

# What Should We Do with the Sermon?

Joseph M. Webb

Everywhere the new materials of Christian worship and liturgy tell us about what Len Wilson and Jason Moore describe as “the rise of digital culture.” It is no longer the media age; it is now the digital media age. It has been seeping into our culture steadily since the 1980s, and now it has found its way into the church. “The digital deconstruction has been happening for years now, and only the most unplugged churches are unaware of the upheaval,” as Wilson and Moore put it.<sup>1</sup>

Despite all of the foresight of media-savvy Christians who tried to get the church/media interaction underway, their words fell on deaf ears. Until the past decade or so, when a new generation appeared. Weaned on saturation media, they appear poised to either leave the church behind, or bring their media world along with them into the places of worship and Christian service. God is still there, as William Fore said, “always ahead of us.”

The dangers of the digital media age for the church are clear. In their ground-breaking study, Wilson and Moore write that “many church leaders do not yet have an idea of how digital media are capable of empowering churches to transform lives with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, “the comfortable response is usually

for churches to retreat to established forms of Gospel communication from an earlier era, where problems in interpretation have mostly been worked out.” That is not where the most severe danger lies, however. The worst danger is in not getting a clear fix on the limitations of digital media within the new church settings. This, of course, will take both time and experience. It will also take

clearheaded, realistic thinking about how the new digital media actually impact fundamental dimensions of Christian worship, learning, experience, and collective participation.

As Wilson and Moore, along with a number of other young Christian writers on media, point out, it is necessary for the church to make the jump from old worship forms to the new

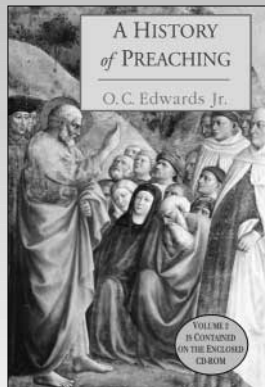
ones demanded by the coming of digital media. A realistic view of this jump, however, demands that we think carefully about what the new digital media can actually provide for Christian worship, and what—again, realistically—it cannot provide.

When new church leaders like Wilson and Moore say they do not want to “retreat to established forms of Gospel communication” they mean that they want to move cleanly away from the church’s traditional liturgical forms, particularly from those old

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traditional sermons, that old kind of preaching, the preaching that has, with exceptions, been dull, generally lifeless, unchallenging, and often difficult to listen to. Granted, a lot of older people grew up with worship and preaching styles that they just got used to and never left behind. But even when the now aging baby boomers reached adulthood in the 1960s, the church's worship, and particularly its preaching, was becoming increasingly difficult to bear. During the 1970s and 1980s came the decline in church membership and attendance across almost all mainline denominations.

At a certain point, however, a resurgence began. New worship forms, characterized largely by the new music styles and the informalities of both dress and hierarchy, began to appear. The influence of so-called charismatic churches, with their high emotionalism, caught on around the fringes of numerous established denominations. New fast-growing, media-tuned churches began to appear. The old liturgical forms were being disposed of. One of those old forms was the sermon.

But what about the sermon? Even now the developers of today's contemporary worship are not at all sure what to do with it any more than most traditional preachers are sure what to do with contemporary worship. The young (and young at heart) contemporary worship developers know that preaching is as old as the church itself. They also know that the church would not have even come into existence without preaching. Yet they also know, or believe, that few things over the past half century have more undermined the church's life, vitality, and appeal than the lifeless preaching that has flowed from countless pulpits, both Protestant and Catholic.

At the very heart of the contemporary worship is not just the introduction of new music or the imposition of new informalities—at its very core is a profound and unmistakable critique of the sermon. Yes, preaching is important, most young

contemporary church leaders would say, and there are, without question, some great preachers out there. But if traditional preaching is all there is, then new leaders say that preaching can have no long-term, viable place in the contemporary worship service.

What is called for in the contemporary worship setting is not just better preaching. It is a different kind of preaching than has generally existed before; or that has existed in the worship outposts of mainline denominations; and one can, without question, find manifestations of it through various evangelical and even fundamentalist churches. Now, though, it is a kind of preaching that must not only be understood but embraced for a new time and place—and a new generation; and mainline seminaries, charged with teaching future preachers to preach, have to learn to teach it.

The preacher for contemporary worship must learn to speak experientially, inspirationally, creatively, and passionately—in a dynamic style that is both participatory and interactive. Those are the new, explicit base criteria. But this description is more than just a style of public address. This approach to preaching, or speaking, will profoundly involve both what is said by the preacher as well as how he or she prepares for speaking. All of it is a part of the same new fabric.

We still, though, have not answered the most basic question. What is there about preaching, or public speech in worship, that requires it to stay at or near the center of contemporary worship? What is there about this human contact of one person speaking before a crowd of persons that even the recent emergence of new visual media cannot, in the end, surpass?

There are three distinct ways of answering that question.

The **first** is that an animated, informed, passionate speaker, one who speaks with empathy, caring, and insight, creates one of the most potent forms of human experience imaginable.

The **second** way to answer the question about the importance of effective preaching in contemporary worship arises from what every great teacher knows firsthand. It is that human speech, coming from a savvy, informed, and deeply caring teacher—i.e., speaker—is the most potent form of formation and persuasion there is.

The **third** important thing about the need for public speaking, or good preaching, in contemporary worship has to do with the fact that the very act of empowerment or commissioning can only be done by a passionate human person and voice. The church, whatever its form, is to function as a servant in the world. Worship is important. It is the offering of oneself to God. It is one's expression of praise to God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Life Giver. In all of these things, though, worship has never been historically conceived as only an end in itself. It is always also the preparation for sending Christ's servants out as light and salt into the world.

What the church at large is facing— with great difficulty—is the demand for a

new kind of preacher, one well trained in the dynamic processes of public speaking, and yet with a sense of theology and practical application of the gospel. Seminaries of all denominations are playing catch up—at least those are that recognize and are willing to confront the revolution in liturgy and worship now upon us all. How is the sermon to be presented in this new environment? What is the sermon to say, and how is it to be prepared? The old ways, we are now coming to know, no longer work. Most contemporary church leaders know, too, that the powerful music and the visuals are not enough, over the long haul, to keep and feed people, young or old. In fact, today's young leaders have become aware of the revolving door effect: after having been drawn into church by the powerful music and experiential atmosphere, in time it becomes old and people drift away. This effect is the equivalent of the gospel seed falling on rocky ground and having no way to sink the roots for a plant to actually grow. Ironically, it is probably only the spoken word, the preached gospel, that can pro-

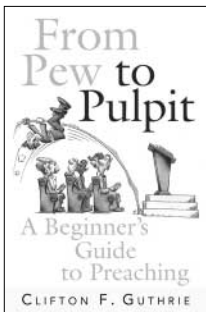
vide that soil out of which long-lasting commitments to Christ's church can actually spring up.

So let the new preachers, the new speakers of the gospel message, arise. Let them learn their lessons well—not just lessons about speaking, but lessons about theology and pedagogy and in-depth Christian commitment. Let them with their new preaching raise the level of power and praise to one not achieved yet by the music and the media settings of the contemporary gospel. God will be praised through it all! □

1. Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 14.
2. Wilson and Moore, 15.
3. *Ibid.*, 14.

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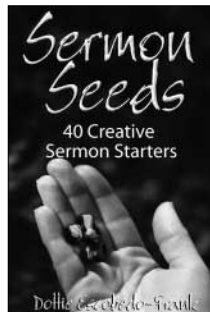


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