From Pulpit to iPod: Disconnecting Preaching from Worship

STEPHEN J. H. TU

Presbyterian Theological Seminary
Vancouver, Canada
tubytu@gmail.com

Abstract

The benefits of making sermons widely accessible by disseminating them over the internet are easily articulated. However, the consequences of separating the sermon from the context of gathered worship in the Sunday service have not been adequately explored. Drawing on the work of media ecologist Marshall McLuhan, this paper considers the consequences of disconnecting preaching from worship and concludes that the long-term effects of cyberpreaching pose a serious problem to the local church.

From Pulpit to iPod

For my most recent birthday my wife got us third row tickets to see the Canadian men's hockey team take on Team USA in the preliminary round of the Vancouver Olympic games. Despite the fact Canada, our home and native land, wound up losing—though "we" would go on to win the gold medal rematch—Laura and I had a terrific time. Seeing the size, speed, and athleticism of these world-class athletes up close was a treat.

Now, we could have just as (if not more) easily gone to a friend's home and watched the game on television. We could have recorded the game, taken a nap, and watched it back later. Why did we go to all the trouble and expense of seeing Canada-USA in person? The answer is intuitive. There is something about being there, live, in the arena, that cannot be replicated or transmitted via electronic means. There is something about being on hand to witness the actual, physical, flesh-and-blood bodily presence of these athletes competing that is lost when the spectator is at home.

This simple truth explains why music lovers are willing to pay tens, if not hundreds of dollars more than the price of an audio recording to see their favorite bands perform live. Watching a recording of a concert on YouTube or listening to one on your iPod is not the same thing. There is something about the band actually being there, and you, being amidst the throng, that simply does not transfer digitally. This explains why we are willing to spend more money to attend a play than we are to see a movie. Our physical proximity to the actors in the theatre matters; that we are willing to pay so much more for that experience is evidence of this truth. The special effects at a Broadway play pale in comparison to those of a Hollywood blockbuster film, but this is of little consequence if we get to sit and watch the actors, themselves, up on stage. We do not need 3-D glasses if the leading man is standing so close to us that we can feel his spittle upon our cheeks.

Given the choice, we almost always prefer to be there live, in attendance, when it comes to sporting, musical, and dramatic performances. If, however and for whatever reason, we cannot be there, a recording serves fine enough as a substitute. It is no replacement, to be sure, but better that than nothing. Most everyone would readily agree.

Can the same be said about preaching? Is anything lost when we transmit our preaching electronically, either via an audio recording or a video telecast? More importantly, is anything intrinsic or essential to preaching lost when the listener is not there at the actual, original, preaching event? Is it merely preferable to be there in person or is there a sense in which a person needs to be at the preaching event for it to really be preaching? Daniel Boorstin calls products of mass media (like the internet) "pseudo-events" (Boorstin 1961). If cyberpreaching (that is, preaching that is transmitted via cyberspace technologies) is a pseudo-event, is it also pseudo-preaching? In other words, is it still preaching in any meaningful way? These are important questions.

Many North American churches today record their sermons and make them readily available for download via the internet. Some, with greater technological resources, even videotape the sermon so you can both listen and watch from the privacy of your own home, and at your own leisure. Several "multi-site" churches have one lead preaching pastor who speaks live at one location while his message is either simultaneously broadcast via satellite to the other campus sites or else recorded to be televised with tape delay at these other venues in following weeks. Should the church embrace these means of disseminating the proclamation of the Word?

On the one hand there are those who believe nothing is lost when preaching is communicated through electronic means and that the church should readily make use of these cyber technologies to reach the lost. "Our message must never change," says Rick Warren, "but the way we deliver that message must be constantly updated to reach each new generation" (Hipps 2005, 29). Dave Ronne, a pastor in Lawrenceville, GA, argues, "We're all geared to watch screens now. Everybody has a plasma TV or a flat screen at home. We're just leaning into where the culture is now." Ed Young agrees. "I don't think you lose a thing. I would argue you could see me better when you're at a venue made for screens." One of Young's parishioners, in fact, *prefers* watching his pastor preach via satellite: "I feel closer to the sermon than I would if I ever attended in person. The screen is so big; it's almost lifelike. I would rather see Ed … on the big screen than somewhere live" (Blake 2010).

Is this the perspective that those of us concerned about the church's worship and mission ought to adopt? Are technologies merely neutral tools that we are tasked with redeeming and using for the sake of the proclamation of the good news?

> In the late 1990s, Christian televangelist Bill Keller sat down with a bunch of internet porn publishers. He wasn't there to convert them; he just wanted to learn how to post videos on the internet. "Pornographers were pretty much the people who spearheaded broadcasting on the internet," says Keller. "They were the only guys doing it, so we basically duplicated what they were doing, in terms of applications" (Downey 2008, 16).

Not all would agree that this is a positive co-opting of digital technologies.

The Medium is the Message

Enter Marshall McLuhan, "the high priest of popcult and metaphysician of media" (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995, 233). McLuhan's work in media ecology, largely unknown or ignored by the contemporary church, warns us of the dangers of unreflective technological appropriation. One of his central insights is that when we use any particular technology the mere use of it alters the way we live, interact, and understand the world. His famous aphorism, "the medium is the message," (McLuhan 1964, 13) suggests that the way a particular medium used is far less important than the impact the use of that medium has on an individual and society.

There is no clearer place that he articulates his theoretical ideas than in a 1977 interview with Pierre Babin. Drawing on insights from Gestalt psychology he says:

> In Gestalt, reality presents itself to the mind as a *figure* detaching itself from a *ground*. We notice the *figure* first and most often it dominates our whole field of consciousness. However, the ground is at least as important and often is even more important. … The real message is what we call the secondary or side-effect of the medium, not its obvious effects. Side-effects are always hidden, like the ground. We are not aware of them. That is also the essence of Gestalt psychology: the *figure*, the gestalt, is visible while the *ground* remains invisible. Human perception encourages us to pay attention to the *figure* (a painting) and to ignore the *ground* (its frame, the wall, etc.). … The real message is all the secondary effects produced by the services and disservices that the medium demands. And these are the social and psychic changes that the medium causes in the lives of its users. … If you want to change the effects of radio and eventually protect yourself from them, you shouldn't overly focus on the content, the radio program. The effects have already produced themselves regardless of radio's content (McLuhan 1999, 100, 102).

So, "Forget the ostensible content, say, of a television program," says author and McLuhan biographer, Douglas Coupland. "All that matters is that you're watching the TV itself, at the expense of some other technology. … Those mediums we *do* choose to spend our time with continually modify the way we emphasize our senses … on a scale so large and spanning so many centuries that it took at least a decade after Marshall's death for him to be proven right, with the triumph of the internet" (Coupland 1999, 19).

What McLuhan suggests for us is that what matters is not that so many more people are hearing the Word via cyberspace, but that they are being shaped by the medium through which they are hearing the Word. That—the digital medium, the ground as opposed to the figure—is the real message. That is the gospel that is being proclaimed.

McLuhan was only saying what the church has always said (though, seems to have forgotten). In his book on worship, Bryan Chapell makes this clear:

> We may think that "the medium is the message" is a modern insight, but the ancient church practiced such communication principles long before Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase. Church leaders understood that if the message was inconsistent with the means by which it was communicated, then the message could easily get lost. Thus, they painted the message of the gospel with every communication brush their structures would provide: building architecture, decoration, pulpit design, furniture placement, the position of worship leaders, and even the placement of participants in the worship service (Chapell 2009, 17).

Were McLuhan, a devout Catholic, alive today he would ask, "If the medium is the message what happens when the medium by which a sermon is communicated is a discarnate, disembodied voice streamed over the internet or downloaded onto a portable music player? What effects—especially long-term—might we expect from the increasing adoption and proliferation of cyber technologies to preaching and worship? What happens, in short, when we disconnect preaching from the context of worship? What are the effects on our local churches? On individual Christians?"

Regrettably, the church has not addressed these questions with any significant attention. But if "man cannot trust himself when using his own artefacts" (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 95) we must question whether we have been wise in making sermons available for download and streaming our preaching

through cyberspace. In his own day, McLuhan was surprised and saddened that so few pastors and theologians considered the impact of their technological appropriation.

He was continually amazed at the reluctance, often the downright refusal, of people to pay attention to the effects of media, and at their hostility to him for what he revealed. They included those, clergy and lay, who enthusiastically embrace the latest technologies without regard for their effects. Such people are blindly eager to make the Mass or the sacraments, or the congregation the content of each new gadget or technology that comes along—in the interest of "bringing the Church up to date" and "making the Church relevant." They are quite innocent of the power of these forms to transform their users—innocent but not guiltless. They share the Protestant attitude, "if God gave them to us they must be good" (McLuhan 1999, xxiii).

McLuhan saw clearer than we do the great power and concomitant danger of the electronic media to shape us for ill. "When electricity allows for the simultaneity of all information for every human being, it is Lucifer's moment. He is the greatest electrical engineer" (McLuhan 1999, 209). In other words, those sermons we make available for download on our churches' websites and those videos of preachers proclaiming the gospel that we broadcast to our satellite campuses are not what they appear to be. There is something insidious in the very media.

How might McLuhan respond to our sermon MP3s and video recordings? What might he say to the ease with which we have made it for people to listen to our preaching without joining us in gathered worship? With rebuke, no doubt: "Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot" (McLuhan 1964, 18). The proliferation of cyber technologies in the day-to-day life of the church shows no signs of abating. What does this mean for the future of preaching? The future of the church? We dare not let these questions go unasked. "The electronic media represent a challenge to the preacher unlike any in the church's history. The challenge is one that needs to be faced by preachers and hearers alike. It is not only the preaching event that is being challenged, but the Christian mind and the Christian way of life which preaching is designed to cultivate." (Reynolds 2001, ix)

Laws of Media

McLuhan's work suggests, in the words of Sven Birkerts, that how "we receive information bears vitally on the ways we experience and interpret reality" (Birkerts 1994, 157). We need, then, to seek to discern the implicit message of the internet, our cyber medium. What are we really "plugging" into? What is its ethos?

Here are four observations:

1. Cyberspace exalts the individual.

It is no coincidence that the "i" is rampant in the digital age. From iPods to iPads to iTunes, the internet celebrates the iPerson. The individual has the power to choose what to read, watch, download, and consume in the privacy of her own home. Navigating from one web site to another is as simple as a click of a hyperlink. You choose. You are sovereign. If you are not satisfied with a particular "app" you have downloaded, another click of the mouse and it is gone.

2. Cyberspace privatizes.

The internet fosters a false sense of community. We do not have friends in cyberspace, we have Facebook friends. Ursula Franklin notes, "Viewing or listening to television, radio, or videos is *shared experience*

carried out in private" (Franklin 1999, 39). This truth is carried out to its extreme in cyberspace. You can publish a blog (or microblog), for instance, and be in contact with people the world over, inviting anyone with an internet connection into the most private details of your life (or at least, those details you choose to reveal and keep private). Despite the popularity of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, then, cyberspace does "tend to be anti-social" (Reynolds 2001, 268).

3. Cyberspace fosters shorter attention spans.

That is the thesis of Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows.* The internet has rewired our brains and we are unable to pay attention for any substantial amount of time. Our minds are constantly racing, unable to think deeply, content simply to wade in the shallows of the Web we have grown used to surfing. David Gordon observes astutely:

> Electronic media flash sounds and images at us at a remarkable rate of speed; and each image or sound leaves some impact on us, but greater than the impact of any individual image or sound is the entire *pace* of the life it creates. We become acclimated to distraction, to multitasking, to giving part of our attention to many things at once, while almost never devoting the entire attention of the entire soul to anything (Gordon 2009, 50).

We have always wanted what we want when we want it, but now we can actually get it. We possess the digital means to instantly gratify our desires. The world is at our fingertips and we can summon it as we please. Turn your computer on and you are instantly connected because the internet never sleeps. As J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett observe regarding the demise of catechetical instruction:

> During the past century mechanization and technology have increased the pace of Western life, leaving us all wanting to do things more quickly so as to get on with whatever we see as next business. The hurrying mindset has led to the fast-food revolution, in which we wolf snacks as we go along rather than treat meals as big deals in the way our grandparents did (Packer and Parrett 2010, 9–10).

We live in "an instant society" (Peterson 2000). Gordon concludes, "Our inability to read texts [like the Bible] is a direct result of the presence of electronic media … because such reading is time-consuming and requires the concentration of the entire person" (Gordon 2009, 50). We simply cannot pay attention.

4. Cyberspace is the domain of infotainment.

Information is literally a click away, but that does not automatically translate into knowledge. In fact, as one pastor I know has put it, "The internet is the friend of information and the enemy of thought." We surf, but we do not understand. Cyberspace is not a serious, but a trivial medium where the emphasis is on appearance and image rather than character and substance. It is simply impossible to convey matters of weightiness in a virtual world (cf. Postman 2005, 147–50). The internet is entertainment packaged as information.

To summarize, with Twitter-appropriate constraints (and with thirteen characters to spare): The message of cyberspace is, You are sovereign and the (digital) world exists to satisfy your desire for instant infotainment.

In order to understand the consequences of this digital medium for our cyberpreaching we turn to McLuhan's tetrad. These laws are "a heuristic device, a set of four questions . . . [that] can be asked (and the answers checked) by anyone, anywhere, at any time, about any human artefact. The tetrad was found

by asking, 'What general, verifiable (that is, testable) statements can be made about all media?'" (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 7). McLuhan discovered that there are four:

1. What does the technology enhance or intensify?
2. What does it render obsolete or displace?
3. What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?
4. What does it produce when pressed to the extreme?

His contention is that every medium, every technology, is an extension of man (see McLuhan 1964). For instance, the hammer extends our hands, the wheel extends our feet, and the telephone extends our voice. But, with every extension comes a corresponding amputation. So, while the phone may amplify our voice (we can be in two places as it were), it renders our times of privacy, solitude, and silence obsolete (see McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 153).

When we apply the tetrad to cyberpreaching it is simple enough to see that the internet *enhances preaching across distance*. Time and space are no longer constraints. Our influence can stretch beyond the lives of those who sit in our pews on Sunday mornings. Anyone, anywhere, can hear (or see) us preach, and at any time. From this light it is easy to understand the internet's appeal. It holds the promise of reaching so many more people than we might otherwise reach, including some who have no direct access to a faithful, Biblical expository preacher.

We can also see, with little effort, that the internet *retrieves the primacy of the Word*. In some emerging church circles preaching has been devalued and its primacy in the life of the congregation and its place in the Sunday worship service have been all but eliminated. When we put our sermons online, available for download, we say, "The Word is important and it is worth your time to listen to it."

What is not as clear upon immediate examination is what cyberpreaching renders obsolete and what it threatens to reverse into when taken to the extreme. This requires further reflection.

Discarnate Man and the Incarnate Church

First, let us observe with Phillips Brooks that:

> Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of those can it spare and still be preaching. The truest truth, the most authoritative statement of God's will, communicated in any other way than through the personality of brother man to men is not preached truth. Suppose it written on the sky, suppose it embodied in a book which has been so long held in reverence as the direct utterance of God that the vivid personality of the men who wrote its pages had well-nigh faded out of it; in neither of these cases is there any preaching. … [It] lacks personality …. And preaching is the bringing of truth through personality. … This was the method by which Christ chose that his gospel should be spread through the world. It was a method that might have been applied to the dissemination of any truth, but we can see why it was especially adapted to the truth of Christianity. For that truth is preeminently personal. However the gospel may be capable of statement in dogmatic form, its truest statement we know is not in dogma but in personal life. Christianity is Christ. … Truth through personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him (Brooks 1907 [1877], 5–6).

Brooks is saying what McLuhan is saying. The medium is the message. And if the message of our gospel preaching is Jesus Christ—God in human flesh; God incarnate, crucified, dead, buried, resurrected, and ascended—then there is something essential to the preacher's bodily presence in preaching. The Apostle Paul tells us as much in Romans 10:14: "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?"

The medium is the message and Christ is its archetype: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). In him, the medium and the message are truly one and the same. How do we communicate the message of the incarnate Christ? By preaching, the bringing of truth through an incarnate person.

When we attempt to proclaim the incarnate Christ as disembodied voices or images we disembody Christ and we proclaim a different gospel. The same sermon, preached to a congregation of people on Sunday morning is, in fact, *not* the same when someone listens to it on his iPod on Monday morning. When we disconnect preaching from worship we have the opposite of Incarnation. We have a discarnate God.

> Electric man [that is, the person who lives in this electric world] is a "super angel." When you are on the telephone you have no body. And, while your voice is there, you and the people you speak to are here, at the same time. Electric man has no bodily being. He is literally *dis-*carnate. But a discarnate world, like the one we now live in, is a tremendous menace to an incarnate Church, and it's theologians haven't even deemed it worthwhile to examine the fact. (McLuhan 1999, 50).

McLuhan continues:

> Isn't the real message of the Church in the secondary or side-effects of the Incarnation, that is to say, in Christ's penetration into all of human existence? Then the question is, where are you in relation to this reality? Most people prefer to avoid the question by side-stepping it. The message is there but they want no part of it. So they eliminate it by plugging into another channel. They hypnotize themselves with the *figure* so as to better ignore the *ground*. They prefer to study the words rather than the questions that Christ asks everywhere, and of every human being …. In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same (McLuhan 1999, 102–103).

When we disconnect preaching from the bodily presence of the preacher we communicate the inconsequence of the Incarnation; this is a gross distortion of the gospel and docetism is scarcely further than a mouse click away.

Consider, too, that our bodies have the capacity for conveying the gospel. In his various letters to the earliest Christian churches, the Apostle Paul refers to his physical body on several occasions as evidence of the message he has proclaimed (see, for instance, 1 Cor 4:9–13; 2 Cor 11:23–28; Gal 6:17).

Second, and closely related, when pastors disconnect preaching from worship they fail in an important way to call their people to imitate them. The Pauline letters are filled with places where the Apostle calls his readers to watch his life and follow him (1 Cor 4:15–17; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess 3:7–9; 2 Tim 3:10–11; cf. 1 Tim 4:12; Tit 2:7–8). Surely these instructions apply to those times he is preaching. Preaching, then, is rightly seen as a form of pastoral care (see Pelton 2008). Our people should see something of how we live through both our transparency and our teaching from the pulpit, and they

should hear us summoning them to follow us as we follow Christ. They should be submitting to the authority of their God-ordained leaders. Part of this involves sitting under the preaching of their own pastor. However, my anecdotal research suggests that many Christians are listening to popular preachers online and then bemoaning their own pastor's lack of exegetical precision or oratorical skill in comparison to the celebrity preacher. How do we exercise pastoral authority in these circumstances? What is the celebrity preacher's responsibility to those who are not a part of his flock? How does the celebrity cyberpreacher communicate to people that he is not God, even while he continues to build his celebrity through his cybersermons?

The problem of celebrity is a serious one and is well-expressed by contemporary songwriter, Ross King, in a song titled "Happy":

> Fourteen thousand members and me
> Watch the preacher up on the screen
> I have never shaken his hand
> My two-dimensional pastor man
> Welcome to America
>
> Doesn't matter if I am here
> In this crowd I could disappear
> Pastor man is all that we need
> Preaching via satellite feed
>
> I can watch it all from my pew
> Till the presentation is through
>
> You will have to pardon me
> This cannot be all there is
> I can't imagine God would be
> Happy about this
>
> …
>
> The church is now the body of Christ
> And every part is equally prized
> The eye can never say to the hand,
> "All we need is this preacher man"
>
> Would you notice if I was gone?
> How easy would it be to move on?

What is the long-term effect of the popularity of celebrity preachers? One shudders to imagine a future where the preaching pastor of the small and mid-sized church has become obsolete. As cyber technologies become more affordable, these churches will opt to save the money they might pay a preaching pastor and spend a fraction of it instead installing the necessary tools to televise satellite feeds of the celebrity megachurch pastor across the city or country. Just as video killed the radio star, cyberpreaching threatens to kill the local church pastor, or at least have him searching for a different vocation.

This leads to a third conclusion. When pressed to the extreme, cyberpreaching threatens to obsolesce the church. If you can hear the Word of God proclaimed, sing along with the most popular worship bands in the world, and even take communion (see Wynne-Jones 2010) all from the comfort of your own home, it is not long before the church, herself, at least as we know her, is gone. Disconnecting preaching from the context of worship communicates that the church is unimportant. When you can practice your faith in

private, the demands of a community on your life are meaningless or nonexistent. Our sense of responsibility to her, to the body of Christ, vanishes. McLuhan saw this coming. He "[foresaw] a long, painful process in which technology shifts would trigger massive identity collapses around the world, which would generate new and terrifying sources of disassociation between the reality of what was physically available to individuals and the unreality of a world depicted by electronic media" (Coupland 2009, 188).

Fourth, when people listen to or watch preaching via cyberspace, that is, when they are not physically present at congregational worship, they lose something of their ability to grasp the truth of the gospel. Hubert Dreyfus argues that "the actual shape and movement of our bodies play a central role in our making sense of our world, so that loss of embodiment would lead to *less of the ability to recognize relevance*" (Dreyfus 2001, 7). This is in keeping with our modern Western tendency to unbiblically dichotomize and separate the soul from the body. But we are a body-soul unity. Every person is "an embodied soul or (one could say) an ensouled body" from conception to death, just as Christ was (Packer and Parrett 2010, 12). Dreyfus challenges us to ask, "What would be gained and what, if anything, would be lost if we were to take leave of our situated bodies in exchange for ubiquitous telepresence in cyberspace?" (Dreyfus 2001, 51). Less of the person's senses are engaged when she is not physically present in corporate worship.

Fifth, when we upload our sermons to the Web we say through their very presence on the internet that the gospel is simply one more philosophy in the digital marketplace of largely frivolous ideas. The sermon becomes nothing more than a religious lecture, an academic exercise. It is no longer preaching. Ironically, then, when we disconnect preaching from worship we say that preaching, itself, is unimportant. While it is true that in the short-term cybersermons retrieve the primacy of the Word, in the long run preaching is obsolesced as it becomes just another podcast lecture. When the sermon can be paused and returned to at the listener's leisure, it is no longer an event-in-time. It is no longer preaching.

Sixth, if Phillips Brooks calls our attention to the necessity of a preacher for there to be preaching, Martyn Lloyd-Jones would have us see that preaching also requires hearers. There is no unction without a congregation. "The very presence of a body of people in itself is a part of the preaching. . . . It is not a mere gathering of people; Christ is present. This is the great mystery of the Church. There is something in the very atmosphere of Christian people meeting together to worship God and to listen to the preaching of the Gospel" (Lloyd-Jones 1971, 43). As Packer puts it:

> Because he [Lloyd-Jones] believed so strongly that the true heart of evangelistic and pastoral Christian communication was God's ordinance of preaching, and that the direct impact of the preacher, living each moment in the power of his message, was the true heart of preaching, he was at first unwilling to be taped; and when finally he gave in on this point he constantly insisted that listening to a speaker 'canned', if one may so speak, on tape was spiritually far less fruitful than being in the same space with a live expositor of God's Word (Packer 2007, ix).

Finally, disconnecting preaching from worship has a deleterious effect on preachers, themselves. We compare ourselves to those with different gifts and feel envious or discouraged. We begin to take shortcuts. We plagiarize. We turn to the Tim Kellers or John Pipers (or Rob Bells) of the virtual world before we turn to God and Scripture. Gordon asks, "What kind of ministers does such a culture [swamped by the inconsequential, bombarded by images and sounds that rob us of the opportunity for reflection and contemplation that are necessary to reacquaint ourselves with what is significant] produce?" His answer:

> Ministers who are not at home with what is significant; ministers whose attention span is less than that of a four-year-old in the 1940s, who race around like the rest of us, constantly

distracted by sounds and images of inconsequential trivialities, and out of touch with what is weighty. It is not surprising that their sermons, and the alleged worship that surrounds them, are often trifling, thoughtless, uninspiring, and mundane…. The great seriousness of the reality of being human, the dreadful seriousness of the coming judgment of God, the sheer insignificance of the present in light of eternity—realities that once were the subtext of virtually every sermon—have now disappeared, and have been replaced by one triviality after another" (Gordon 2009, 58–59).

This is the sobering virtual reality that we now inhabit.

Conclusion

More than twenty years ago Neil Postman articulated the inherent problem of television as a medium for conveying spiritual truth in his seminal book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Substitute "the internet" for "television" and we have an apt description of our present age:

> [O]n television, religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment. Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence. On these shows, the preacher is tops. God comes out as second banana …. [T]his fact has more to do with the bias of television than with the deficiencies of these electronic preachers, as they are called. It is true enough that some of these men are uneducated, provincial and even bigoted. They certainly do not compare favorably with well-known evangelicals of an earlier period, such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitfield and Charles Finney, who were men of great learning, theological subtlety and powerful expositional skills. Nonetheless, today's television preachers are probably not greatly different in their limitations from most earlier evangelicals or from many ministers today whose activities are confined to churches and synagogues. What makes these television preachers the enemy of religious experience is not so much *their* weaknesses but the weaknesses of the medium in which they work. Most Americans, including preachers, have difficulty accepting the truth, if they think about it at all, that not all forms of discourse can be converted from one medium to another. It is naive to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value. Much prose translates fairly well from one language to another, but we know that poetry does not; we may get a rough idea of the sense of a translated poem but usually everything else is lost, especially that which makes it an object of beauty. The translation makes it something it was not" (Postman 2005, 116–17).

Postman's assessment, accurate in my judgment, is enough to cause the most even-tempered person to despair as she evaluates the current state of affairs, almost three decades after we were warned against "amusing ourselves to death." What, if anything, is our hope? Penultimately, we must cultivate the metaphor of preacher-as-artist. For McLuhan, "The artist is the man in any field, scientific or humanistic, who grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time. He is the man of integral awareness" (McLuhan 1964, 65). This means we ought to develop a radically counter-cultural lifestyle. It means unplugging from cyberspace as much as we can and encouraging our people to do likewise. It means immersing ourselves with real people over real meals, sharing real struggles, and, as far as possible, using non-electronic technologies. To the extent that we need to be "plugged in," we should recognize that the media we use exert an invisible and powerfully transformative role in our lives.

Ultimately, however, we should be neither utopian nor dystopian in our attitude toward cyber technologies. Even as we seek to exercise wisdom and caution with respect to cyberpreaching of all kinds,

let us remember our true hope is that Christ will one day set everything right. All the distortions that digital media have created and will continue to create in our lives will be undone and we will be made whole. In the final assessment McLuhan was right in saying, "I have never been an optimist or a pessimist. I'm an apocalyptic only. Our only hope is apocalypse. … Apocalypse is not gloom. It is salvation. No Christian could ever be an optimist or a pessimist: that's a purely secular state of mind" (McLuhan 1999, 59). And so our prayer remains, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20). "Come, not via cyberspace, but come, come in all your resurrected beauty."

ENDNOTES

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