applicable to all people everywhere. Awareness that they are addressing an audience that might include individuals on the other side of the globe might relieve ministers from being overly concerned with the comments and handshakes that await them at the sanctuary door after the worship service is done. It might encourage them to preach sermons that are faithful to the biblical text. It might discipline them to find the gospel of Christ in every text, since it alone addresses the deepest need of every person in the world. In this sense, the uploading of sermon podcasts might increase the effectiveness of the preaching ministry of the local church.

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[195] Lloyd-Jones, 37.
[196] Ibid., 134.
[197] Ibid., 143.

However, there are other dimensions of preaching that might be threatened by this practice. Many who write about preaching emphasize the responsibility that ministers have to proclaim messages that address the specific needs of the congregation under their care. "The healthiest preaching … supplies the application people need."[198] It "is forcefully and relevantly applied to the present condition of those who hear it."[199] Through preaching, ministers serve their people by bringing "God's message in the Bible to their hearts, minds and lives."[200] One might reasonably fear that the decision to include thousands of unseen listeners in a preacher's potential audience may interfere with the important relationship that exists between preachers and the members of their local churches. "The temptation to speak to the 'general human condition' is almost unavoidable…. [Many] of our sermons speak as if no one in particular has gathered here …."[201] The invisible presence of electronic eavesdroppers might hinder pastors from truly addressing the people who are seated in front of them, from delivering sermons that "emerge from all kinds of conversations and relationships [with members of the congregation] in which the preacher has engaged."[202]

Charles Bugg writes about how he learned as a young preacher that his sermons needed to address the situation of his local congregation. He left seminary for his first pastoral assignment already equipped with a preaching plan that would carry him through the first six months of his ministry. However, within the first month of his arrival at his new church, a young newly-wed man was killed in an automobile accident. The people of

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[198] Chapell, 53.

[199] Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy – Not by Bread Alone,* The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 32.

[200] Adam, 135.

[201] William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech – Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), ix.

[202] Neil Richardson and George Lovell, *Sustaining Preaching and Preachers – A Practical Guide* (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 25.

the congregation and the surrounding community were devastated. Bugg immediately forgot about his preaching plan and began to preach from texts that would address his people's grief. He learned "that sermons need to connect to where people are."[203] Had he been concerned with the task of building an online audience for his sermon podcasts, one wonders whether he would have learned this lesson as well as he did. He writes, "A preacher may be articulate; she may be trained to exegete a text; she may be able to craft an imaginative, intelligent message. But that message has to be spoken to persons."[204] Not, he might add, to a computer.

Another writer who learned this through personal experience is pastor and home missionary J. Peter Vosteen. Upon taking a pastoral position in a new church, he writes, "I stepped into the pulpit for the first time, [and] was overwhelmed by the realization that I did not know the people to whom I was addressing God's Word."[205] Without understanding their backgrounds, their struggles, their personal stories, and their fears he "could only preach to them in a general way."[206] However, because of his conviction that preaching is more than merely the proclamation of God's word ("It is the proclamation of God's Word to His people"[207]), Vosteen immediately decided to visit his congregants and to interact with them in a personal way. From this experience he learned that "[w]e must always ask ourselves whether we are interested in our personal advancement in the ministry or the people of God?... The power of the pulpit is not in oratory or eloquence. It is in the man who walks with God and uses God's gifts to communicate the love of God

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[203] Bugg, 45.
[204] Ibid., 47.
[205] J.Peter Vosteen, "Pastoral Preaching" in *The Preacher and Preaching – Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century,* ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986), 397.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid., 398.

in Jesus Christ to his congregation."[208] Of course, a pastor whose listeners include an

online audience might reach this same conclusion, but the distraction of uploading

sermons to a church website and of monitoring the number of downloads each week

might conceivably slow the whole process down.

A chief reason why sermons need to address the needs of a specific congregation

is because of the important role that preachers play in the life of a church. Adams, as

quoted before in this study, contends that "God ordained regular preaching in His church.

That is why a preacher should preach."[209] In addition, "*[i]ndividually*, good pastoral

preaching helps each person in the congregation to grow in his faith, conforming his life

more and more to biblical standards. *Corporately*, such preaching builds up the church as

a body in the relationship of the parts to the whole, and the whole to God and to the

world.[210] Because of the role that preaching plays in the life of a local congregation,

sermons need to target the needs, concerns, questions, and sins of the individuals who sit

in the pews.

> A church has a postal code and stands near Fifth and Main in some town or city.
> The profound issues of the Bible and the ethical, philosophical questions of our
> times assume different shapes in rural villages, in middle-class communities, or in
> the ghettos of crowded cities. Ultimately we do not address everyone; we speak to
> a particular people and call them by name.[211]

Any message that is broad enough to hold the interest of whatever individual might

happen to stumble upon it while surfing the web will possibly be too generic to minister

to the people in a local church. Though he died before the invention of the internet,

Lloyd-Jones would surely see this as a tragedy. Preaching, he writes, "is speech

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[208] Ibid. 416.
[209] Adams, 12.
[210] Ibid., 13.
[211] Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 74.

addressed to people in a direct and personal manner" that implies "a living contact."

Whatever might cause a preacher to lose that contact, he writes, is "bad in and of

itself."[212]

If the practice of posting sermons online influences preachers, even in

unconscious ways, to speak primarily to people other than their own congregants, a vital

dimension of preaching could be lost. Hostetler's advice to pastors is:

> Preach to *your* congregation, not someone else's. What could be more ludicrous
> than for a white, suburban, middle-class Southern Baptist to denounce the sins of
> urban welfare cheats or for a liberal New York Episcopalian to rail from the pulpit
> about the backward racial attitudes of white southerners? Yet this happens all the
> time, and it is what most congregations expect to hear. Real prophets attack the
> bigotry, parochialism, and expectations of their audiences. False prophets never
> engage their audiences, probably because they themselves have not really
> struggled with the Word of God.[213]

Those words were written before the posting of online sermons became a common

practice. If the danger of neglecting one's immediate audience existed then, it is perhaps

even more of a reality today.

For a number of reasons, however, the concern that online audiences will turn

effective preachers into ineffective pastors may be overblown. One of these reasons is the

fact that good preaching always seeks a balance between being timelessly true,

universally applicable, and specifically targeted to the individuals at hand. It is entirely

possible for preaching to be what author Jim Belcher calls "biblical but at the same time

connected to … life."[214] Pastor and author David W. Henderson expresses the same

confidence. Though the message of scripture is that "God meets people right where they

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[212] Lloyd-Jones, 227.

[213] Michael J. Hostetler, *Introducing the Sermon – The Art of Compelling Beginnings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 72-73.

[214] Jim Belcher, *Deep Church – A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 141.

are," the task of the preacher is to "point people where God would have them be, and then to point to Jesus as the only way to get there."[215] Sidney Greidanus, Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, also contends that preachers may prepare their sermons with "an eye to the congregation" as well as with "an eye to the text."[216] All of this would suggest that skillful and careful preachers might easily deliver sermons that are, at the same time, specific enough to address the needs of a local church and yet general enough to touch the heart of an anonymous listener on the web. The texts from which ministers preach demonstrate this truth in their very nature, since the various portions of scripture were designed for specific audiences in specific contexts, yet recorded in writing in order to be available to audiences around the world and throughout time. The idea that a preacher must choose between the internet and the pew seems to present a false dichotomy.

Another factor that might assuage the fear that congregations will be overlooked if their pastors' sermons are posted online is the powerful interaction that always takes place between a preacher and a congregation during the preaching event. This "element of 'give and take'"[217] is made possible through the non-verbal cues presented by the congregation to the preacher. After all, "communication is a two-way process."[218] Robinson observes:

> Most people do not realize that important feedback takes place during the act of preaching. Listening seems passive – a typical Sunday spectator sport. Yet able communicators listen with their eyes. They know that audiences show by their expressions and posture when they understand, approve, question, or are confused. People nod agreement, smile, check their watches, or slump in their

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[215] David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift – Communicating God's Truth to Our Changing World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 44.
[216] Greidanus, 157.
[217] Lloyd-Jones, 227.
[218] Richardson and Lovell, 8.

seats….. These congregations give their preachers the home court advantage by actively listening to what they have to say.[219]

Lloyd-Jones maintains that there are power spiritual factors at play "in the very atmosphere of Christian people meeting together to worship God and to listen to the preaching of the Gospel."[220] Thus, the influence of a worshiping congregation on its preacher might be even greater than that of a secular audience on a typical public speaker. Because the interaction between a congregation and a preacher can be so powerful in its effect upon the speaker, the fear that ministers will forget about their congregants merely because their sermons are available online may, in fact, be overstated. Most preachers, it may be contended, will be impacted so greatly by their interaction with the people sitting in front of them that they will not give much thought, if any, to those who will be downloading their sermons from the internet later in the week. During a live preaching event, the "fusion of the physical presence of the … speaker … and the response of the audience or listener" creates a powerful dynamic that is not existent when an unseen internet user downloads a sermon podcast in a context of virtual anonymity.[221] Hence, the physically present congregation will have an impact on their preacher that online listeners will be unlikely ever to produce.

Another reason the practice of posting sermons online may not necessarily have a negative impact on preachers' abilities to address their local congregations is the development of disciplines that help preachers to stay in touch with the members of their

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[219] Haddon W. Robinson, *Making a Difference in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 131.
[220] Lloyd-Jones, 43.
[221] Matthew Lee Anderson, "Three Cautions Among the Cheers: The Dangers of Uncritically Embracing New Media," in *The New Media Frontier – Blogging, Vlogging, and Podcasting for Christ,* ed. John Mark Reynolds and Roger Overton (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 63.

churches. "Every person and every congregation are unique."[222] Sitting in every worship

service are people from various backgrounds who listen to the sermon with different

points of view. Sometimes preachers will be astonished by the variety of responses to

their sermons by different groups within their congregations.[223] Because of this, a number

of techniques of "audience analysis"[224] have been developed to aid preachers in

understanding the people to whom they speak. Peter Adam, for example, suggests that

preachers regularly practice disciplines such as: meeting with small groups of church

members to seek feedback about their preaching; praying specifically for the members of

the church; and, imagining, while preparing a message, "four or five representative

people in [the] congregation (one old, one young, one single, one married, one male, one

female, *etc.*)" in order to contemplate the way the sermon ought to interact with their

lives.[225] Throughout this whole process, the preacher is to be asking, "What message does

God want to give these people from this text?"[226]

The desire of preachers to understand their listeners is nothing new. In a book

originally published in 1592, the Puritan pastor William Perkins advised ministers to be

conscious of the various types of listeners who might be present at any preaching event.

Among these types he included: "unbelievers who are both ignorant and unteachable";

spiritually open unbelievers "who are teachable, but ignorant"; listeners "who have

knowledge, but have never been humbled [by God's law]"; spiritually humbled listeners

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[222] John J. Jeter and Ronald J. Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears – Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 15.
[223] Grenville J.R. Kent, "Preaching the Song of Solomon" in *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching,* ed. Grenville J.R. Kent, Paul J. Kissling, and Laurence A. Turner (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 136.
[224] Timothy S. Warren, "A Paradigm for Preaching," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (October-December 1991): 467.
[225] Adam, 133.
[226] Adam, 133.

in need of gospel consolation; and, those "who already believe."[227] A spiritually mixed audience, he believed, is "the typical situation" in any worship service.[228] Therefore, preachers need to employ thoughtful methods to reflect on their congregants' needs in order to prepare messages that truly speak to them. These are the very kinds of disciplines that might enable preachers with large online audiences to maintain their focus on the local congregations to whom they speak live.

These are reasons why the fear that pastors whose sermons are posted online will lose touch with their own congregations may be overblown: because of the balance that is needed in preaching between a general exposition of the text and a precise word for the specific situation; because of the powerful dynamics that take place in the interaction between preachers and their listeners; and, because of disciplines pastors can employ to keep themselves informed of the needs of their church members. Though none of these factors eliminate the danger that preachers may address their cyber-audiences while neglecting the people in their churches, they do offer the hope that this concern is not insurmountable.

Analysis of Relevant Literature

All of this seems to point to the need for further study into the question posed by this paper. The purpose of this study is to explore ways that pastors whose sermons are posted online continue to address the needs and concerns of their local congregations.

Literature that examines the church's use of the internet indicates that the numbers of churches posting their ministers' online audio sermons and the numbers of people downloading these podcasts are already significant and are certain to increase in

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[227] William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying – With the Calling of the Ministry* (Carlisle, PA, Banner of Truth, 2002), 56-59.
[228] Ibid., 62.

years to come. A concern raised is that the Christian church tends to embrace new technology without engaging in serious thought about ways that this technology might affect its ministry, its message, and its communal life.

Literature from communication theorists also expresses concern about the church's reluctance to engage in serious thought. Theorists warn that a simplistic view of the communication process might have an adverse effect on the church, especially as it engages in new technologies. The dynamics at play in live public speaking events will tend to focus ministers on the people who are present while they preach. However, the audience constructed, sometimes unconsciously, by any public speaker does not always correspond to those who are being directly addressed. It should be expected that the existence of online audiences will impact the preparation and delivery of sermons by pastors. Great care will need to be taken by ministers to ensure that the practice of posting audio sermons online does not hinder them from addressing the needs and concerns of their local congregations.

The Bible, obviously, does not say anything directly about the church's use of the internet. However, an analysis of various biblical texts indicates that Christian preachers should aim to relate personally and specifically to the churches to which they minister. At the same time, however, they need to balance this with the biblical mandate to proclaim a message that is universally true regardless of the audience being addressed. The need to maintain this balance would imply that pastors whose audio sermons are regularly posted online need to ensure that this practice does not keep them from tailoring their sermons to the context of their local church. At the same time, however, the knowledge that their

sermons will be available to an online audience might protect them against the danger of over-contextualizing.

Writers on the subject of preaching point to the need for this balance, too. They frequently write about the relationship that exists between preachers and congregations and about the need for preachers to speak specifically into the context of their congregants. However, they also point out that preachers need to guard against over-contextualized messages that are shaped more by the audience than by the biblical text. Several authors in this field have written of disciplines that ministers can follow in order to understand more fully the people whom they address. All of these ideas factor into the question of how pastors whose sermons are posted online can continue to address the needs and concerns of their local congregations.

However, the research conducted in this paper has failed to discover material in which all of these areas of study combine. With an increasing number of congregations making use of internet technology by posting audio recordings of their pastors' sermons online, it is remarkable that more has not been done to examine the way this practice may impact the preaching that takes place in the local church. When compared with the amount of research being done in the related field of online distance learning in academic institutions,[229] the paucity of research by the church into this matter seems even greater. All of this would suggest that the kind of qualitative research done in this project addresses an area of study where much more work needs to be done.

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[229] Among the many scholarly publications devoted to the study of internet technology and its use in the field of education are: *International Journal on E-Learning, International Journal of Online Pedagogy and Course Design, Interdisciplinary Journal of E-Learning and Learning Objects, Asian Journal of Distance Education, European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning, American Journal of Distance Education, Distance Education Report,* and *Open Learning: The Journal of Open and Distance Learning.*

CHAPTER THREE

The purpose of this study is to explore ways that Christian pastors whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings address the needs and concerns of their local congregations. As explained in the preceding chapter, literature about churches' use of the internet indicates that the posting of online sermon recordings by local congregations is a steadily growing phenomenon. Literature about Christian preaching stresses that it is important for pastors, in their preaching ministries, to address the specific needs and concerns of the local congregations they serve. Writings from the fields of communication and rhetoric suggest that a speaker's perception of his/her audience will invariably affect what the speaker says and how he/she says it. How do pastors who are aware that their sermons will be heard by potentially hundreds of online listeners continue to target their preaching toward the lives of their local congregants? Are they concerned about the impact that an online audience might have on their preaching? Are there steps that they can take to keep from being influenced by their awareness of these unseen listeners so that this awareness does not negatively impact the local preaching event?

This chapter will describe a qualitative study that was done to help find answers to these questions. It will explain the methodological approach used to explore this topic by outlining the basic design of the study and the reasons for choosing this method. It will then describe the process used for selecting a sample of participants for the study, including a definition of the type of sampling employed, the criteria used in the selection

of participants, and the rationale for the use of those specific criteria. Next the chapter will outline the process used for the collection of data, as well as the process used to analyze that data. The chapter will also describe the personal position of the researcher, including the orientation, assumptions, and biases of the researcher that might have bearing on the outcome of the study. Finally, the limitations of this study will be explained in order to examine the extent to which its findings are applicable to the research problem being explored.

Design of the Study

The research design of this study followed the approach known by practitioners as "qualitative research." In her book *Qualitative Research – A Guide to Design and Implementation,* Sharan B. Merriam defines qualitative research as an approach to knowledge in which "researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed,* that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world."[230]

Merriam identifies four key characteristics of qualitative research, all of which comprised important elements of the present study. First, according to Merriam, this kind of research focuses on understanding and meaning, rather than on cause and effect.[231]

> Drawing from the philosophies of constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism, qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience.[232]

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[230] Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research – A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 13.
[231] Ibid., 5
[232] Ibid., 14.

The purpose of this present study, accordingly, is not to determine whether certain effects

on preachers are caused by the posting of their sermons online, but rather to interact with

their descriptions of their own personal experiences with this practice. Secondly, in

qualitative research "*the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and

analysis.*"[233] The writer of this study was personally involved in interacting with the

individuals who were interviewed as well as in interacting with the data that their

responses supplied. In doing so, the researcher's personal bias was an inevitable factor in

the shaping of the results of the study. It, therefore, needs to be clearly identified.

The third characteristic of qualitative research, in Merriam's view, is that it

follows an inductive approach to gathering knowledge. Rather than proposing a

hypothesis and then setting forth a way to prove or disprove it, in qualitative research

conclusions are drawn while data is being gathered and after the study is complete. For

this reason, the researcher in this present study proposed no hypothesis as to what

findings would result from the interviews. The researcher, instead, interacted with the

data from the interviews as it was being gathered in order to seek to understand the

experiences that the participants in the research were describing. The final characteristic

of qualitative research is that, in reporting its findings, it engages in what Merriam calls

"rich description."[234] She further explains, "Words and pictures rather than numbers are

used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon. There are likely to

be descriptions of the context, the participants involved, and the activities of interest."[235]

In presenting the data from the interviews, therefore, the researcher in this present study

sought to describe personal details about the participants that help to give meaning to

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[233] Ibid., 15.
[234] Ibid., 16.
[235] Ibid., 16.

their explanations of their experiences as preachers whose sermons are posted online.

Hence, all four key characteristics of qualitative research, as outlined by Merriam, were

involved in this present study.

Participant Sample Selection

Data for this study was collected by interviewing a sample group of participants.

These participants were selected for the interview according to the principles of

purposeful sampling. As opposed to probability sampling, in which participants are

selected randomly in order to draw generalizations from the results that are assumed to be

applicable to a broader population, in purposeful sampling participants are intentionally

selected according to specific criteria determined by the researcher.[236] This type of

sampling often proves to be much more useful when conducting qualitative research.

"Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover,

understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can

be learned."[237]

Seven participants were selected to be interviewed. When they were invited to

participate in the study, they were informed that the researcher was seeking to interview

individuals who met the following criteria: (1) Christian pastors whose ministry

assignment includes regularly preaching to a local congregation, (2) pastors whose

weekly sermons have been posted online for at least two years, and (3) pastors whose

online sermons are frequently accessed by at least half as many people as those who

normally listen to them preach live.

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[236] Ibid., 77.
[237] Ibid., 77.

There are several reasons why it was assumed that these criteria would yield data pertinent to this study. First, it was important to analyze the thoughts of ministers for whom congregational preaching is part of their regular job description. There are many people engaged in full-time Christian ministry who preach only occasionally or not at all. There are others who preach regularly, but to differing groups of people. Certainly all of these people make significant contributions to the life of the church. However, in order to glean the kinds of insights that answer the research questions proposed in this study it is important to hear from individuals who face the challenge of proclaiming God's word to the same body of Christian worshipers on an ongoing basis. Second, it was important that the participants be preachers whose sermons have been posted online for at least two years. It was assumed that this would have given them time to interact with the fact that there is an audience who listens to their sermons via the internet. It was hoped that after having had recordings of their sermons available online for at least two years, these pastors might have received feedback in various forms from individuals who listened to their preaching this way. This feedback, it was assumed, would have created an awareness of their online audience in the minds of these preachers that might (or might not) influence the way they address their local congregations. Finally, it was helpful to interview preachers whose online audience was large enough to have had a perceptible impact on their approach to preaching. For this reason, the researcher sought to interview Christian pastors whose online sermons are frequently accessed by at least half as many people as those who normally listen to them preach live.

In order to select participants for this study, the researcher initially emailed a request for an interview to pastors with whom he was personally acquainted, and who he

thought might meet the research criteria. In this email note, the purpose of the study was clearly explained to these pastors, as was a brief description of what to expect from the interview process and an outline of the criteria that needed to be met by interview participants. (Note: In the initial set of emails sent out by the researcher, participants were sought who had an online audience at least as large as the number of listeners who regularly heard the preacher speak live. However, it proved to be difficult to find enough participants who met this criterion. In later emails, the criterion was changed, and participants were sought whose online sermons were frequently accessed by at least half as many people as those who normally listened to them preach live.) Similar emails were sent to preachers whose names were known to the researcher either through his awareness of the online presence of their ministry or through his study of literature about church involvement on the internet.

As participants were interviewed, some of them were asked if they knew of other preachers who would be helpful participants in this study. This approach has been referred to as "[s]nowball, chain, or network sampling" and is a form of sampling commonly used in qualitative research.[238] Merriam explains, "This strategy involves locating a few key participants who easily meet the criteria you have established for participation in the study. As you interview the early key participants you ask each one to refer you to other participants."[239] Finally, the researcher located church websites on which the pastor's sermons were regularly posted by use of an internet search engine and emailed these pastors, explaining the purpose of the study, outlining the criteria that

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[238] Ibid., 79.
[239] Ibid., 79.

needed to be met by those being interviewed, and inviting them to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected by interviewing a sample group of seven participants. The interviews were each approximately thirty to sixty minutes in length. The interviews were semi-structured in their approach.

> In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions. Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.[240]

A pilot test of the interview was conducted before the interviews used in data analysis were actually performed. This test allowed the researcher to refine the questions he was going to use so that they would be more likely to yield data useful to the study.

In determining an interview protocol to be used in the study, the researcher decided to ask questions along the lines of the ones listed below:

Research Question 1: *To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online aware of their online audience as they prepare and deliver their sermons?*

1. How many people listen to your sermons online? Do you know who they are? Do you know where they are? Do you know how they locate your online sermons?

2. Tell me about a time you were contacted by someone who listened to one of your sermons online.

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[240] Ibid., 90.

3. To what extent do you think about your online listeners while preparing a sermon? In what ways do you think about them while delivering a sermon?

4. Do you ever address your online audience openly while preaching? If so, in what ways? How often?

5. Have you ever consciously changed the content of a sermon to address a need or question that your online listeners might have? Tell me about a time when you have done this.

Research Question 2: *To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online concerned that this practice may affect the way they address their local congregation?*

1. Tell me about the kinds of people who attend you church. Do they have any specific needs, questions, or concerns that you feel you need to address in your preaching?

2. What rationale was behind your church's decision to post your sermons online?

3. To what extent are you concerned that, in your preaching, you may be speaking to your online audience to the exclusion of your local congregation? In what ways have you responded to this concern?

Research Question 3: *What steps have been taken by pastors whose sermons are posted online to ensure that their sermons still target the specific context of their local congregation and community?*

1. How do you determine whether your sermons are communicating effectively with the worshipers who attend your church?

2. Are there any practices you follow in your sermon preparation or preaching to help yourself understand the needs and concerns of the worshipers who attend your church? If so, what are some of these practices?

3. Are there any practices you follow in your sermon preparation or preaching to keep yourself from addressing your online audience to the exclusion of the worshipers who attend your church? If so, what are some of these practices?

The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format, with the exception of one in which the participant agreed to be interviewed only by telephone. With the exception of this one interview, in each case the researcher traveled to the neighborhood or church setting in which the participant was engaged in ministry. This provided the researcher with a sense of the context in which the participant worked and a better idea of the type of community to which the participant preached.

The interviews were recorded on a portable MP3 recording device. Participants were informed of the fact that the interviews would be recorded. Written transcripts of the interviews were later prepared from the audio recordings. The participants were each asked to sign a consent form that gave permission to the researcher to use their responses for the purpose of this study, with the assurance that their identities would be kept confidential, that audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews would be destroyed when the research project was done, and that they could withdraw their consent at any time without penalty and have the results of their participation, to the extent that they could be identified, returned to them, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

Data Analysis

A challenge that the researcher faced in this study was analyzing all the data gathered through the research. The data to be analyzed consisted of the audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews along with the researcher's own personal observations and experiences gained during the interview process.

In basic qualitative research the "analysis of the data involves identifying recurring patterns that characterize the data."[241] To accomplish this, the researcher engaged in what has been termed the "constant comparative method" of data analysis.

> Basically, the constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. The dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data.[242]

By identifying these patterns the researcher is then able to gain insights and draw conclusions that relate to the questions being explored in the study.

In the case of this particular study, the process of data analysis involved the typing out of the transcripts of the recorded interviews. The researcher did this work of transcription himself, rather than delegating it to someone else, in order to be forced to think carefully about the responses given by each of the persons who were interviewed. The very act of typing out these transcriptions enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns given by the various participants in response to the interview questions. Usually the transcription of a given interview was typed out before the next interview was conducted. Over time, this enabled the researcher to ask questions in the latter interviews that more effectively probed the patterns that were appearing.

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[241] Ibid., 23.
[242] Ibid., 30.

Data analysis is one of the few facets, perhaps the only facet, of doing qualitative research in which there is a preferred way…. [The] much preferred way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection. At the outset of a qualitative study, the investigator knows what the problem is and has selected a purposeful sample to collect data in order to address the problem. But the researcher does not know what will be discovered, what or whom to concentrate on, or what the final analysis will be like. The final product is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. Without ongoing analysis, the date can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed. Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating.[243]

After the transcripts were typed they were printed out and read through carefully by the researcher. By underlining certain ideas and making notes in the margins the researcher was able to identify more clearly the patterns that existed among the responses of the participants that were pertinent to the research questions being explored in this study. Differences in their responses were also observed, as well as differences in their ministry settings.

By examining the various patterns and themes that emerged from the data, and after reflecting on his experience interviewing the participants in the study, the researcher was able to draw conclusions related to the topic being explored. He was also able to identify areas of further study that seem to arise from this research.

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[243] Ibid., 171.

Researcher Position

In order for the results of qualitative research to be considered valid, researchers "need to explain their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research to be undertaken."[244] This is because the researchers themselves function as the main instrument for the collection of data.[245] "[The] human instrument has shortcomings and biases that might have an impact on the study. Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or 'subjectivities,' it is important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data."[246]

The researcher who conducted this study is a pastor who has been involved in local preaching ministries for over twenty years. He is committed to the idea that Christian preaching ought to communicate the truths of scripture in a Christ-centered way that is contextualized to address the needs, questions, and concerns of a local congregation. Audio recordings of the sermons that he preaches to his local congregation have been posted on his church's website for over five years and are sometimes downloaded by many more people than those who listen to him preach live.

The researcher ministers in a city where most of the inhabitants regularly use mass transportation, including underground trains. This makes it less likely for them to listen to broadcast radio than they would if they lived in a place where people commonly drive cars in their daily commute, and, hence, more likely to listen to portable MP3 players. A number of the researcher's congregants regularly listen to sermon podcasts downloaded from the internet, as does the researcher himself.

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[244] Ibid., 219.
[245] Ibid., 15.
[246] Ibid., 15.

Therefore, though the researcher is not conscious of any personal bias against the use of internet technology by churches, or specifically against the podcasting of audio recordings of sermons, he is conscious of a personal concern that his awareness of the online audience that listens to his own sermons might negatively impact his preaching to his local congregation. He has listened to enough sermon podcasts of other preachers who seem to be effectively addressing the needs of their local congregations to be convinced that the posting of online sermons does not necessarily need to affect a pastor's local preaching ministry. Yet he is personally aware of the impact that having an online audience might potentially have on a preacher.

Study Limitations

This study, and the research on which it is based, involved several limiting factors. In order to assess the validity of this research and the applicability of its results, it is important that these limitations be declared.

One limitation had to do with the availability of research participants. As mentioned above, the researcher had to adjust one of the criteria from what was originally intended because it proved to be difficult to locate participants who had an online audience that equaled the size of their local congregation. In fact, several of the participants did not know the number of people who listened to their online audiences. Some of the participants expressed concern about the time involved in sitting for the interview and the researcher felt pressured to keep the interview shorter than he would have liked. Because the researcher began the process of seeking participants for the study by emailing pastors with whom he was acquainted, five of the seven pastors interviewed

are members of the same denomination to which he belongs. This may affect the ability to generalize the results of the study to pastors in other church traditions.

Another limitation was due to limited resources for travel expenses. The researcher lives in New York City and did not solicit participation from pastors who lived more than three hours' drive from that site.

The general difficulty of attaining information about internet usage resulted in another limitation to this study. Though churches might be able to ascertain the number of times a sermon podcast has been accessed online, it is difficult to know how many individuals downloaded the recording, since it might have been downloaded by the same person more than once. Also, it is impossible to know whether or not the individuals who downloaded the recordings listened to the entire sermon, part of the sermon, or none of it at all.

There is also a limitation inherent in the type of research methodology that was employed in this study. Though qualitative research is valuable for providing insight into how people experience a given aspect of their world, the results of qualitative research are not necessarily generalizable to broader contexts. The fact that the results cannot be broadly generalized does not invalidate the helpfulness of qualitative research. It does, however, speak to the purpose for which qualitative research is designed.

In spite of these limitations, it is hoped that this research has yielded data that is helpful to understanding the questions that were explored in this study. It is hoped that it has provided insight into ways that Christian pastors whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings address the needs and concerns of their local congregations.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

As stated in chapter one, the purpose of this study is to explore ways that Christian pastors whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings address the needs and concerns of their local congregations. In order to explore this topic, the researcher followed the approach known by practitioners as qualitative research,[247] and interviewed seven pastors whose experience as preachers was considered likely to provide helpful insight into this topic. This chapter presents the results of these interviews. first by offering a description of the research participants, then by analyzing their responses in relationship to the research questions explored in this study (which are described below), and finally by presenting a summary of the findings.

The researcher selected participants for the study according to the principles of purposeful sampling[248] in order to interview individuals who met the following criteria: (1) Christian pastors whose ministry assignment includes regularly preaching to a local congregation, (2) pastors whose weekly sermons have been posted online for at least two years, and (3) pastors whose online sermons are frequently accessed by at least half as many people as those who normally listen to them preach live.

There are several reasons why it was assumed that these criteria would yield data pertinent to this study. First, in order to glean the kinds of insights that answer the research questions proposed in this study it is important to hear from individuals who

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[247] Merriam, 13.
[248] Ibid., 77.

face the challenge of proclaiming God's word to the same body of Christian worshipers on an ongoing basis. Second, it was important that the participants be preachers whose sermons have been posted online for at least two years, since it was hoped that, after having had recordings of their sermons available online for at least two years, these pastors might have received feedback in various forms from individuals who listened to their preaching this way. This feedback, it was assumed, would have created an awareness of their online audience in the minds of these preachers that might (or might not) influence the way they address their local congregations. Finally, it was helpful to interview preachers whose online audience was large enough to have had a perceptible impact on their approach to preaching. For this reason, the researcher sought to interview Christian pastors whose sermons podcasts are often accessed by at least half as many people as those who gather in their churches to hear them preach.

The participants in the study were interviewed individually in conversations that lasted from thirty to sixty minutes. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format, with the exception of one in which the participant agreed to be interviewed only by telephone. Excluding the phone interview, in each case the researcher travelled to the neighborhood or church setting in which the participant was engaged in ministry, so that the interviewer could get a sense of the context in which they worked and of the community to which they preached. An audio recording was made of each interview. Written transcriptions of the interviews were produced by the researcher, who then studied them, seeking to identify themes and patterns in the various responses by analyzing their words in relationship to three basic research questions:

1. To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online aware of their online audience as they prepare and deliver their sermons?

2. To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online concerned that this practice may affect the way they address their local congregation?

3. What steps have been taken by pastors whose sermons are posted online to ensure that their sermons still target the specific context of their local congregation and community?

What follows is a summary of the findings from these interviews.

Description of Participants

In order to encourage open and honest responses from the pastors interviewed, the researcher promised to conceal their identities in this report and to destroy all recordings and transcriptions of the interviews upon completion of this study. Therefore, the names of the participants have been altered and some of the details that would allow them to be indentified have been omitted. However, the descriptions below provide basic background information about each participant that is deemed to be pertinent to the study.

Participant #1 – Andrew

Andrew is the fifty-year-old pastor of an urban congregation located in an affluent neighborhood of a major city in the northeastern part of the United States. Though he had some preaching experience prior to his current pastorate, Andrew was ordained about ten years ago in the church he now serves and has been the regular preacher for that congregation ever since. Though the average worship attendance at the church is below 100, Andrew's online audio sermons are regularly accessed by over 300 people.

Andrew's church, which belongs to a conservative, evangelical denomination, is very intentional about contextualizing its ministry to its surrounding neighborhood – a neighborhood with a reputation for being artistically creative, socially progressive, and politically liberal. Andrew and his family are interested in the arts and in the pursuit of knowledge, making them a good fit for the neighborhood their church is trying to reach. The researcher interviewed Andrew in his comfortable home in a high-rise apartment building. The books lining the walls of Andrew's study reflected his commitment to careful research and biblical scholarship.

Participant #2 – Jerome

Jerome pastors in the same city as Andrew, leading a mega-church with over five thousand people in regular weekly attendance. The church, which he planted over twenty years ago, meets in five different Sunday worship services in several locations. Though Jerome has associate pastors who help with the preaching responsibilities, he normally preaches at least four times a week. Many would agree that the growth of Jerome's congregation has been fueled largely by his unusually gifted preaching. Through his preaching, teaching, and writing, Jerome has become widely known in evangelical circles and beyond. Audio recordings of Jerome's sermons are available through his church's website, some for free and some for a small charge. These recordings have a very wide listenership and are frequently cited as having an influential effect on the preaching of other ministers.

Participants #3 and #4 – Larry and Bill

Though they were interviewed separately, Larry and Bill are described here together since they both serve as associate pastors in the same church. Though they do

not speak as frequently as their senior pastor, Larry and Bill both preach to this church on a regular basis. Their preaching responsibilities are slated to increase in coming years as their senior pastor approaches retirement. Larry has been preaching for over thirteen years (ten at his current church and, before that, at another church for three and a half years.) Bill began his ministry at his current church and has been preaching there for seven years. Larry was interviewed in the floor of suites that the church rents in a high-rise, center-city office building. The researcher met with Bill in the church's recently opened worship center located a couple of miles away from the church office.

Though in some ways Larry and Bill are overshadowed by the presence of their well-known senior pastor, they were each selected for their positions because of their exceptional speaking abilities. Their church expects them to deliver sermons that are biblically accurate, culturally engaging, and homiletically sound. When Larry preaches, he addresses audiences of between 600 and 1,800 people. Bill addresses 1,500 to 2,000 people on a given Sunday, spread across two to three different services. Audio recordings of their sermons are available for a small charge through their church's website. Their audio sermons are heard by people all over the world.

Participant #5 – Adam

In an outlying borough of the same city there is a neighborhood known for its bohemian lifestyle, its progressive artists, and its alternative rock bands. Adam, in a completely unfeigned way, fits this neighborhood perfectly. In his late thirties, he is one of the oldest people in the congregation he leads – a church he planted seven years ago. In addition to ministering to his congregation, Adam is a well-known musician. This fact, coupled with his naturally engaging preaching style, has given Adam an audience for the

online recordings of his sermons that is significantly larger than the number of people who hear him preach live. Though his congregation numbers under three hundred in attendance, recordings of his sermons are frequently accessed by online listeners as many as nine hundred times.

Participant #6 – Robert

Robert also ministers in an outlying neighborhood in this same city. However, his neighborhood is known, not for its artistic creativity, but rather for its poverty, its drug trade, and its high rate of crime. Robert, who appears to be in his mid- thirties, describes his ministry as bi-vocational, since he splits his time between ministry to his local congregation and his work as a highly regarded itinerant preacher. While missing only six Sundays in his home church last year, Robert took about forty overnight road trips, speaking at youth rallies, church retreats, and Christian colleges. He reported having recently been invited to speak at a Christian rock concert with around six thousand young people in attendance. Robert's passion for Christ and his winsome personality became quickly apparent during the interview, revealing to the researcher why he is in such demand as a public speaker. Attendance in Robert's church is normally around 85. Audio recordings of the sermons Robert preaches there are regularly accessed by one hundred to two hundred listeners.

Participant #7 – Anthony

Anthony is a senior pastor serving a congregation in a suburban town in the northeastern United States, a church which grew out of an evangelistic ministry he helped to start about ten years ago. Though that ministry was not begun with the goal of planting a church, as the number of participants in the ministry grew, a desire was expressed for

the group to worship together. This desire eventually led to the founding of the church, which is reaching a broad spectrum of people from the community.

Appearing to be in his late thirties, Anthony is obviously well-read and (in the opinion of the researcher) is an unusually gifted preacher. (The researcher listened to several of his online sermons.) Anthony has worked in the past as an adjunct professor at a seminary located a couple of hours from his home. At the time of the interview, typical Sunday worship attendance at Anthony's church was around 150. Though he was unable to ascertain the size of his online audience, Anthony's remarkable speaking abilities and the type of feedback he has received from online listeners convinced the researcher that his insights would be helpful for the purpose of this study. (The researcher learned of Anthony from one of the other participants, who regularly listens to his sermons online.)

Awareness of Online Audience

The first research question explored in this study is: To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online aware of their online audience as they prepare and deliver their sermons? During the interviews, a number of questions were posed to the research participants which were designed to shed light on this matter. These included questions such as:

- How many people listen to your sermons online?

- Do you know who they are?

- Tell me about a time you were contacted by someone who listened to one of your sermons online.

- To what extent do you think about your online listeners while preparing a sermon?

- In what ways do you think about them while delivering a sermon?

- Do you ever address your online audience openly while preaching?

All of the pastors indicated that they were aware, to some extent, of the fact that their sermons were being heard over the internet. Even those who were the most insistent that their online audience did not affect their preaching reported at least some awareness that those listeners existed. Jerome, for example, who was confident that he gives very little thought to the matter, said, "Occasionally, you can't help but say, 'I wonder how that's going to sound. If somebody hears that over there, what are they going to say?'"

The extent to which the participants in this study reported an awareness of their online audiences did, however, vary significantly. Some of this awareness had to do with the individual pastor's involvement in his own church website and his understanding of the way the website was designed. Several of the pastors said that they had no easy way of knowing how many people were accessing their sermon recordings over the internet. "I have no idea how many listen," said Larry, "I've never checked into it." Bill and Anthony said something similar to Larry. Jerome was also unaware of the number of people who access his sermons over the internet and referred the researcher to the director of his church's department of communications and media. "You ought to just call him. He'd be happy to tell you." Andrew and Adam were both able to cite statistics about their online listenership, but only because they had looked into the matter for the sake of the interview. Only Robert seemed to have paid any attention to this figure, noting that his church website has a visible counter that indicates how many times a sermon has been accessed. "On the sermon player it has a 'listens' count. It says how many 'listens,' and that number is usually between one hundred and two hundred." He reported that the

presence of this counter had often led him to ponder why some of the online recordings were accessed more than others, and to contemplate ways to increase the number of downloads by selecting better titles for his sermons.

Anthony, who described himself as being much less involved with modern technology than most of his peers, conjectured that a pastor's general level of involvement with the internet might have an impact on how aware that minister, while preaching, will be of potential online listeners. He explains,

> This is just speculation, but I think that the more time a pastor tends to spend online, especially in social media, the more conscious he would be about his sermons and thinking about them in terms of what will happen as they are listened to [online]. In other words, I think, there's a lot of anxiety that people have about what will happen if this or that thing is said about them on Facebook, for instance, and I don't live with any of this anxiety because I don't have Facebook.

He described friends of his in ministry who have been very strategic in their use of social media as a way to build their churches. Though he certainly did not condemn that use of technology, he felt that it might increase a minister's concern about unseen listeners on the internet.

Another factor that seemed to influence the preachers' awareness of their online listenership had to do with the number of people who hear them preach live. Robert, for example, thought that the attention he receives as an itinerant preacher probably decreases his concern over those who hear his sermons over the internet. In a similar way, Bill reported that he gives his internet listeners very little thought because of the context in which he preaches – to a large congregation, in a high profile church, under the shadow of a famous senior pastor, in the center of a large metropolitan area. Bill said:

> I think preaching in this city, where there's so much scrutiny anyway, that impacts me more, in terms of scrubbing every word and being very careful about what I say, because in many ways the listening audience of a center city

congregation like ours is similar to the kind of people who might be listening online. So I don't think I'm impacted by the online audience nearly as much as I am by those sitting in front of me. I remember the very first sermon I preached at our church, I went out and put my notes on the stand, and I looked out and there's George Will from ABC News. So that happens in this city, and it happens at this church, and I think this is more in the back of my mind than somebody who might download my sermon in Chicago or something like that.

Larry, who preaches in the same context as Bill, reported similar feelings. Laughing, he said, "Our church is mostly known for our senior pastor's preaching. People tend to critique his online sermons more than they do mine." In a similar vein, Jerome conjectured that the temptation to cater to one's online audience to the detriment of a local congregation's needs is probably greater for pastors with small congregations, since the internet provides them with opportunity for exposure that they might not otherwise find.

Whether or not this is so, the interviews did reveal that pastors of smaller congregations are sometimes aware that posting their sermons online might help their church to grow. Anthony said that he knows people from his church's surrounding neighborhood might be listening to his sermons online – people who might potentially come to visit his church: "It just happened two weeks ago. A guy said that he heard about me and then listened on the internet and came. He had listened to a number of sermons and was really intrigued and wanted to come and be here. And so he's come for the last few weeks." Similarly, Adam said, "I've had some people come and say, 'I have been trying out your church for the last six weeks. I've been listening to your sermons'."

Most of the pastors reported that they had been contacted by people from outside their ministry area who had heard them preach via the internet. Some of these stories were remarkable. Anthony reported that a minister friend in England had recently

contacted him to inform him that the leaders in his church were listening to Anthony's online sermons and being shaped positively by what they were hearing. Anthony reported that he often prepares sermons with a desire to see them shape potential leaders in his own church. When he fails to see the desired growth in his own people, he sometimes reassures himself by thinking of the leaders in England who are listening to him. "Chris's leaders are listening. I'm working as hard as I can to build up the church, and if it's my congregation plus this other guy and some of his leaders that will be good." He also said that he is sometimes contacted by former seminary students of his who are now in ministry who tell him they are listening to his preaching online. He sometimes thinks of these students while preparing a sermon. "I'll take a bit of encouragement thinking that the fruit of my work may not just be in this immediate context, but might actually be to help them a bit, too."

Andrew said that he once heard from a stranger in Canada who had discovered his preaching online. The man informed Andrew that the members of his house church were gathering to listen to Andrew's podcasts while they looked for a pastor of their own. He also reported that some people from Australia, during a trip to his city, had visited his church because of their exposure to his online preaching. He went on to say, "There was another guy from California. He just showed up one Sunday and said he had traveled across the country to visit because of the sermons. I just said, 'Why? Why are you doing this?'" Another online listener, living in the southern part of the United States, informed Andrew that he and his wife were contemplating moving to Andrew's city in order to be part of his church. When asked how these things made him feel, Andrew said, "It makes me feel like it's worth it, what I'm doing."

Bill also reported an unusual encounter with someone from afar who had heard him preach online, an encounter that took place when his church dedicated its new ministry center building. He relates that story here:

> When we opened the building two months ago, we celebrated it, obviously, as you would expect. And there was this guy from Singapore, this young guy, hyper-enthusiastic, and he literally had come to our city because our church was opening our ministry center.… He was so enthusiastic. But the bizarre thing was this.… He wanted to meet our senior pastor. And I had been worship leading and our senior pastor had been preaching, and so I was going to introduce him to our senior pastor, but he also said, "Can you give me your autograph?" which was the most bizarre thing because this was somebody I'd never met who lives half a world away. And he wanted to have his picture taken with me. So clearly this was a function of the fact that he had heard me online. He obviously had been listening to my preaching at some level where it had impacted him to the point where he wanted my autograph, which is bizarre. So that's the most recent reminder to me that there's an audience beyond the walls of this building.

Adam also reported having received positive attention from his online listeners. He observed that his success as a musician has probably given him public exposure that has led people to listen to his podcasts. He elaborated:

> A lot of times the people who wind up listening to my sermons found them because they googled my name or our band's name. They are interested in the band and they want to know more so they end up listening to a sermon. I've had a number of people email me and say, "Thank you so much for your music, and I listen to your sermons and I really like them."

But the feedback these preachers got from their online listeners was not always positive. Adam reported having received harsh criticism once over one of his sermon recordings. He explained, "Somebody emailed me and said, 'Your sermon is being discussed right now on the Warfield List'." This, he explained, is a conservative online chat room frequented by pastors from his theological tradition. "Somebody posted my sermon and said, 'Hello, brothers, I came across this sermon and I was very disturbed. I would like you to listen to it. Does this fall within the realm of our standards?'" Adam

described the lengthy email exchange that followed this discovery as he responded to his

critic and sought to engage him in dialogue.

Andrew said that his concern over possible criticism from online listeners

sometimes affects the way he prepares his sermons. He said that he is wary of criticism

from two potential sources – theologically conservative listeners from his ecclesiastical

tradition and socially liberal listeners from his neighborhood. With regard to potential

theological critics, he said:

> I know there are going to be people listening. For example, there are a lot of times
> where I will make mention of a certain problem that for the larger Reformed
> community is an important issue, but not as much for people in my
> congregation…. I'll say things in certain ways and I'll bring up certain points,
> thinking that, if this is a message that is going to last beyond this Sunday, this
> issue needs to at least be mentioned in regard to this passage…. I'll do this
> because we are in the Reformed community. I want these to be Reformed
> sermons. I want them to stand up to the kind of people who have been to seminary
> and are more versed in these matters.

At the same time, he reported being careful not to include material in his sermons that

might be misunderstood by residents of the surrounding neighborhood. "I've been very,

very careful whenever I speak on the gay issue. Yes, I do leave things out of my sermons

in that regard, because I want to be careful that things are presented well."

Larry referred to the fact that people listen to his sermons online as "a very

frightening thing." When asked to explain, he said:

> Well, people who are professors and academics always say that the only thing
> that's worse than not being published is being published, because now there's so
> much accountability for what you say. And I think one of the things that can
> happen sometimes is people [who hear you online] don't understand the context
> in which you are saying something, and then they say that your humor was
> inappropriate, or you shouldn't have said it that way.… It's a little bit unfair.

He also explained his concern about online audiences hearing sermon illustrations that have to do with his family, admitting that this sometimes affects what he chooses to share while preaching. He explained,

> I don't talk about my children very much, if only because it's hard enough to be a pastor's child without having to have people from all around the world hearing stories about my child. You know what I mean? So I try to edit that out. But if I were in a church that was more of a family church, and didn't have the internet, where the whole world could listen to the sermons, I might be more inclined to talk about my family. But I think in this context I don't really feel that comfortable doing it, because I don't want these stories about my family to be on public record for the rest of forever.

Larry said, however, that he does not feel that this hinders his preaching. He makes adjustments for this reality by choosing different ways to illustrate a point or by making reference to children in a general way.

Fear of negative feedback from an internet audience, however, is not the only factor that might influence the way pastors with online sermon podcasts address their local congregations. In fact, sometimes the opposite dynamic might be at play. For example, Robert reported that he sometimes makes adjustments for his online listeners in his preaching, not in order to pander to their tastes but rather to make listening to his sermons less meaningful for them. He does this, he said, to motivate them to come to church. He suspects that perhaps half the people who hear him preach online are regular attenders of his church who, for whatever reason, fail to show up for worship on a given Sunday. With a laugh, he said,

> It's hard enough to just get these people in that room right there.… Sometimes it's hot. We don't have air conditioning. And they're coming from thirty minutes away, let's say. Why come, you know? So I don't put the PowerPoint online. And this is sort of joking, but sort of not. I tell them that there are a lot of things that are going to be visual. There are a lot of things like PowerPoint. You're not getting the full meal deal from a podcast.... So I've been thinking of ways to kind of reward listeners for being here. And occasionally I'll say, "Now, of course, you

> won't get this on the podcast, but everybody look at this ridiculous slide." And I won't say what the slide is.

His hope, he indicated, is that the frustration of listening to something like this over the internet, while being unable to see his visual aids, will prompt his listeners to attend church.

Though few of the pastors in this study reported that they specifically targeted their online audience in their preaching, most of them indicated that they had experienced significant interaction with these listeners. Even those who said that they gave little thought to the fact that their sermons were being posted online, with a little probing, spoke of ways they had become aware of the people who listen to them preach on the internet. All of this would seem to indicate that, to varying degrees and for differing reasons, pastors whose sermons are posted on the internet are conscious of online audiences as they prepare and deliver their sermons.

Concern Over the Effects of Having Sermons Online

The fact that pastors are aware of online listeners, however, does not necessarily mean that they will fail to address the needs and concerns of their church members in their preaching. The second research question explored in this study is: To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online concerned that this practice may affect the way they address their local congregation? In order to explore this topic the interviewer posed questions such as:

- Tell me about the kinds of people who attend your church.
- Do they have any specific needs, questions, or concerns that you feel you need to address in your preaching?
- What rationale was behind your church's decision to post your sermons online?

- To what extent are you concerned that, in your preaching, you may be speaking to your online audience to the exclusion of your local congregation?

- In what ways have you responded to this concern?

For the most part, none of the ministers interviewed seemed overly concerned that the existence of an online audience was causing them to neglect the needs of their local congregations. However, some of them did allow that, were this to happen to a preacher, it would indeed be a serious problem. Larry, for example, did not see this as a problem in his own preaching, but he did see that it might become a concern for the church at large. He explained:

> When you preach knowing that there's an online audience there's a temptation to preach to the tape and not to the people. So it almost becomes a performance, in which you're just concerned about what you're saying and not saying because it's going to be recorded, more so than because you're trying to speak to a certain group of people.

For a minister called to preach regularly to a specific local congregation, he said, this could be a problem. He added, "I think if you are a pastor your job is to shepherd the flock under you. There may be people who are listening online who can benefit from you, but they are not really your flock. They are really just people who buy your sermons. I think it's our responsibility as preachers to preach to the flock that we have." However, though Larry acknowledged this as a potential danger of having one's sermons posted online, he felt he was able, through effort, to avoid this pitfall. He went on to say,

> I think that preachers have to work hard to really contextualize and speak to their flock and not so much speak to so many other flocks. I'm always very flattered when someone says, "I listened to your sermon online and it was great." I'm very flattered by that. But I also realize that my calling is to care for the people here, and to do that through my preaching, than it is to preach to people I've never met.

Jerome also expressed little concern that his awareness of his online audience was affecting the way he preached to the people of his church. He did, however, acknowledge that it might present a danger to other preachers, particularly those with smaller congregations. The fact that he preaches to a large church, he felt, helps to shield him from the peril of neglecting his congregants in order to address online listeners. However, he said that he could imagine himself, in a different setting, falling into that trap.

> If I had a small church, and I knew more people were downloading and listening to my sermons than I actually had in front of me physically, I think that it probably would be very hard to not start thinking about my ministry as being this very broad ministry. I think, though, that's very dangerous – very, very dangerous.

Later in the interview he expounded on this danger for small church pastors:

> The church pays you to preach and minister to them, but if you spend all this time getting your ministry out there to the world, writing sermons so that everybody can hear them, you are not acting with integrity. In other words, people with small churches are being paid to take care of the people there, and yet those churches are basically funding this minister's ministry to the whole world. I don't think that's fair.

> Other ministers indicated, in the interviews, that they also felt that pastors are primarily responsible to minister to the needs of their own local congregations. Robert said, "In a word, I would say the purpose of preaching is to encourage, to encourage my people." Similarly, Larry said:

> As a pastor, my job is to shepherd people in their life context, at that time in that place. The whole purpose of preaching is to take the word of God and make it alive and embodied in a particular place so that people can access it…. It's the job of every preacher to articulate the gospel in a way that the people that they speak to can understand. That's primarily what I'm trying to do. That's why I'm a pastor and not a teacher…. If you are a teacher, your message tends to be less contextualized – more of a broad audience. But as a preacher you really have to speak to your particular context.

Anthony, whose passion for preaching was evident throughout the interview, expressed similar views. He did not hesitate at all when asked what he considered the purpose of preaching to be, saying:

> One of the primary ways that God makes himself known, and chooses to make himself known, is when people gather around and hear the word. I think the scriptures are the living word of God, by God's design and decision, to open up in the midst of the community that's coming together – to open up his will for them by revealing who he is and who they are. I think that happens when scripture is exposed, when it's opened. So when I preach, my thought is that if I can listen carefully to what God was saying to the communities to whom these words were addressed originally, … and then, discerning that, ask, "What would God say to the people that are gathered together here, that I am one of, through this text now?" that would be my aim. So I listen and I think, "What is God seeking to say through this word now to us?"

With similar passion, Adam said, "I think what I'm after is I want God to actually speak to people. I want God's presence to be there."

This understanding that a primary purpose of preaching is to speak God's word to those who are physically present may be the factor that motivated some of these preachers to have thought so deeply about the congregations they address week after week. When asked to describe the people to whom they preach, Anthony and Robert immediately described distinct categories of people who attend their church. Adam did the same, adding an explanation of the kinds of spiritual struggles with which each of these proto-typical listeners had to deal. When asked to describe his congregation, Jerome rattled off statistics in a way that showed how often he had thought about them. "Well, it's about sixty percent single, about half white and half Asian, and highly educated. It's young. Probably the median age is a little over thirty." Bill's answers indicated that he has spent lots of time thinking about the kinds of inner questions being asked by the people in his church who hear him preach. He elaborated on this:

> I think primarily they are asking about how this ancient idea of Jesus relates to their modern life here in this city. How does it relate to my desire to be married? How does it relate to the fact that I am working one hundred hours a week and I'm making good money but I'm still unhappy with my life, and I'm a Christian but I don't really have joy? How do I activate this message in my life once I leave here on Sundays so that I find joy and purpose in my job, that I find comfort with the fact that I'm lonely and alone in this big city, that the future seems very uncertain in this economy? Does God really know that I'm here in this city and trying to live out my faith? I think that they are looking for comfort and they are looking for purpose.

These pastors' thoughtful understanding of their own congregations may help to explain the lack of concern these preachers had that their awareness of an online audience might have a detrimental effect on their preaching ministry to their local church. They all seemed to have thought very seriously about the needs and concerns of the people sitting before them while they preach.

A couple of the pastors interviewed acknowledged that they might be more prone to overlook their congregants if the number of people hearing them online were greater. Given the size of their online audience, however, they did not see it as a problem. Robert said, "I think if the number of online listeners were ten thousand, I'd start thinking about it. … I think that there is a scale to it. If we're having this interview in ten years, and people just begin loving my podcast, then maybe the answers might be different." Anthony said something similar:

> If you told me, "Hey, we did a little check on your website and there's fifty people listening," I would say, "O.K." It would probably have a small impact on me. But if you told me, "There are fifty thousand people listening every Sunday," I bet it would change the way I preach. I bet I'd be anxious. I'd be driven by anxiety. I'd be driven by insecurity. I'd be driven by the desire to say things in just the right way. And I would have this mass audience in my mind.

Given the current size of their online listenership, however, neither Robert nor Anthony were very worried that the members of their church were being deprived because their

pastor was secretly preaching to the cyber-world. Like the other preachers interviewed, though they acknowledged that this might hypothetically be a problem for other pastors, they were confident that it was not one for them.

That being said, however, the researcher could not help but wonder whether some of these preachers were overestimating their ability to shut their online listeners out of their minds. One reason for this suspicion was the obvious effect the presence of a recording device seemed to have on the pastors during the interviews. Andrew appeared awkward and uncomfortable at the start of the interview, frequently glancing down at the recorder. Larry admitted after the interview that the presence of a recording device had probably altered the communication process that took place while he spoke. Robert spoke directly into the recorder at one point during the conversation, jokingly telling the machine what he was communicating to the researcher through his body language. He also suggested that the recorder ought to be shut off at one point during the interview because of something he was about to say, nevertheless allowing the recording to go on.

This behavior made it difficult for the researcher to believe that these same men, promised anonymity in the context of this study, could be as unaffected by the presence of recording devices while they preached as they claimed to be. Of course, sermons are usually recorded through devices that are not visible to preachers the way the researcher's bright red MP3 recorder was, sitting on tables in the middle of each interview. This distraction may explain their discomfort to some degree. Furthermore, unlike most congregations assembled for worship, the researcher himself was aware that a recording was taking place. Thus, the researcher's own body language may have contributed to the pastors' awkwardness during the interview. Yet, it was interesting to note that even

Jerome, who because he was interviewed by telephone could see neither the researcher's body language nor the recording device, also seemed to be affected by the fact that his words were being recorded. At one point during the conversation he confirmed this awareness by saying, "Just for the record, since I'm being recorded, let me say this."

Of course, not all the participants in the study reacted this way. But the researcher could not help but wonder whether people as obviously affected by an anonymous recording for use in an academic research project could be as uninfluenced as they claimed to be by the fact that their sermons are being posted online.

Rather than being concerned that the posting of their sermons online might negatively affect their preaching, some of the pastors interviewed indicated that they thought the practice might actually improve the way they preach. They seemed to have valid reasons for saying this. For example, Larry said, "I think that having an online audience definitely made me more precise. It made me think with greater precision." Andrew reported that being aware that his preaching might be theologically critiqued by online listeners forced him to study more thoroughly as he wrote his sermons. "I think I prepare much more rigorously," he said. In the same way, he felt that his concern over possibly offending socially liberal neighbors who might download a sermon from his church's website was helping him to deliver sermons that would engage them more effectively if they ever visit his church. In addition to this, he explained that it was helping him to model for his congregation a more productive way to talk with their neighbors about controversial matters. When asked if he ever felt frustrated over not being able to speak to his congregation more openly about homosexuality because the sermons are online, he said, "No. I really think that what it does is that it trains me to

preach the way I should preach." It helped him, he said, through the pattern of communication he demonstrated in his preaching, to teach his church members "how to speak to the larger communities."

In a similar way, Jerome admitted that his knowledge that people from other parts of the world hear his sermons online keeps him from speaking disparagingly about regional differences. As a preacher in the urban Northeast, he said:

> I shouldn't make fun, even in a gentle way, of rural people or southern people or anything like that. I shouldn't do that even though, in this city, people make fun of other parts of the country. I don't do that, partly because I don't think it exhibits a gospel character, but now that I know people listen all over the place, I guess it probably reinforces that.

Knowing he has a broad online audience, he felt, helps to safeguard him against being ungracious or condescending in the way he speaks from the pulpit.

Robert also pointed to a positive effect on his preaching that he felt came from having his sermons posted online. It kept him, he said, from inappropriately plagiarizing the ideas of other preachers. Referring to some well-known pastors to whose sermon recordings he personally listens, he said, "I know people will listen to Tim Keller on podcast and also listen to me. A lot of times they will listen to a Matt Chandler sermon and then they'll listen to me. So if I don't give credit where credit is due, they will know I'm plagiarizing." His awareness of this, he reported, made him much more careful to quote the preachers whose ideas he borrows. This, he felt, improved his preaching. "You really up your game, and it really makes you better, I think. It makes you work harder."

Not all the ministers interviewed, of course, reported such positive effects on their preaching from having their sermons posted online. However, for the most part, none of

them were overly concerned that the practice was causing them to neglect the needs of their congregations in their preaching.

This lack of concern may explain the fact that, in the case of most of these pastors, they and their congregational leaders had apparently not put much thought behind the decision to start posting sermon recordings online. Other than Andrew, none of them could articulate a clear rationale behind the decision. At Andrew's church, the sermon podcast, he said, grew out of the tape ministry, "which for us was the '5T Ministry' – 'Transferring the Teaching to Them'." But other than Andrew, most of the preachers interviewed seemed unsure exactly when it was that their church began uploading sermon podcasts. Indeed, the researcher sometimes got the impression, while speaking with these pastors, that they themselves had little influence over this aspect of their church's ministry. Andrew and Jerome both suggested that the researcher should contact someone else in their congregation in order to get more information about the church's podcast. Robert and Adam both spoke of having to seek an explanation about the podcast from the person who managed the website for their church. Jerome spoke of his disagreement with his congregation's policy of charging for sermon downloads, as if his views on the matter were being disregarded by the church. Though Robert stated that, for some time, he and his leaders had wanted their church to provide sermon podcasts, he described the actual decision to implement this practice as something almost forced on the church from outside. He reported that a man from another state heard that his church did not have a podcast and, without being asked, sent them the equipment they would need to start doing so. He explained,

> A guy, who happened to be from Texas, came up and said, "You know how easy this is to do, right?" And we were like, "Oh, no. It's going to be a lot of work."

And he said, "Here's a program called Audacity. It's free. And here's this equipment you'll need. I'm paying for it. It will arrive at your door." He bought it and sent us a diagram. He bought like $200-300 worth of equipment. He said, "I just want to bless you guys." And so that week it was like, "Oh. Click button. And now we're podcasting."

Though Robert was grateful for the man's generosity and was pleased that his church would be able to provide sermon recordings online, his description of the way this practice began at his church suggested that very little thought lay behind the decision to podcast. For the most part, this was consistent with what the rest of the research participants said.

The willingness of these congregations to embrace this technology and incorporate it without deliberation into the ministry of their church made it clear that none of them were concerned about ways it might affect their pastor's preaching. The pastors also seemed to share this lack of concern.

The second research question explored in this study is: To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online concerned that this practice may affect the way they address their local congregation? If the answers given by these research participants in the course of their interviews are consistent with the views of other preachers who podcast, then it would seem that most pastors who do so are not concerned about this at all. Though they may agree that the practice could have a negative effect on others, they are not concerned that it will impact their own preaching in any significant way.

Steps Taken to Ensure Contextualized Preaching

The fact that pastors are unconcerned about whether having an online audience might keep them from addressing the needs and concerns of their church members, however, does not necessarily mean that they are indifferent to the needs of their

congregants. The third research question explored in this study is: What steps have been

taken by pastors whose sermons are posted online to ensure that their sermons still target

the specific context of their local congregation and community? In order to explore this

question in the interviews, the researcher asked the participants questions such as:

- How do you determine whether your sermons are communicating effectively with

   the worshipers who attend your church?

- Are there any practices you follow in your sermon preparation or preaching to

   help yourself understand the needs and concerns of the worshipers who attend

   your church? If so, what are some of these practices?

- Are there any practices you follow in your sermon preparation or preaching to

   keep yourself from addressing your online audience to the exclusion of the

   worshipers who attend your church? If so, what are some of these practices?

To determine whether or not their sermons were connecting well with the people

of their churches, these ministers relied on a number of things. One of these was the

nonverbal cues from their congregants that are perceptible during the preaching event.

Anthony said, "In the actual delivering of my sermons, I can see my people. I don't

preach with a manuscript, so I'm very connected face to face with the listener. I can see

their body language." Robert said, "As I'm up there speaking, people may be nodding or

I'm seeing tears or whatever." Andrew joked that "if they are yawning or their eyes are

closing," it's a definite clue that his preaching is not connecting with his people.

Some of the preachers spoke of being aware on occasion of less tangible feedback

while preaching – of a subtle, spiritual awareness that the spirit of God is at work in the

church. Andrew said, "I think that there are times when there's a stillness. When I feel

the anointing, I feel the anointing on the congregation rather than on me." He described a

sermon he had preached from James chapter one, shortly before being interviewed, in

which he could sense this happening. "I felt like people were being kind of brought into a

new place in their thinking, in their walk with the Lord." This kind of spiritual

discernment is often difficult to describe. Larry put it this way:

> I think every preacher understands this a little bit. I don't want to over-spiritualize
> it, but there are some times when you preach and there is this sense of divine
> appointment. There's something in the air. I don't know how to explain it, but
> there's something where you just sit there and you say, "I felt very convicted
> about what I spoke. It came out in a way that I was comfortable with, and it felt
> very spiritually full." And you can kind of sense that God is doing something
> there, but it's hard for me to describe. I think that every preacher at some point
> has experienced that. It's like the golf swing when you hit the ball just right. It's
> what helps you to get through all of the bad swings. You know what I mean? It's
> a little like that. Hopefully it can happen again, and so that is why I keep doing it.

Though he clearly does not sense these kinds of spiritual dynamics at work every time he

preaches, they seem real enough to Larry for him to look to them as a reliable indication

that his preaching is ministering effectively to his congregants.

Some of the pastors reported that they regularly relied on feedback from particular

individuals or groups within their churches to help them to assess the effectiveness of

their preaching. Adam said, "I talk with my assistant pastor about the sermon every week.

He will try to give me good feedback, and he does a good job of it." Bill felt that his

wife's observations about his preaching were especially helpful to him. He elaborated:

> My wife really is the best barometer. I remember hearing years ago that, as a
> preacher, your spouse needs to be your biggest fan and your biggest critic. And I
> think my wife really inhabits that well because on the one hand she knows that
> my psyche is very fragile, and so she's very careful to encourage. But also, if I'm
> preaching in the morning and I'm preaching again in the afternoon, and she's
> heard me in the morning, she'll find things in particular that are self-righteous or a
> little too moralistic or heavy-handed and really help me think about the message
> in a more gospel-oriented way.

Larry also finds pointers from his wife to be helpful:

> My wife is so wonderful. She will listen to the sermon on Saturday night and give me feedback. And she represents a very different type of person from me. So hearing her and what's important to her helps guide me in applying the message to people who are of similar sentiments. She has insights that don't immediately occur to me, because I have certain strengths and weaknesses and she has others.

Jerome spoke about how helpful feedback from his church's elders has been to him in his preaching. Their interaction with the congregation, as leaders appointed to shepherd the flock, gives them particularly helpful insight into ways the preaching is impacting the church. Jerome said, "It's the job of the elders to conserve the fruit of the preaching and to tell me about it." Robert referred to his church's deacons as "some of [his] closest friends in the world." He said that his deacons meet through a monthly conference call in which they give each other updates on needs in the church and pray together through the list of church members. Robert listens in on this call, without saying anything, just to keep himself in touch with the needs of the people to whom he preaches. "That's always helpful – just to be reminded that these are the people I minister to."

Feedback that comes directly from the congregation was also frequently mentioned as a helpful way for these preachers to know if their sermons were communicating effectively to their churches. Jerome said that he sometimes gets emails from people in the church in response to his preaching. Anthony reported that he spends "a lot of time with people from the congregation outside of official church settings." This practice, he said, provides him with many opportunities to learn whether or not his preaching is helpful to the church. He went on to say,

> Unsolicited feedback will come. People will say, "Oh, you know, I was just engaged with this person and I was thinking about what you preached about." So I'll hear that kind of thing a lot. If I hear people integrating what I've been preaching about into their approach to living in ways that I've just shared, I know

the sermons are connecting with them. A lot of people in my neighborhood come to our church. A lot of my friends are leaders in our church. So there is a very big overlap between my social life and my life here in the community, which I like very much. I hear lots of feedback.

Andrew indicated that he gleans similar insight into how to preach to his congregation through his involvement in his church's discipleship program. He explained what that looked like: "I have a number of discipling relationships that are going on. And they have been very helpful for helping me understand what applications need to be made in people's lives, because they get me into an intimate level. And I say, 'Wow, this is what people like this are thinking about and dealing with. Why aren't I talking about that?'" In this sense, what is helpful to him is not so much specific feedback from people about particular sermons he has preached, but rather on-going interaction with members of his congregation at a deeper personal level than normally takes place after a corporate worship service.

Ironically, Bill reported that he knows that his preaching is communicating effectively to the people who hear him preach live when they refer others to the audio recordings of his sermons. He elaborates,

> If someone comes up after a sermon and says that they are going to go buy an MP3 for their non-believing friend or cousin, to me that really is an encouragement, because I'm very aware of preaching to both Christians and non-Christians, too. I believe that the gospel is for everyone, that Christians and non-Christians need it, in different ways, but we don't have to bifurcate our preaching in a way that privileges one over the other. And so, for me, I feel like if somebody is willing to share that sermon with somebody who's not a Christian or somebody who's struggling, then it impacted them personally. They understood it. And they feel comfortable enough to turn it over to somebody who maybe isn't as comfortable with church or Jesus or the Bible. So that's just my selfish way of saying, "O.K. At least part of what I was trying to accomplish got through."

A couple of the pastors interviewed spoke about particular reading material that they find helpful when it comes to targeting their preaching to the needs of their hearers. Larry, for

example, mentioned several secular news sources he finds particularly helpful: "If you read an article in [these periodicals] you understand what the average person thinks about and responds to and how they think and act. You actually get a sense of the cultural narratives that they live by or the worldviews that they live by.… I often find that to be very important." Andrew mentioned similar help that he receives from a particular Christian journal: "I have back issues of *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* on my hard disk, and so one of the application steps [in my sermon preparation] is to look up the text in that data base of journals. Then I just review and see if there's anything in there that spurs an application for that text." The discipline of regularly reading these materials helps these preachers to contextualize their sermons more effectively for the communities to which they preach.

Other pastors spoke of other disciplines they have employed to help themselves to connect with their congregations. Jerome spoke of a formal survey that was conducted of the people who attend his mega-church. This survey provided him with helpful insight into the kinds of people he addresses week after week (revealing, among other things, "that fifteen percent of the people there either have doctorates or are getting their doctorates.") Though the size and complexity of his church now prohibits this, he also mentioned that for years he held a public question and answer time following each service, so that people could inquire about the subject on which he had just preached. With this practice, he said, "you can tell very much whether you are connecting with people, whether you are reaching people." Andrew also reported that he used to provide a question and answer time following the worship service. Unlike Jerome, however, it was

the decline in the size of his congregation, rather than its growth, that now makes that practice unworkable.

Robert described a discipline he once employed while preparing a sermon. He said that he has one particular church member who frequently critiques the theological accuracy of his sermons. He found that he was unconsciously preparing sermons to satisfy the demands of this one critic and that this was causing him to neglect the needs of others in his church in his preaching. Feeling convicted that he was failing in his task as a pastor, he constructed a visible display of his congregation to help keep them in mind while writing his sermon. He explained,

> I took a post-it note and put it on top of my desk with a list of about twenty names who were just from every walk of life, just varied. And I literally made a constructed audience. And my wife sees this and she goes, "Who are these? They have nothing in common." But that's what I did. And I said, "You know what? This kid, who is borderline retarded, he's twenty years old, comes in wearing headphones. A lot of times I don't even think he takes his headphones out for the sermon. He's listening to Eminem or whatever. Occasionally he takes those headphones out. What does God want to say to him through this sermon?" Well, that puts it in a whole different ballgame than our brother who is waiting to pounce on every doctrinal error. And I realize that there is a lot more of "headphone guy" [in my church] than there is of this one "doctrine police."

Though he felt a desire to prepare a sermon designed to silence his critic, he felt that his task as a pastor was to preach God's word to the entire church. So he developed a practical discipline to help him achieve that. "I realized that there was going to be a lot of innocent bystanders if I just unloaded on this guy. I'm called to rise above that." Though, in this situation, Robert was not worried that he was neglecting his congregation in order to speak to his internet audience, it is easy to see how a practice like this might help a preacher deal with that problem.

So it seems that there are a number of steps that pastors whose sermons are posted online can take to ensure that their sermons still target the specific context of their local congregation and community. They can be attentive to the nonverbal cues and body language of their congregants. They can seek to discern the work of the Spirit of God during the preaching event. They can welcome feedback about their preaching from individuals and groups within their congregations. They can be intentional about spending time with church members and about keeping in touch with helpful literature. They can employ formal disciplines such as question and answer sessions, surveys, and visual displays. If they are worried that their awareness of their online audience might cause them to neglect the needs and concerns of their own congregations while they preach, these are steps they can take to help prevent that from happening.

Summary of Interview Results

The purpose of this study is to explore ways that Christian pastors whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings address the needs and concerns of their local congregations. Based on interviews with seven pastors whose ministry assignment includes regularly preaching to a local congregation and whose weekly sermons have been posted online for at least two years, it would seem that this is an important topic to study.

These pastors all indicated that, even though they may not have given it much conscious thought, there are numerous (and sometimes remarkable) ways in which they have been reminded that there is an unseen audience listening to them in the cyber-world. They all seemed to feel that it would be highly improper for pastors to neglect the needs

of their local congregations in order to speak, through their preaching, to their online audiences, and that the danger of a pastor falling into this trap is very real.

Surprisingly, none of the pastors expressed much concern that they themselves were succumbing to this temptation. This lack of concern may be due to a sort of personal naiveté, as indicated by the obvious reaction of some of the pastors to being recorded during their interviews. Could people so clearly affected by a recording device during an anonymous study like this one really claim to be uninfluenced by the publicly accessible recording of their sermons? Can preachers regularly contacted (and sometimes even visited) by online listeners from around the world really put them out of mind while preparing and delivering sermons?

However, these pastors' lack of concern that their awareness of online listeners might affect their ability to address their local congregations could also be attributed to the steps they have taken to ensure that this does not happen. They reported a number of ways, both during the preaching event and throughout the ministry week, in which they keep themselves in touch with the lives and needs of the people who gather to hear them preach. Their ability to stay connected relationally with their congregants would seem to indicate that, though the practice of posting sermons online might have a negative effect on a pastor's preaching ministry, it does not guarantee that it will. The practices that helped them stay in touch with their church members might be employed by other pastors whose sermons are posted online to ensure that having an internet audience does not lead them to neglect the congregations who hear them preach live.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary of Findings

This study was conducted in order to look at the ways in which preachers who know that their sermons will be heard by an audience of online listeners nevertheless continue to speak in meaningful ways to congregants in their local churches. In exploring this topic, we have asked several key questions. Does the existence of an unseen audience, listening to the preaching event by way of the internet, impact a preacher's ability to address the specific life situations of the people in the pews? Are preachers whose audio sermons are posted online concerned that they might inadvertently neglect the people they are addressing live? If so, what steps can they take to prevent this from happening?

In order to examine this topic, the researcher conducted a review of literature from three areas of study and also analyzed biblical material deemed pertinent to the matter. According to literature that examines the church's use of the internet, the numbers of churches posting their minister's online audio sermons and the numbers of people downloading these podcasts are already significant and are certain to increase in years to come.[249] In many ways the church appears to be rapidly adopting this technology into its ministry without giving much thought to its possible impact on congregational life.

Literature from communication theorists reveals that the dynamics involved in the communication process are much more complex than many churches appear to realize.[250]

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[249] Bailey and Storch, 23.
[250] Fortner, 44.

There are a number of factors at play in the live preaching event that will tend to keep preachers in tune with the needs of the audience seated before them.[251] However, the audience actually addressed, sometimes unconsciously, by any public speaker does not always correspond to those who are physically present.[252] It should be expected that the existence of online audiences will have some impact on the preparation and delivery of sermons by pastors.

Those who write on the subject of preaching highlight the need for Christian pastors to seek a certain balance in their preaching. Preachers should deliver messages that are contextualized enough to address the specific concerns of the congregation to whom they are speaking, and yet, at the same time, general enough to present biblical truths that are applicable to all people at all times.[253]

An analysis of biblical material suggests that this same balance was important to the preaching of the early church. Apostolic preaching specifically focused on the contextual needs of the audience being addressed, yet presented a message that was universally true and that could be preserved through a new medium (printed text rather than spoken voice) for audiences not physically present when the sermon was delivered. Of course, the printed text in this case (the writings of scripture) was divinely inspired in ways, this researcher believes, that will not be repeated in the life of the modern church. Nevertheless, this seems to imply that what congregations are doing by posting audio sermons online is not necessarily new in the life of the church. Though the technology is different, the practice is the same. Sermons delivered to one audience are being offered to another audience through the use of a different medium. The fact that ministers are

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[251] John B. Thompson, 83.
[252] Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca, 19.
[253] Johnson, 31.

addressing more people than merely those seated before them, however, requires

preachers to give much careful thought to their patterns of communication in order to

ensure that, by adding an unseen audience to their total listenership, they do not

unintentionally neglect the audience that hears them speak live.

In order to explore this matter further, the researcher followed the approach

known by practitioners as qualitative research[254] and interviewed seven pastors whose

experience as preachers was considered likely to provide helpful insight into this topic.

Participants were selected for the study according to the principles of purposeful

sampling.[255] For the interviews, the researcher sought to meet with Christian pastors

whose ministry assignment includes regularly preaching to a local congregation, whose

weekly sermons have been posted online for at least two years, and whose online

sermons are frequently accessed by at least half as many people as those who normally

listen to them preach live.

In examining the responses of the individuals who were interviewed, the researcher

analyzed their words according to three basic research questions:

4. To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online aware of their online

   audience as they prepare and deliver their sermons?

5. To what extent are pastors whose sermons are posted online concerned that this

   practice may affect the way they address their local congregation?

6. What steps have been taken by pastors whose sermons are posted online to ensure

   that their sermons still target the specific context of their local congregation and

   community?

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[254] Merriam, 13.

[255] Ibid., 77.

The responses of the participants revealed that, though they may not give much conscious thought, while preparing or delivering sermons, to the people who hear their sermons online, they all receive significant feedback from this audience, enough of which to have been made quite aware of its existence. Though most of the ministers interviewed felt that it would be inappropriate for pastors to neglect the needs of their congregants in order to preach sermons that appeal to internet listeners, none of these pastors seemed overly concerned that this was happening to them. Were these pastors in denial? Some of their lack of concern could, perhaps, be explained that way. Much of it, however, might be explained by the various steps they have taken to understand, connect with, and address the specific congregation to which they were called to preach. The steps taken by these ministers might point to general practices that pastors should consider following in order to prevent their awareness of an online audience from negatively impacting the preaching event that takes place at the local level.

Recommendations for Practice

The experiences of these pastors suggest that there may be a number of practices that could be recommended to Christian pastors whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings to help them to address the needs and concerns of their local congregations.

In his interview, Robert related how the presence of a visible counter on his church's website, indicating the number of hits his sermon recordings have received, is what enticed him to begin pondering why some of his sermons were more popular online then others. It might be helpful for churches to design their websites so that this information is not easily available. The less frequently pastors are reminded of the

number of people listening to them online, the less likely they are to be concerned about them.

Such a design detail may not make a difference for all pastors, but for others it may prove to be helpful. It is common pastoral knowledge that some ministers request that they not be informed of the giving records of individual church members, so that they will not be swayed to treat people differently based on their financial contributions to the church. In a similar way, some pastors may request to be shielded from information about what happens to their sermons online. Both Anthony and Robert admitted that if they knew that large numbers of people were downloading their sermon podcasts, it would probably alter the way they preach. Given how gifted each of them are as communicators, it does not seem unlikely that their online following could grow. It might be prudent for them to take steps to ensure that data from their church website is not easily available to them.

In addition to giving careful thought to how their church's websites are designed, pastors who want to resist the temptation to preach to their online audience might also be advised to be careful about how they interact with the internet and social media in general. Anthony conjectured that "the more time a pastor tends to spend online, especially in social media, the more conscious he [will] be about his [online] sermons." Just as wise pastors, for generations, have taken practical steps to safeguard themselves against areas of personal weakness or temptation, pastors who feel that they are overly fascinated with their online listenership might take practical steps to shield themselves from the online world as a whole. For example, if their congregations use social media as a way to sharpen communication or build congregational connections, pastors may

choose to delegate the tasks involved in this to someone else. Blogging, Tweeting, and Facebook updates might all be handled by trusted church leaders, rather than being added to a pastor's already full job description. Pastors might also develop personal disciplines that limit the amount of time they spend reading blogs or listening to online recordings of other preachers' sermons.

More important than the need to guard against overexposure to the online world, however, is what these interviews revealed about the need for pastors to stay in touch with their church members. An awareness of the issues with which church members are dealing might be attained by soliciting regular feedback from congregational leaders. Jerome receives feedback from his elders, Adam from his assistant pastor, and Robert from his deacons. Both Bill and Andrew talked of receiving helpful feedback from their wives. Perhaps even more valuable than this, as Anthony noted, is spending "a lot of time with people from the congregation outside of official church settings." Bryan Chapell wrote that the "healthiest preaching … supplies the application people need."[256] All of these preachers seemed to have found ways to know their people well enough to do preach sermons that are applicable to their lives. It seems advisable for any pastors who allow their sermons to be posted online to make sure that they make an extra effort to connect with their church members outside of the church, as well.

The internet provides the Christian church with many new opportunities to develop its ministry and advance its message. One of these is the ability of churches to post audio recordings of their pastors' sermons online. Though there are valid reasons why churches may choose to do this, it is not advisable for a church to take such a step without engaging in serious reflection. The addition of an online audience may have

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[256] Chapell, 53.

unforeseen effects on the way pastors preach to their congregations. Though an awareness of these internet listeners may pose a danger for some preachers, thoughtful ministers can take steps to prevent it from happening. Taking these steps might even make them more effective than before at preaching God's word to the church.

Recommendations for Further Research

For decades now, the voices of critical thinkers such as Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong have been reminding us of ways that new developments in media technology inevitably affect our lives as human beings. Others, such as Quentin Schultze, T. David Gordon, Robert Fortner, and Shane Hipps, have looked specifically at how technological change impacts the life of the church. There seems to be a great need right now for more of this kind of study.

The present study suggests several specific areas in which further research is needed (or at least desirable.) Questions that might be explored include the following:

- In what ways does the availability of online sermon podcasts affect the participation of Christians in their local church?

- In what ways does the availability of online sermon podcasts affect the ways that Christians respond to the preaching at their local church?

- To what extent and in what ways are Christian ministers training their congregations about prudent use of the internet and social media?

- To what extent and in what ways do Christian pastors use online sermon podcasts for their own personal spiritual development?

- To what extent and in what ways do Christian pastors use online sermon podcasts in their sermon preparation?

- What approaches are churches taking as they make decisions either to adopt or to reject new technologies for use in their ministries?

- To what extent and in what ways do Christian seminaries find internet technology useful for the training of future ministers?

- To what extent and in what ways are churches using social media in their ministries?

- To what extent and in what ways does social media impact the ways that Christians involve themselves in a local church?

Discussion of Topic

In a qualitative research project such as this present study, the researcher personally interacts with the insights of the research participants as well as with the literature reviewed in the exploration of the topic. My own experience as a pastor whose sermons are posted online as audio recordings is what led to my interest in the questions investigated in this study.

This is how it began. We had just finished the early worship service at our church one Sunday morning and I was preparing for the second service, which would start a few minutes later. I was discouraged by some of the nonverbal cues I had received from the congregation while preaching at the first service. It was clear that something about my delivery had completely alienated several of them. When an elder who had just heard me preach approached, I winced at the thought of what he would say. In my experience, feedback from this particular elder sometimes came across in very unhelpful ways. "We should get together sometime," he said with a smile that failed to mask his displeasure.

"We haven't had lunch in a while. It would be good to sit down and chat about your preaching."

Though my emotions were blurred by the irritation I was feeling, the thought that immediately flooded my mind was crystal clear. It was so clear, in fact, that it startled me. "How dare you critique my preaching? Do you know how many people will hear that sermon online?"

I am the pastor of a small congregation in Queens, New York. Our Sunday morning attendance, including children, is usually a little more than 200 people. In an effort to help our church grow, one of our members designed a church website on which audio recordings of my weekly sermons are posted. I was instructed to update my entry in the "Pastor's Blog" section of the webpage at least once a week, in order to encourage return visitors to the site. In learning how to do this, I could not help but notice that whenever I was uploading new material I was able to see the number of times my sermons had been accessed online. At first the numbers meant little to me, but (similar to Robert) as I continued to observe them week after week, they began to catch my attention. Often the sermons were only downloaded a few dozen times, but sometimes they would be accessed by hundreds of listeners. Occasionally, a particular sermon recording would even be downloaded thousands of times.

It was hard to make sense of the numbers. Sermons that had seemed to connect powerfully with my congregation would sometimes receive very little attention on the internet. Conversely, sermons that seemed to have completely missed the mark while I was preaching them would sometimes generate a large number of online hits. Who were

these people, and why were they listening to me? Why did they notice one sermon but not another?

Like the ministers interviewed in this study, there are a number of ways in which I have been made aware that there are people who hear my sermons over the internet. Once in a while I receive emails from them – a former church member who has returned home to South America and misses our congregation, a pastoral colleague planting a church in Northern Mexico, a regular attender who missed the worship service last week because she was home with the flu. Once a distant uncle, whom I have not seen in years, sent me a Christmas card from Canada in which he informed me that he sometimes hears me preach online. A woman from our neighborhood once called our church office asking how she could become a member of our congregation. She had never visited our church, but had been listening to the sermons on our website for several months and was ready to join. Last year, a church in another state tried to recruit me to be their senior pastor. Someone from that congregation had visited our church and now the entire pastoral search committee was listening to me online. I still remember the kind words of one man from that congregation who called to tell me that he had been listening to me while jogging and that my sermons had meant a lot to him.

To the pastor of a mega-church, addressing thousands of people every week from the lectern in a large auditorium, this kind of attention probably seems insignificant, even laughable. I would not know; I have never been the pastor of a mega-church. To a minister of a small congregation, however, strokes of this nature are hard to resist. After a week of folding bulletins and moving sound equipment, it can feel good to know that there are more people listening than the few who walk through the church doors. I think

Jerome may be correct in his suggestion that the perils of technology are inversely proportionate to church size. The danger of preaching to one's internet audience is greater for the pastor whose church is small.

It was not until my between-service interaction with an unhappy elder, however, that I realized something was going wrong. As Jerome said in his interview, "It's the job of the elders to conserve the fruit of the preaching and to tell me about it." Though my elder probably could have found a better time and place to talk with me, he was only doing his job. He discerned (as I also did) that my sermon that morning needed some help. Overseeing the preaching of the word, including my own preaching, is something our congregation has called him to do. When I noticed that my immediate response to his comments was to dismiss them by thinking about my online audience, I realized that my fascination with hits and downloads was having an undesirable effect on me. A well-intentioned leader of our church was offering to help me, as he ought, to minister more effectively to the people I have been called to teach. To use online listeners as an excuse to ignore his advice would, it seemed to me, be seriously wrong.

Literature on the church's use of internet technology indicates that more and more congregations are making audio recordings of their pastor's sermons available online. Such technology is said to have "placed a powerful tool for ministry at the church's doorstep."[257] The low cost and ease of use of this technology make it very appealing, even to smaller churches. [258] In his interview, Robert expressed this simplicity well, "Click button. And now we're podcasting."

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[257] Jewell, *Wired for Ministry,* 48.
[258] Bailey and Storch, 155.

This is, of course, not the first time the Christian movement has employed technological advances to take its message to the world.[259] The invention of stained glass, of the printing press, of amplified sound, of radio broadcasts, of television, and of the cassette tape player have all presented the church with new ways to disseminate the Christian message and have, in one way or another, been used effectively by Christian communicators. Similarly, there are certainly many ways that people will benefit from sermon podcasting. It makes biblical instruction readily available to hearers all over the world.

However, as communication theorists such as Robert S. Fortner have observed, Christians often hold very simplistic views of the way communication works. He contends that in many Christian circles, people view communication as "a linear process, [with] a clear beginning and ending point, [and with] an identifiable set of elements that relate to one another in a definable and predictable way."[260] The problem with this view is that it treats information as a simple commodity that, by being communicated, is merely transported untouched from its point of origin to its point of reception.[261] This view not only falls short of the commonly shared insights of communication theorists, it also fails to do justice to the complex and rich way that communication is portrayed in the Bible.[262] For the most part, the pastors interviewed for this study were not concerned that their awareness of people who would hear their sermons over the internet might affect the way they preached. One wonders whether Fortner would attribute this lack of

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[259] Reina Schement and Stephenson, 272.
[260] Fortner, 44.
[261] Ibid., 78.
[262] Ibid., 64-65.

concern to the generally oversimplified view of the communication process that he has

observed in the church.

According to theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Schultze, the

church also tends to embrace new technologies with far too little serious reflection.

McLuhan wrote:

> The ordinary evolutionary and developmental attitude towards innovation [in Christian circles] assumes that there is a technological imperative. "If it *can* be done, it *has* to be done"; so that the emergence of any new means *must* be introduced, for the creation of no matter what new ends, regardless of the consequences.[263]

Similarly, Schultze observed that Christians, eager to employ any new medium that is

developed, have historically "equated technological progress with progress itself."[264]

These words seem to describe the experiences of many of the pastors interviewed

in this study. Few of them could explain when or why their churches began podcasting

their sermons, and several of them talked about the matter as if it were something entirely

out of their control. If their experience is common, we might conclude that sermon

podcasting is being entrusted into the hands of congregational technicians rather than

being overseen by the ordained shepherds of the church. I was struck by the fact that even

Jerome, an influential Christian leader, seemed to have little say over whether or not his

church would charge for his sermon downloads, a practice to which he objected.

None of this is to say that churches should stop posting audio recordings of their

pastor's sermons online. However, there does seem to be a need for the Christian

movement to begin reflecting thoughtfully about how (and if) it will make use of

technological developments as they arise. The internet is radically changing life in our

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[263] McLuhan, "Liturgy and the Microphone," 114.
[264] Quentin J. Schultze, "Evangelicals' Uneasy Alliance With the Media," 69.

world.[265] It would do little good for the church to ignore this reality and bury its

ecclesiastical head in the sand. However, the day when the church can readily adopt any

change that comes along (as if that day ever existed) is certainly here no more. The

"technological imperative" [266] identified by McLuhan needs to be rejected and replaced

with serious reflection about how technology should be used by the church.

Recently a leader of our congregation breathlessly unveiled for me his exciting

new goal for our church – live, online streaming of our weekly worship services. With

just a simple set-up (one inexpensive video camera and an internet connection) people all

over the world would be able to join us at our worship services without ever moving from

their laptops. Though there may be valid reasons for a church to do something like this,

the research from this study prompted me to ask a simple question that seemed (at least

for now) to put an immediate end to the discussion. The question: "Why?"

All of the pastors interviewed in this research seemed to have a deep and sincere

love for the local church. They all also shared a high view of preaching and a conviction

that an essential part of the pastoral calling is to communicate the truths of scripture to

the specific needs and concerns of the men, women, boys and girls of one's congregation.

After listening to these preachers, it is hard for me to imagine that there are many pastors

out there whose desire is to neglect the spiritual needs of their people and to use

preaching as nothing more than a platform from which to build an online following. The

preachers I interviewed seemed to treasure the opportunity to minister to the members of

their own local churches. I think they would all have agreed with author Charles Bugg

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[265] Estes, 18.

[266] McLuhan, "Liturgy and the Microphone," 114.

"that sermons need to connect to where people are"[267] and with Haddon Robinson that "we do not address everyone; we speak to a particular people and call them by name."[268]

However, they all also revealed that the practice of posting their sermons online has brought them attention from listeners outside their own church. Admittedly, their fascination with this fact seems to be less intense than mine, yet they all agreed that the existence of their online audience has had at least some effect on them as ministers and as people. It seems that they share a common conviction that pastors with online listeners must devote themselves to ministering to the people who shake their hands at the door of the church, not to the people who click on their church's webpage. It seems to me that all of these pastors would agree with author J. Peter Vosteen, who wrote, "We must always ask ourselves whether we are interested in our personal advancement in the ministry or the people of God?... The power of the pulpit is not in oratory or eloquence. It is in the man who walks with God and uses God's gifts to communicate the love of God in Jesus Christ to his congregation."[269]   Several of the pastors interviewed revealed that the broadening of their audience (by virtue of having their sermons available as podcasts) has probably improved the quality of the preaching they provide for their local church. In this way, the fact that their sermons are available online might help to protect them from the kind of over-contextualization against which some writers on preaching warn. For example, Graeme Goldsworthy writes:

> Relevance is relative. It is relative to how we perceive a situation. Often it is based on as simple a thing as enjoyment. A sermon was deemed relevant because the preacher stimulated and entertained us. Maybe it seemed relevant because it confirmed our already formed ideas or prejudices. The preacher needs to beware.

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[267] Bugg, 45.

[268] Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 74.

[269] Vosteen. 416.

> A lot of congratulations and noise about relevance and how the Lord blessed us through the sermon or talk can be very seductive.[270]

When Andrew reported how knowing that his sermons will be heard online pushes him to study more thoroughly, and when Robert acknowledged that it protects him from the temptation to plagiarize, and when Jerome admitted that it helps keep him from speaking dismissively about people from other regions of the world, they are all demonstrating ways that sermon podcasting seems to have improved their preaching. Were they exclusively concerned with delivering messages designed for the ears of their local church members, their ministry to their church members, paradoxically, might have been less effective. However, since they know recordings of their sermons will by posted online, they present their congregations with messages that are appropriate for a broader audience. This awareness may help them to maintain the balance seen in the apostolic preaching of the Bible, a balance between preaching that is contextually specific and yet, at the same time, universally true. If the preaching of the apostles is to be our pattern, then we would have to conclude that this is the kind of preaching local congregations need to hear. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote that "the pew is never to dictate to, or control, the pulpit."[271] Broadening one's audience to include online listeners may help preachers to guard against this happening to them.

I have also seen ways in which having my sermons posted online has helped me to preach more effectively. Our church meets for worship on Sundays in a rented Jewish synagogue. A recent sermon text included a reference to "those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."[272] Though most of the members of my

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[270] Goldsworthy, 61.
[271] Lloyd-Jones, 143.
[272] Revelation 2:9, *English Standard Verson.*

congregation probably needed to hear little more about this verse than that it pointed to the persecution being endured by the Christians in ancient Smyrna, the thought crossed my mind, while preparing the sermon, that members of the synagogue that rents to us might hear this sermon online. It is no secret to me that a significant faction of the synagogue congregation does not appreciate the fact that they rent their building to a Christian church. A verse like this one might easily add to their anger over the rental agreement. Awareness of this possibility prompted me to spend a little bit more time on this verse while preaching to my congregation, explaining that a verse like this should never be used as an excuse for anti-Semitism.

Was this an example of sermon podcasting forcing a pastor to overlook the needs of a local church? Few of our people actually needed to hear me say this. I would have to admit that the fact that our sermons are available online certainly did alter the content of my sermon that day. However, it could easily be argued that this made my sermon better – better not just for a hypothetical online listener, but better for the people of my church. We live in a city with a sizable Jewish population. Most of us either live near or work alongside Jewish people every day. In fact, a number of those who attend our worship services are Jewish believers in Christ. It is good for us to see that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not the narrow belief system of an exclusively Gentile church, but rather is good news for people of Hebrew descent, as well. Were my sermons not available online, I might have easily overlooked an opportunity, presented by this text, for our congregation to celebrate this truth together. It was helpful for the members of our church to hear their pastor tell them that the New Testament is not an anti-Semitic text.

As observed in chapter four of this paper, the fact that most of the preachers interviewed were not overly concerned that their online sermon recordings were influencing them to neglect their congregations may have been due to the steps they were taking to understand the people of their churches and the people of the communities around them. Though none of these pastors employed the kinds of congregational focus groups advocated by writers such as Peter Adam,[273] they had all found other effective ways to keep in touch with people's lives. This is not to say that formal disciplines such as these would be ineffective, but rather that, even without them, pastors can find a number of opportunities to learn ways that their sermons can address specific concerns and needs. It seems that pastors who truly care for the flock throughout the week find it much easier to feed them on Sunday mornings.

The practice of posting audio recordings of pastors' sermons online, if approached thoughtfully, might assist those pastors to shepherd well the flocks under their care. To the extent that it does this, this practice can be a helpful ministry tool. However, there are valid reasons to be concerned that this practice might distract pastors, specifically in their preaching, from effectively addressing the lives of their congregants. To the extent that this distraction occurs, pastors either need to develop practices that enable them to resist it, or sermon podcasts are a tool they would be better off avoiding.

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[273] Adam, 133.

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