The Word Digitalized:
A Techno-Theological Reflection on Online Preaching and Its Types

Sunggu A. Yang, Assistant Professor or Christian Ministries
School of Theology, George Fox University

Abstract: *Upon the unexpected arrival of COVID-19, preachers have been forced to preach online. Among many problems and challenges in performing online preaching, a grave one has been the lack of theological consideration given to these new practices: to date, not a single publication can be found in the market that is dedicated to online preaching. Given the paucity of theological reflection related to this emerging genre, this article develops a theology of online preaching—epitomized as the Word digitalized—that encompasses yet goes beyond the homiletical scope of the conventional Barthian threefold perception of the Word (i.e., incarnated, written, and proclaimed). In the theology of online preaching developed here, eight representative types of online preaching currently practiced by preachers are examined, each demonstrating the Word digitalized in creative and effective ways.*

I. Introduction

In the time of the COVID-19 crisis, online preaching has become a new norm for the pulpit worldwide.[1] This new norm requires a novel theological conception of preaching and eventually a fresh homiletic-strategical consideration of online sermon delivery. In other words, we need a theology of online preaching even as we develop new ways of practicing preaching. The rationale is simple. Online preaching is different from conventional preaching, especially as practiced by mainline Christians. As we shall see in detail below, online preaching has its own techno-theological reasoning and unique ways of social communication. Without a critical comprehension of these, the practice of online preaching would find itself standing on shaky theoretical ground with no concrete performative strategy. Truth be told, this actually happened. When the pandemic began to hit the U.S. in early 2020, most churches, not to mention preachers, were not really ready for the novelty of online preaching. Even worse, there was not enough time to develop theological questioning and necessary homiletical resources. All that the preacher could do was "just do it" online, which has generated many stories of unfortunate results. To be sure, some preachers have experienced hidden potentials in online preaching and presented stories of their innovations. But for many, a concrete theology of online preaching, as well as applicable homiletic strategies, are greatly needed.

The purpose of this essay is twofold: to provide a theology of online preaching and an introduction of various types or homiletic strategies of online preaching already being practiced by early innovators. I will begin with Karl Barth's threefold definition of God's Word in order to show one conventional theological understanding of preaching and then proceed to explore a

---

[1] For this essay, I define online preaching as a digital livestream form of preaching that is performed with no face-to-face congregation in front of the preacher even when the preacher delivers her message either in the church or somewhere else such as her own home office. Thus, online preaching is mainly for online listeners (or online watchers). As a side note, a big difference between televangelism and online preaching is that the former is typically performed by "celebrity" preachers with the presence of their congregations in physical church buildings; they broadcast their sermons with extensive technological support. Nowadays, any local preacher can practice online preaching with minimal technological settings that nevertheless provide relatively high-quality livestreaming.

fourth emerging digital dimension of God's Word and its theological and homiletical implications. Barth is a personal yet strategic choice for a homiletical dialogue, thanks to the author's Reformed background and Barth's homiletical significance in that particular tradition. Yet, I hope that preachers and homileticians from other traditions may recognize common ground in his homiletical theology and thus applicability of it to their practices of preaching. For the purposes of this paper, when I use the descriptive word "conventional" (as in "conventional preaching"), it is intended to connote Reformed-conventional. Another notable limitation of this article, due to its primary concern with the practice of online preaching, is the lack of extensive consideration of online liturgical contexts, though the latter is inseparable from the former and implied throughout. Focused consideration of online liturgy would be an important follow-up project to this essay.

II. Karl Barth's Threefold Definition of God's Word

Barth's threefold definition of God's Word provides one of the most compelling affirmations of the importance and practice of preaching that the preacher can carry in the Reformed liturgical context and beyond. For Barth, a prominent theological figure from the pre-online print culture,[2] the Word of God exists and presents itself in the following threefold form: the written Word of God (scripture), the revealed Word of God (Christ), and the proclaimed Word of God (preaching).[3] He explains that scripture itself is not the Word of God until it is preached in the church's proclamation, and that we can know the revealed Word only from scripture adopted by the church's preaching. Finally, preaching is only possible when it is rooted in the written Word and the revealed Word.[4] Accordingly, the three forms of God's Word never exist apart from each other, and without the other two one form loses its fullest authenticity as God's Word. For Barth, this concrete unity of scripture, Christ, and proclamation is analogous to

---

[2] In a sense, Barth is a beneficiary of his own era's technoculture—namely print culture, along with the emerging radio, TV, and film industries of his time, as Walter Ong would argue (see below). This statement seems quite right when we consider the church's heavy reliance on print—one of the most advanced technologies of the Reformation era with its dual purposes of knowledge dissemination and spiritual formation. Barth obviously took great advantage of print technology for similar purposes in generating multiple publications, including the little book, *Homiletics*. This implies at least three things. Pre-online print culture should not be considered an era of no technological advancement (that is, we should not have a condescending posture toward print culture; truth be told, we still heavily rely on print for social discourse). Second, Christian knowledge dissemination and formation is still bound to a great extent to print culture in the current era of digital revolution, although print's historical significance is gradually diminishing. This article by no means implies that print culture has no relevance in today's world, but only that the digital revolution is swiftly taking over the role of print culture and therefore necessitates novel ways of knowledge production and personal formation. Third, Barth's homiletical argument based on print culture (i.e., the written Bible) presents its own limitations as the Bible itself has a strong oral/aural basis. Yet, Barth upheld the Bible as the most reliable source for God's revelation due in part to the unavailability of the oral tradition which preceded and contributed to it. Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 75–80. Walter Ong, a major literary critique and cultural historian of the twentieth century, recognizes "writing" as "a technology." With the dawn of writing technology, he contends, "hearing-dominance" has yielded to "sight-dominance." From this perspective, it would not be wrong to state that online digital preaching further promotes, if not maximizes, sight-dominance as people now *watch* (and listen to) preaching through the digital screen, rather than being mere listeners of the sermon in the conventional homiletic-communicational model. More will be discussed later regarding this matter. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 80–81, 115–120.

[3] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Volume I, Part 1*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 110.

[4] Ibid., 120–21.

the doctrine of the Trinity. In his own words, the Trinity is "only one analogy to this doctrine of the [threefold] Word of God."[5]

What this threefold formula of God's Word generates in terms of theological and homiletical significance of each form of the Word is as follows. First, the written Word of God obtains the status of reliability and immutability or eternity. The written Word is reliable as it is the trustworthy source of the revealed Word and the preached Word flows from it. The written Word is immutable or eternal in the sense that no more written Word will be provided (that is, the canon is "set") and the canon will stay as it is for good, although other invaluable written words of faith will continue to emerge. Second, the revealed Word, as it represents the historical reality of the Word, generates two of the Word's core characteristics, namely proximity and presence. Christ is always close to this world and ever-present in the proclaimed Word. Third and finally, the preached Word, as it rises from the eternal Word and the historically revealed Word, is given an unmistakable authority due to its presumed transformational power (i.e., transformation of humankind; both individually and communally) and an assurance as the reliable Word of God. To summarize, Barth's idea of the threefold form of God's Word engenders these theological and homiletical traits of each Word:

- The Word of God written: immutability, reliability
- The Word of God incarnated: proximity (reality), presence
- The Word of God preached: transformativity, assurance

Many homileticians of past and recent years, across different cultural contexts and embracing different theological foci, build their homiletic discourses and practices upon these traits of the Word (though not necessarily relying on Barth).[6] The Word is deemed reliable and eternal, always realistic and present in human history, and assuredly transformational. For them, therefore, preaching this six-trait Word is self-sufficient and enough for "success" for effective preaching in most—if not all—contexts. Anything more than these does not seem to be needed among those who, especially among Reformed traditions (including the Presbyterian homiletician and preacher Thomas G. Long), adopt some form of this "perfect" Trinitarian formula of the Word and its six eminent traits.[7] When the pandemic suddenly hit, it shook the

---

[5] Ibid.

[6] Homileticians may not give equal emphasis to all six traits. Instead, it is likely to have a more nuanced focus on one or two of the six, depending on the specific homiletical topics or contexts considered, while still having all six in mind. For instance, Lucy A. Rose focuses on dialogical proximity and presence of the incarnated Word in her roundtable homiletic proposal, Justo L. González and Pablo A. Jiménez on postcolonial transformativity and assurance of the preached Word, and Luke A. Powery on the written Word's reliability in terms of its pneumatological nature of lament and celebration. See Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Justo L. González and Pablo A. Jiménez, *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005); Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

[7] Long acknowledges biblical preaching as "the normative form of Christian preaching." For him, the Bible is the precious and most authoritative conveyor of God's revelation recorded and cherished by the faith community throughout history. The written Bible, Long continues, is eminently Christ-centered (meaning that we are encountered by Christ in it), assuring of Christian faith, spirit-transformative, reliable for life's guidance, and counter-imaginative vis-à-vis "the consumerist, militaristic, death-obsessed imagination of the culture." For Long, preaching must therefore arise from this unique and canonical christological document. It seems that, in other words, Long believes in and affirms confidently the six traits of conventional Barthian preaching as the core nature of

theological ground of our homiletic theology and practices. A new fourth dimension of the Word has arisen and it has great significance, namely; *the Word digitalized*. A seismic change and challenge has followed with its rise, including the swift emergence of online preaching.

III. The Fourth Techno-Dimension of the Word: The Threefold Word *Digitalized*

It is presumptuous to state that the crisis of the 2020 pandemic spawned the fourth dimension of the Word—the Word digitalized as online preaching. Years before the pandemic, the Word has been digitalized and many around the nation practiced online preaching. Yet, what the pandemic has contributed to is the digitalized Word's vital and superior role in the ministry of the church as a whole, and particularly in the practice of preaching. For instance, online preaching is no longer a secondary option for worship but has become a primary method of sharing sermons with others.

A little more clarification on the definition of the Word digitalized may help here. Like the threefold nature of God's Word in Barth's formula, the Word digitalized is also threefold in its nature. In a nutshell, the Word digitalized includes the written Word, the revealed Word, and the preached Word; *all three digitalized*. Each Word deserves more detailed description.

A. The Written Word *Digitalized*

The written Word *digitalized* means, first and foremost, the paper *Bible digitalized* and available for free online.[8] This simple fact has had numerous digital and interpretive ramifications in recent history. To begin, the free online Bible has resulted in the common person's ability to readily compare different translations of the Bible. Further, with some basic or even no knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Greek, people can now delve into the ancient meanings of biblical passages thanks to the availability of interlinear Bibles. Also, with various free online commentaries associated with online Bibles, people's interpretive skills and imagination can be enhanced without formal theological education. In addition, free resources of ancient non-canonical writings (e.g., the Gospel of Mary) broadens, if not challenges, one's view of the biblical horizon. Finally, for Smartphone users, the Bible can be near at hand at all times as a theological and spiritual resource when raising and answering questions. All these phenomena significantly challenge the two core traits of the written Word as previously discussed: immutability and reliability. It is not that mutability of the Bible arises as if one may now alter—e.g., add or delete—the given content of the Bible. Nor does it mean that the Bible is no longer reliable as a canonical authority. It means that the interpretive and hermeneutical horizon of the written Word is wide open: de facto, "beyond horizon." Any novel meaning of the written Word can be mined and applied to one's life, for good or ill. Again, the written Word itself may not be mutated at all; however, one's pursuit of its meanings is now boundless. Thus, the former traits of immutability and reliability give way to other traits of *fluidity* and *usability*. It is true that immutability and reliability still stay, yet fluidity (of biblical interpretation or meanings) and usability (of the biblical content) take priority over the former two and are much more important in most people's minds.

---

biblical preaching. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 59, 60–62.

[8] For more articulation of the term digital or digitalized, see C. The Preached Word *Digitalized* section, below.

B. The Revealed Word *Digitalized*

The revealed Word *digitalized* denotes *Christ's image digitalized*, and more importantly, we can now encounter and enjoy a wide variety of digital images of Christ coming from different situations and cultures. A fine example is found in the painting of South African artist Maxwell Lawton, titled "Man of Sorrows."[9] In the painting, Jesus appears not as a typical mighty or pastoral Caucasian, blue-eye figure, but as an AIDS patient who is in severe agony. The painting's message was not the suffering of AIDS itself, but Christ's empathetic "healing touch" over AIDS patients, as depicted by Lawton. Another example comes from Chinese Christian artist He Qi.[10] Qi effectively wipes away the western image and tone in his biblical paintings around the life of Jesus. Instead, Jesus and his followers appear as Asians with Asian apparel and other cultural expressions. The paintings bring the life of Jesus home to the very core of Asian psychology by representing Jesus no longer as a foreign stranger (who happens to be the savior "for" Asians from the west) but as an Asian ancestor who walked among Asians and whose whole life is given to Asians and others. Similarly, Korean Jesus portraits painted by Ki-Chang Kim generate a similar intercultural impact.[11]

One more unmistakable example is the digitally recreated face of Jesus published in 2002 in the magazine of *Popular Mechanics*.[12] A British team of forensic anthropologists in collaboration with Israeli archaeologists "re-created what they believe is the most accurate image of the most famous face in human history."[13] What they present to the world as "the most accurate image" of Jesus is the dark and swarthy Middle Eastern man represented as a darker-skinned Semite. As Alison Galloway, a professor of anthropology at the University of California in Santa Cruz, puts it, this digital image of Jesus is "probably a lot closer to the truth than the work of many great [Western] masters."[14]

What all these digitalized images of Jesus imply is the weight of intercultural omnipresence or cross-cultural ubiquity of the revealed Word in the world. This newly recovered trait of the Word adds powerful specification to the two conventional traits of proximity and presence of the revealed Word. The digitalized Word is not simply proximal to the world in an abstract sense or in a mono-cultural sense (e.g., the predominant white western image of Jesus), but enables each different culture to see and adopt Jesus as its own in a very meaningful way. Thus, it is now better to state that Jesus is *in and of* each wonderful culture than that (the mono-cultural) Jesus is present in different cultures.

Besides the newly added trait of cross-cultural ubiquity, the revealed Word *digitalized* is embedded with connectivity. This connectivity is possible thanks to 1) the images themselves connected by hyperlinks and 2) people's responses and reactions to the images now connected

---

[9] The image is available in one of his interviewed articles found in Joriel Foltz, "VCU Without Borders," *Shafer Court Connections*, spring 2006, 9 (also the image is available on his own website, http://www.maxwelllawton.com/images/Lawton%20VCU%20Article_v1.pdf, accessed October 10, 2020).

[10] Many of his Asian images of Christ, along with portraits of other biblical stories, are available at https://www.heqiart.com/ (accessed October 10, 2020).

[11] Several images are available on a Korean newspaper webpage, http://m.daejonilbo.com/mnews.asp?pk_no=1090321. For more scholarly discussions of the Asianness of Jesus, see Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Asian Faces of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 2013), esp., chapter 5, "Jesus Christ in Popular Piety in the Philippines," by Salvador T. Martinez.

[12] Mike Fillon, "The Real Face of Jesus," *Popular Mechanics*, April 10 2020 (republished), https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a234/1282186/ (accessed October 10, 2020).

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

online. For instance, when a reader of this article clicks digital links found in footnote 9 through 12, she is instantly directed or connected to the original sources of Jesus's images. If those sources have their own embedded links, the reader can move on to another set of sources. The pattern may continue nearly indefinitely. Through all of these links, people's responses and interactions with one another, readers may encounter both amateur or professional comments.

In short, with the dawn of the revealed Word digitalized, the traits of proximity and presence absorb, if not give way to, whole new meanings of *ubiquity* and *connectivity* of the Word. These new traits generate easier and more familiar accessibility to the Word and many more—almost endless—possibilities for expressing the Word in fresh ways.

C. The Preached Word *Digitalized*

More than anything else, the preached word *digitalized* indicates preaching that is performed for or through online spaces. Unlike the written and revealed Word digitalized, however, the preached Word digitalized is in most cases accompanied and accomplished by the human body and voice, just like conventional in-church preaching. Yet the distinctive feature remains the same in that the preached Word digitalized (i.e., online preaching) is accomplished through *digital spaces*. In other words, between the online preacher and the online listener there is a digital medium through which communication is possible. This factor truly distinguishes the preached Word *digitalized* from conventional ways of preaching.

Two critical interlocking questions arise from this: "Does this medium or space help or hinder the listener's hearing?" and "If it is helping (or hindering), how can we use this medium most effectively?" Given that most churches in the U.S. today are using online spaces as their only or primary communicative tool, it is desirable and fruitful to discuss its effectiveness and how to use online preaching wisely. To do so, it is important to further understand what digital space represents.

Principally and plainly, digital space is what is displayed on the screen of a digital device (e.g., laptops, desktops, TV screens, tablets, Smartphones). Initially—that is, before the online revolution— this space existed mainly for the purpose of unilateral information transfer. For instance, a person could send a digitalized message or information through a hard disk memory device to another person who would receive and play it on the digital screen. Then the receiver may send back his or her information to the one who initiated contact in a similar way. Obviously, there was always significant delay in communication between the two parties. Into the late 20th century, online digital space revolutionized this "delayed" transaction. Information now flows instantly between two parties back and forth (e.g., Facebook Messenger). Further, information can now flow between more than two parties, even thousands or tens of thousands of parties, in less than a second. Thus, a true bilateral and even multilateral communication via digitalized screens has been achieved.

As we live through the 21st century, digital space is not only used for information transfer but also for social transaction or *social interaction.* In addition to various types of Social Network Services (SNS) like Instagram or Twitter, digital space provides nearly unlimited forms of social interaction. Two good examples are college education and worship services through Zoom. On Zoom, students enjoy live discussions with their peers, and many churches livestream their services. Again, what is remarkable about this digital social transaction is its ability for *multilateral spontaneous communication*; numerous people from many different places and time

zones can participate in communication at the same time.[15] In addition, online communication and interaction is instantly shareable with anyone around the world. In today's digital online industry, most successful companies design their products and contents in ways that allow them to be easily shared and distributed around the nation or the world with only one click or touch. *Spontaneity*, *accessibility*, and *shareability* greatly matter in the digital space.

Last but not least, one of the most critical dimensions of digital space is its highly artistic-holistic nature in communication. The digital space is artistic or aesthetically malleable as it takes advantage of a limitless number of calligraphic fonts, colorful images, object or human movements, various geometrical or mathematical figures, cartoon drawings, filmed natural scenes, photos, videos, music, lines, graphs, emoticons, etc.[16] This space is also holistic as it utilizes at least three of the five human senses: seeing, hearing, and touching (including screen touch and typing). Even the digital space can be said to employ the other two senses of tasting and smelling as the clear and real-life images on the screen provide the brain with indirect experiences of the two remaining senses. In fact, when online bread and cup communion is practiced today, the two senses partake in the digital spiritual interaction.[17] In these ways, the availability of real-time video speaking in the digital space may be said to promote the space's holistic artistry.

When the preached Word is delivered in online space, the Word digitalized is exposing itself to these new digital online traits: multilateral instant communication, holistic artistry, and shareability. In effect, these three new traits enable the preached Word's traditional traits of transformativity and assurance to be possible in the digital space. In other words, when these new traits are absent or when they are not conscientiously developed, online preaching has a slim chance of wielding its spiritual magic of transformativity and assurance. People simply would not get it if the Word preached in digital spaces did not adopt the new space's core traits. Frankly, the sudden onset of the pandemic did not allow enough time for preachers to adopt these new required traits of the digitalized Word, which in many cases has led to the ineffectiveness of the online pulpit.

D. Toward Effective Online Preaching

Six previous traits of the threefold Word are still strongly evident in the (online) pulpit because the preached Word still rises from the study of the written Word in the Spirit of the revealed Word. Yet, the new seven traits of the threefold Word *now digitalized* have emerged and taken on greater significance over the former six, or at least have added new meanings to them. Among other reasons, the difficulties of online preaching mainly stem from the

---

[15] On social media, as Stine Lomborg and Charles Ess point out, the user (the listener in the case of online preaching) "is now increasingly the producer or author of much of the content posted in these venues." Stine Lomborg and Charles Ess, "Keeping the Line Open and Warm": An Activist Danish Church and Its Presence on Facebook," in Pauline Hope Cheong, *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 169. As will be discussed later with reference to the Zoom/Chat Style of preaching, online listeners can now actively contribute to the final content of the sermon as the authentic "producer" or "author" of the sermon.

[16] See Robert S. Fortner, *Communication, Media, and Identity: A Christian of Communication* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), esp. chapter 6, "Communication as Art." Fortner provides a comprehensive articulation of how and why (digital) communication is art or artistic (having aesthetic dimensions).

[17] For online communion, people typically prepare their own elements at home and consume them when the pastor or priest blesses all of the elements at different places, including in his or her church where the online worship and preaching occurs during livestreaming.

unfortunate clash between the previous six and new seventh trait or from a lack of integrating a new configuration of all seven.

The Threefold Word	Reformed/Conventional Preaching Traits	Online Preaching Traits
The Word, Written	Immutability, reliability	Fluidity, usability
The Word, Revealed	Proximity (Reality), presence	Cross-cultural ubiquity, connectivity
The Word, Preached	Transformativity, assurance	Instant communication, holistic artistry, shareability

The most challenging conflict is between immutability/reliability and fluidity/usability. The conventional authority of preaching rooted in immutability and reliability of the Word no longer remains its highest consideration. Rather, wide-open fluidity and pragmatist usability of the Word are crucial for people's engagement with preaching and thus preaching's communicative effectiveness. In other words, fluidity and usability have become hugely important contributing factors for preaching's authority and reliability.

The second most notable clash occurs between assurance and instant communication alongside shareability. In online spaces, the preached Word digitalized is itself a form of digital information, and this information travels very quickly, in less than a second. The margin to measure the assurance of the preached Word becomes very narrow. However, there is no reason to utterly despair. People's sharing activity of the preached Word itself (i.e., the global spreading of the good news preached from a local preacher) helps obtain a digital form of assurance. Simply put, the fact that people can and do share the preached Word widely, instantly, and voluntarily is a positive sign that the Word's assurance is being retained.

The above two examples of apparent clashes between the conventional six traits and the emerging seven traits of the Word are not nearly as consequential as their potential for compatibility and collaboration. The previous six are in great need of self-transformation while the emerging seven heavily rely on the six for mutual enhancement. In this sense, effective online preaching would be wise to combine the "old" six traits with the new seven traits in a new configuration of homiletical theory and practice. Certainly, this is tough work for any preacher today: it requires a lot of critical reasoning and strategizing, as well as better digital infrastructures in local churches. Yet it is undeniable that this tough work is demanded of the church as well as society at this point in time. Preachers are called to walk along this challenging digital road. We must respond to needs and requests from the "digital pews" (that is, any and everywhere people now worship online) as pastorally as possible.

The following section outlines eight types of online preaching that strive to adopt and creatively adapt the six and seven traits into their practice of preaching today. The first five are more popular and widely practiced than the last three. Yet, the last three types have also recently garnered wide attention and are gradually being employed by more and more preachers; for this reason, it is important to know more about them, also. These eight are not chosen because they are deemed to generate the most effective forms of homiletical communication but they appear to be the most widely available and reliable options at this point for the preached Word digitalized.

IV. Eight Types of Online Preaching

As the shock of the pandemic set in, some preachers have been wise and swift enough to develop creative communicative strategies for online preaching. It is not clear whether these online preachers were well aware of the seven traits of online preaching as discussed above. However, what is obvious is that the eight types of online preaching described below illustrate different combinations of the six and seven traits of the threefold Word digitalized. This section briefly discusses each of the eight, exploring how each adopts and adapts the seven traits of the Word digitalized in its practice.

A. The Lecture Style[18]

Figure 1

- **General Description**: This is the most familiar, if not most popular, style. Preaching is livestreamed from the pulpit of the brick-and-mortar church so that this style of online preaching is not really distinguishable from conventional preaching. However, a notable difference is the absence of a physical congregation in the church. Typically, all the pews are entirely empty. People are invisible, present only in the digital space. They can see the preacher but the preacher cannot see them, which in most cases makes the preacher uncomfortable. The preacher should look into the camera's lens all the time since there are no people in the pews. Even the lecture-style preacher who uses a platform and moves around while preaching (rather than standing frozen in place, attached to a fixed pulpit), should look into the camera (or better yet, multiple cameras set at different angles). Almost everything is the same as conventional preaching except that the preacher now speaks to the camera.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits**: While all eight types of online preaching can adapt the seven traits in unique ways, each style will show certain traits to their advantage more than others. For example, the lecture style of online preaching can maximize the effect of the trait of ubiquity; in particular, christological-spatial ubiquity. This christological ubiquity happens when the online preacher speaks from the conventional church's pulpit or platform which carries with it a sense of sacredness, encouraging association with Christ's presence in the digital space. Metaphorically interpreted, the preacher's church-space is connected (the trait of connectivity) with that of the listener, which "transforms" the latter into a sacred one as well. It is observable that holistic artistry of the Word might be lacking to some extent in this style since the camera angle is mostly fixed on the lecture style preacher, yet its strong trait of ubiquity conveys the possibility of inviting the symbolic feel of the church's artistic nature (e.g., the aesthetic pulpit area design) into the listener's digital screen space.

---

[18] For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8s70HIvl0U&feature=youtu.be (accessed October 10, 2020). All rights are reserved by Sunggu Yang for all minimalist illustration figures throughout the article.

B. The Conversation Style[19]

Figure 2

- **General Description**: The preacher typically sits behind the table, looking at the camera on the same plane/level. The background and the surrounding environment feel comfortable and friendly, perhaps including a plant or vase of flowers in view. Most importantly, the preacher's presence appears highly pastoral, and her vocal tone and style of speaking is very conversational. With the preacher on the same visual plane/level as the camera, listeners feel like they are sitting across the table from the preacher. As the preacher knows that she is now "conversing" with individuals behind the camera lens, the preacher often offers rhetorical questions to aid the listeners' perceived or imagined participation in the sermonic event. Rather than using a manuscript, preaching with short notes often works better in this style as the preacher is expected to keep constant eye contact with the camera (that is, the listeners).

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits**: Fluidity and usability are the two hallmark traits of the Word digitalized in this style. As the preacher creates a conversation with the listeners akin to the Roundtable Pulpit model proposed by John S. McClure,[20] the preached or conversed Word will welcome many different interpretations of scripture. That is, the preacher's interpretation and application of scripture in this style is generally wide open as she invites the listeners' own fluid explorations and applications of it in their unique *sitz im leben*. In this way, the listeners become virtual contributors to the preaching event.

C. The Reporter Style[21]

Figure 3

- **General Description**: The preacher stands without the pulpit and the conventional altar in the background, and does not have a full manuscript.[22] The virtual background can be made of real-life still-cuts, moving images, or church images. All of this contributes to the creation of highly situational preaching. The key homiletical strategy is the production of the sacred event that seems to be happening *here and now* in the world, which the preacher "reports" from her vantage point. As a result, preaching in this style sounds like fact-based, "live" reporting. Usually, other liturgical elements will accompany preaching (e.g., prayers, candle lighting) before, during, or after the sermon as well as real-life pictures or news photos, recorded music, interviews, and other performances such as sacred dancing. Sophisticated technological support is needed to ensure high definition, visual quality, and smooth transitions between various liturgical elements.

---

[19] For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psICh2IP2-E&feature=youtu.be (accessed October 10, 2020).

[20] John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

[21] For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo44NzWjp0A&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

[22] Some preachers use the teleprompter invisible to the sermons listeners.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits**: Holistic artistry is visible to a great extent in this style. Above all, the preacher uses hand gestures, facial expressions, and intonation to effect a holistic performance. In addition, the artistic background, other aesthetic artifacts, and the careful use of technological elements (e.g., digital sound effects) all promote the beauty and liveliness of the preached Word digitalized. The high visibility of the preaching event can enhance cross-cultural ubiquity of the Word by adoption of images, music, dancing, and other elements from different cultures and contexts.

D. **The Interview Style**[23]

Figure 4

- **General Description**: This is probably the friendliest style of online preaching (along with the Zoom/Chat style explored below). In most cases, the preacher finds herself in an environment that is absent of any religious symbols or references. The preacher may sit in the living room of her own house or in the flowery backyard of the church grounds. More often than not, a very calm atmosphere is favored as an "interview" is being held. This style creates the feeling of participation in an interview between the preacher and viewers. The conversation proceeds in a dialogical manner with the preacher providing answers to presumed questions from sermon listeners, much like a pastoral mentor in their midst. To promote this effect, the sermon often utilizes actual questions and answers with moments of expressed humility when the preacher may say, "I don't actually have an answer for that," or "I may need more time to think about what you've said so that I can provide better answers for you." Last but not least, in order to create a real interview feel, two or three cameras focus on the preacher from different angles throughout the sermon (similar to CNN's former *Larry King Live* interview show).

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits**: The pastoral and interview feel of preaching comes with the traits of usability and connectivity of the Word digitalized. Scripture becomes a fine hermeneutical catalyst for the deeper homiletical interview process (thus good usability of scripture is demonstrated), and listeners as invisible yet influential interviewers may experience a close connection with the pastoral dialogue partner. Holistic artistry may also be experienced in this style by matching the surrounding environment with the key theme of the sermon or scripture. The preacher's body posture and clothing may also match the sermon's theme and similarly reflect the holistic artistry of this style.

---

[23] Here is an online preaching example for this style, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3464&v=OBGNTys_Qsk&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

E. The Drama Style[24]

Figure 5

- **General Description**: Many preachers in children's or youth ministry practice this style for the Word's physio-holistic encounter with listeners (i.e., utilizing more than verbal communication). In this style, preachers may perform a scriptural drama with necessary props in front of the digital camera that broadcasts the scene to its target audience. Because the audience's attention span is relatively short, the performance should be highly riveting to retain attention. However, the drama sermon does not have to be overexaggerated because preaching is not a place for cinematic spectacles (which are reserved for movie theaters). The impactful content of the gospel is still most important for the given audience. As the paraphrased words of Paul reminds us, "For the kingdom of God depends not on [spectacles] but on power" (1 Cor 4:20). It should also be noted that the drama style is not exclusively for younger generations. A well-planned scriptural drama with sophisticated props or a pre-filmed dramatic sermon will serve adults as well as younger audiences. As people of all ages are now living through an image-driven era,[25] these dramatic styles of preaching may well appeal to a range of listeners, especially through their creation of aesthetic online spaces.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits**: The trait of holistic artistry prevails in the drama style. The whole personality of the preacher embodies the scriptural story, which is further magnified by various arts that accompany it. The trait of fluidity also works well in this style as the performed drama interprets the scriptural story from a fresh hermeneutical perspective (e.g., in the way of reader-response interpretation).[26] Cross-cultural ubiquity also shows itself to great potential as many different artistic images of biblical figures and symbols of Christ from various cultures may be easily adopted in this style.

F. The Zoom/Chat Style[27]

Figure 6

- **General Description**: This is a highly informal style of online preaching—at least in delivery, if not also in content. The preacher may even live Zoom-stream the message from her own study or a quiet corner of a shopping mall. The key is making the preaching environment as friendly and approachable as possible for listeners. Compared to the Lecture style (as a polar opposite), this style presents the preacher as a Christian on equal footing with the listener as they share their religious

---

[24] For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shBTDPnGPec&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

[25] See Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[26] Gerry Brenner argues for the performed text as a source of a fresh interpretation from the reader's vintage point of view. See his work, *Performative Criticism: Experiments in Reader Response* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

[27] For example, see https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sN57LIyaLaC8MqR-mrQRdeMfPdil0W8M/view?usp=sharing (accessed October 10, 2020).

authority. The preacher "chats" with listeners as a good friend and hopes to address the concerns of daily life with great sympathy. This style is gaining popularity among preachers thanks to its easy, low-tech usability for both the preacher and listeners. A great strength of this style is its ability to allow the preacher and listeners to have instant bilateral communication either via the chat room or direct dialogue (see below for further explanation). Some churches now practice communion in this style as well because its technology allows people to simultaneously see each person's consumption of the elements.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits**: As already noted, the two traits of instant communication and shareability are prominent in this style. With regard to instant communication before, during, and after sermon delivery, listeners or viewers[28] can initiate questions or comments about the sermon. For instance, during the sermon, a viewer may post a question in the chat room about a theological concept introduced by the preacher to elicit further conversation. Then the preacher, noticing the instant question feed, may choose to immediately engage the question. The reverse may also happen. During the sermon, the preacher may ask a question of viewers and they may immediately post their answers in the chat room or answer the question through live talking. Whereas we may have thought that "preaching is fulfilled in the hearing of the listener," this style of preaching in the present digital age suggests that "preaching is fulfilled in the midst of the sermonic dialogue." Another great communicative advantage of the Zoom/Chat style is its hyper-shareability with other social media outlets like YouTube and Facebook. The live sermon occurring on Zoom can be also simultaneously broadcasted on YouTube and Facebook. This helps the sermon to be shared virtually worldwide only by a simple click on a hyperlink. As a result, a very high level of connectivity of the revealed Word is achievable. Especially during times of virtual communion, people can be connected with each other in the same body of Christ in one virtual place, wherever they may reside physically, be it Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, etc.
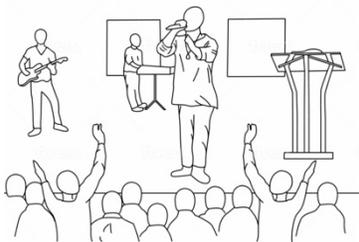
G. The Rock Concert Style[29]

Figure 7

- **General Description**: The preacher of this style often roams around the worship "stage." He may begin the sermon from the podium with the Bible, then as the sermon develops to its climax, may engage the listeners more assertively by physically approaching them or by an embodied performance of the preached Word. At times, especially when using dramatic shouts or high pitches, the praise band will accompany the sermon for a synergetic effect, generating the feel of a live rock concert. Listeners or "worship-goers" (like concert-goers) participate in the sermonic concert by shouting back, humming, laughing out loud, or clapping. They actively respond to the preaching event, even to the point of "completing" the

---

[28] With regard to online preaching, the traditional designation of "listener" does not seem to reflect the online communicative reality. Rather, the concept of "viewer" may better serve as listeners now hear and watch *through the screen*, like film watching, not only the preacher but also other holistic artistic elements.

[29] For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMpzvw4yhB8&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

sermon by their contributions. Indeed, without their contributions, the preacher's performance and delivery would fail in its effectiveness.

In figure 7, active worship participants are still portrayed (as in time prior to the pandemic) even though in actual online preaching they are not present.[30] This portrayal is intentional because the preacher of this style still strives to create a concert-like feel for online preaching while having only a minimal, yet fully operative, worship staff. A smaller music band will accompany the preacher while a minimum number of church staff—safely distanced—will play the role of worship-goers.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits**: As in the Drama style, the two traits of fluidity and holistic artistry thrive in this style. The (musically) performed Word by the preacher opens the way for creative interpretations of the Word; that is, the same Word can be performed differently as an interpretive act both by the preacher and worship participants at different times (as noted above, in this style worshipers also participate in the sermon event by their own "actions"). Strictly speaking, no two performances acted out at different times are ever the same. That being the case, the performed Word often opens the positive floodgate for unbounded or fluid hermeneutical possibilities of the Word proclaimed. After all, the performed Word is holistic-artistic. Since no piece of art invites just one fixed interpretation of itself, it invites ongoing interpretation.

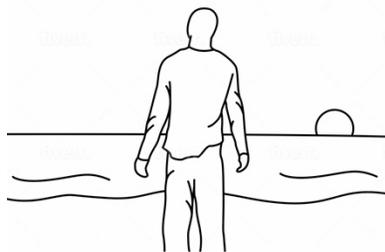## H. The Film Style (The Vidpod Style)[31]

Figure 8

- **General Description**: This Film style,[32] a most cutting-edge sermonic production of the digital media age, is rapidly emerging as an avant-garde alternative to conventional preaching. It is unconventional in several ways: preaching does not happen in a church building (filmed shots of the sermon can happen anywhere around the world); the preacher does not actually appear in the sermonic film, but sermon viewers only listen to her voice; music—including various songs or a variety of instrumental music—often accompanies the sermon from beginning to end; several preachers can preach a sermon together by their coordinated narrations or each preacher can take turns on different Sundays; finally, the preacher does not have to live near the church or her congregation but can be located anywhere just like the viewers. Thus, the man standing in figure 8 is not actually the preacher. He is an actor in this sermonic film whose performance relates to the scripture

---

[30] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lW916Mcl1Ow&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

[31] In his recent Facebook feed, John S. McClure at Vanderbilt Divinity School calls this style the Vidpod sermon, a neologism created by combining video and iPod. The communicative technique is almost the same with the Film style. The Vidpod sermon overlays the preacher's sermonic narration with a variety of relevant images and video clips. Like the Film style, the preacher does not necessary show up in the sermonic Vidpod, except for the preacher's voice. A notable difference between the Film style and the Vidpod style is that the Film style tends to create a short sermonic film that has a coherent narrative structure, while the Vidpod style adopts disparate images and clips that can align with the sermon points. His sermon is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UHgVi86S7c&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1vS1d710MUyqjrWvw1soLSpmw8UqwBtlM1lNwSDQWhPj4HIe8QQ0UG53s (accessed October 21, 2020).

[32] For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_09CDqhMCJI&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

reading and the sermonic content. In fact, the sermonic film moves from scene to scene and changes its actors in accordance with the sub-thematic movements of the sermon. Music will also constantly change to match these movements. By the end, we have the impression that the preacher appears to be *filming a scriptural message*, which nearly elevates the film's visual authority to that of scripture itself (although scripture still holds the higher status of revelation for most preachers of this style).

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits**: Shareability is a key to the sermonic communication of this style. The listeners or viewers have neither a church building nor a designated online space where they gather together. They can be at any place, physically or virtually (e.g., on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Tweeter, Tumblr, etc.), where the pre-recorded digital sermon is playable on any digital device. Easy access to the sermon content and simple shareability of it on any online video platform is a prerequisite for this style's effective communication.

    Ironically, without the preacher's bodily presence during the sermon, this style achieves (indeed, requires) a high level of holistic artistry. Music, acting, images, symbols, and various filming skills (e.g., close-up, time-lapse) all contribute to the artistry of the sermon. The trait of artistry has good potential to promote the cross-cultural ubiquity of the sermon. Thanks to the image-driven nature of the sermon, various images of the human race, culture, Jesus, and creation around the world can be easily incorporated into the sermon. Over a shorter or longer period of time, cross-cultural ubiquity may also be achieved by a series of sermons adopting various images of the written or incarnated Word. The possibilities for cross-cultural ubiquity are nearly unlimited.

In sum, all the seven traits of the Word *digitalized* can be naturally or intentionally embedded in all eight types of online preaching described above. Also, there is homiletical overlap among the eight in terms of the utilization of the seven traits; that is, different types share several traits. It should also be noted that each type is best developed when maximizing a select set of traits. Finally, this categorization of the eight styles can help preachers be aware of various strategies that are available for adaptation when faced with many different online contexts and audiences.

It is recommended that online preachers continue to study social and online communicative dynamics. Digital platforms of communication and message content change constantly and faster than we may even notice. This means that there is a good chance that other types of online preaching beyond the above eight may emerge sooner rather than later. Preachers may want to seize, rather than chase after, the pace and move ahead in creating their own operative online preaching theory and practice.

By the time this article is published (mid-summer of 2021), COVID-19 may have been addressed in ways that allow worshipers to return to their church pews and preachers to their pulpits. However, given the likelihood that new viruses and hybrid versions of COVID may still threaten us, it is entirely possible that preachers will need to continue to develop their online

ministries of preaching the Word digitalized for a long time to come.[33] To be sure, it is unlikely that many congregations will meet exclusively "in person" and very likely that they will be utilizing online platforms for worship and preaching in the foreseeable future. In either case, this article is intended to help preachers to consider the options for the Word digitalized, including the opportunities and challenges that different styles invite. At the very least, we should continue to develop homiletical tools that are communicatively effective and theologically sound for the digital, online era. Even in times of non-pandemic crisis, we can further diversify our modes and styles of preaching to fit situations that favor an online approach (e.g., providing a message of hope for those who are isolated or may find a worship community online while living in remote places or experiencing natural catastrophes). Whatever our circumstances may be, learning and further developing a theology of online preaching and its types (along with accompanying digital skills) is of great importance for preachers today—both for seasoned and emerging ones. We hope to see more educational, theological, and critical resources related to online preaching in the near future.

---

[33] In 2018, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) already predicted that different kinds of pandemic could happen again in the future. The coronavirus of 2020 is only one of them. See the CDC's article, "The 1918 Flu Pandemic: Why It Matters 100 Years Later," on its website, https://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2018/05/1918-flu/ (accessed on October 10, 2020). Also, see CNN's "Discover 'Disease X': In the Congo Rainforest, the Doctor Who Discovered Ebola Warns of Deadly Viruses Yet to Come," https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/22/africa/drc-forest-new-virus-intl/index.html (accessed on December 22, 2020).