

IN-PERSON PREACHING AND “MEDIATED” PREACHING

Introduction

Who would have thought that the modern church would be experiencing the fulfillment of predictions such as the tablet computer, flat screen television, and hologram made in the futuristic family cartoon *The Jetsons* which premiered in 1962 and was set 100 years in the future? The thought of such technological advances just a mere sixty years ago were things of science fiction and fantasy. However, such advancements have now become common place, not only in society as a whole but also within the local church having changed the way church is experienced. This paper will explore the current movement toward adopting technology as the medium for formation from the pulpit and will examine the benefits, dangers, and limitations, while providing a defense for in-person preaching over mediated preaching as a pathway forward in light of long-term implications for the health of the local church.

The Benefits

The technological advancements in the areas of internet bandwidth and live video streaming have birthed an era of multi-site churches and simulcast preaching.¹ For the purpose of this paper, simulcast preaching will be considered synonymous with mediated preaching in order that it might be contrasted with in-person preaching. While multi-site churches are the current trend in evangelicalism, Mark Driscoll notes that, “perhaps the most controversial aspect of

¹ During simulcast preaching, the sermon, whether live or pre-recorded, is broadcasted to another church site. See Frye, “The Multi-Site Church Phenomenon in North America,” 159.

many multi-site churches is the use of video for the preaching.”² He contends that while not optimal nor preferred, there are some benefits in certain situations where simulcast preaching makes sense. A case can be made for simulcast preaching as it provides a sermon to a congregation where one might not otherwise be possible. Such congregations may be without a local pastor or are unable to assemble in one location where an in-person sermon can be provided. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both our inability to assemble and at the same time the benefit of receiving a sermon via simulcast. Another case can be made for simulcast preaching in that it enables God’s Word to be preached to a much wider audience. Bob Smietana gives the illustration of Billy Graham’s crusades which were recorded and later broadcasted saying, “God could still work, even if Graham wasn’t in the room.”³ In the case of multi-site churches, where each *campus* may not have its own local preaching pastor, simulcast preaching does provide a consistently preached sermon across all locations. While many younger Americans have no preference if the preaching is live or by video, Ken Langley, president of the Evangelical Homiletics Society, and pastor of Christ Community Church says that over thirty-five percent of people will only visit churches where an in-person sermon is preached. “I do think that there is something missing when the preacher is not present,” Langley said. “And it’s hard to define. Presence is important.”⁴

² Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 247.

³ Bob Smietana, “Research: Americans Prefer In-Person Preaching to Video,” LifeWay Research, Last modified December 17, 2013, accessed November 15, 2021, <http://www.lifewayresearch.com/2013/12/17/research-americans-prefer-in-person-preaching-to-video>.

⁴ Ibid.

The Dangers

If the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the benefit of simulcast preaching, it also revealed the limitations and dangers of adopting this technology as the medium for formation from the pulpit. While in-person church attendance has always experienced an ebb and flow, I believe in light of the pandemic and in large part because of the availability of simulcast preaching, a historic number of congregants are choosing not to return to the local church. Before simulcast preaching was a reality, the only option to hear a sermon involved in-person church attendance, whereas now there's no need to come into local church if the sermon is readily available online. Another danger to simulcast preaching is that it communicates to its listeners that the in-person preaching of God's Word is not a priority. In a multi-site church, the site which is receiving the simulcast, will often have live music and worship in part because they do not have a live preacher. Does this convey that in-person singing and worship is more significant than hearing God's preached Word? Is not the sermon a vital part of the church's worship? And isn't the worship incomplete if the preacher isn't there with the rest of the congregation? There is a real danger to the health of the local church when local preaching is absent.

In simulcast preaching, there is a risk that the preaching pastor is only known to the congregation by what they see on the screen. The danger here lies in the preaching pastor's absence from living life in bodily fellowship among his congregation as a brother. In other words, if the congregation does not have the opportunity to see their pastor living out his Christian walk alongside them, they can begin to form a "screen perfect" version of their pastor. Arguing for the necessity of an in-person preacher, Christopher Ash says, "the preacher cannot teach and preach authentically without loving people and that love involves the desire to share

not only the gospel but also his life (1 Thess. 1:8).”⁵ If all they see of their preacher is what is on the screen during Sunday morning service, they may benefit from the screen preacher’s words, but run the risk of losing their connection to their local pastor, not knowing if he loves and cares for them except in some shallow sense. And this is not what the local pastor wants nor is it what he is called for! “The [preaching pastor] ought to be a man accountable to a congregation,” says Ash, “sharing his life with the sheep he knows and loves and who know and love him—all in the context of joyful mutual accountability and encouragement.”⁶ Thirdly, one of the dangers in a congregation losing their connection to their pastor, is that it makes it easier to become an anonymous church member who only attends online, which only further breeds disunity from the community of attending believers.

Lastly, one of the greatest dangers that comes from simulcast preaching is that less preaching pastors are being raised up for the next generation. Every time a new multi-site church pops up that implements simulcast preaching, there is one less opportunity for the next generation of preaching pastors. Prior to the technological advancement of simulcast preaching, when a new body of believers formed a church, the acquisition of a local preaching pastor was a vital and necessary step, but no longer is that the case. Unfortunately for the next generation preaching pastor, a viable option now exists in not forming a new church requiring its own preaching pastor, but rather in joining an existing multi-site church and simply becoming yet another *campus* under the same identity, branding, and message. The dangerous side affect of the

⁵ Christopher Ash, “Why I Object to Screen Preaching,” *The Gospel Coalition*, Last modified April 16, 2013, accessed November 8, 2021, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-i-object-to-screenpreaching>.

⁶ Ibid. Christopher Ash contends that the norm ought to be the local preaching pastor, arguing against any distancing from the congregation and its pastor, especially in the area of preaching.

multi-site model is that it robs the local pastor from his opportunity to preach God's Word, and to love and minister to the local church he is called to.

The Limitations

Interestingly, all of the limitations surrounding simulcast preaching have nothing to do with technology, but rather with locality. Great sermons preach, but they don't pastor. I believe that most of the limitations of simulcast preaching stem from not having a local pastor. While pre-recorded video sermons can be tailored to an audience, there is no substitute for a sermon which is well tailored by a local pastor who is intimately involved with and understands the specific struggles of his congregation. One of the many responsibilities of a preacher is to pastor the flock, and you cannot pastor the flock if you aren't physically in the local church. Many multi-site churches attempt to overcome this limitation by having a site or campus pastor, but often this individual is not the preaching pastor seen on the simulcast. This issue of not having a local pastor extends to the exercising of oversight and discipline over a congregation of people with whom the simulcast preacher has never personally met. This limitation logistically makes church discipline of remote congregants more difficult or nearly impossible. And even if some manner of church discipline is issued, the remote congregant can simply jump churches and attend somewhere else online. The issue of remote pastoring the *church* becomes further complicated when one considers exactly what constitutes the church. In a multi-site model, does the remote site itself constitute a church? What about all of those attending online in various parts of the city, state, country, or internationally – do they constitute a church? Grant Gaines posits that the word *ekklesia* constitutes a literal assembly and therefore “it should not be used to designate a body of Christians who are not characterized by literally assembling together in the

same place.”⁷ He points to both 1 Corinthians and Acts as describing the nature and life of the local church as one which is characterized by the gathering together “in the same place.”⁸ With this understanding of church as one which assembles in the same place, how can a group of dispersed believers watching simulcast preaching from the comfort of their homes be considered a church even though they have never actually assembled?

A Defense for In-Person Preaching

In my defense for in-person preaching I must confess that I am a member of a multi-site church, so my critical evaluation of such a model is not without warrant. Our multi-site church has always been on the forefront of technology as our senior pastor has an international ministry which has long catered to having video sermons recorded and available to the public. As our different multi-site campuses became functional, a decision was made early on to always have an on-campus preaching pastor who not only ministers to the local body but also delivers an in-person sermon at the very least one service during the weekend. For those service times when the in-person preacher is not giving his sermon live, a simulcast preaching option is offered. Is this situation ideal? No, my preference has always been to have an in-person preacher, but the option of the simulcast as an exception and not the norm is a compromise I’m willing to live with. I like what Scott McConnell, vice president of Lifeway Research has to say, “I don’t think anyone gets up on a Sunday morning saying, ‘Boy, I’d really like to watch a video sermon.’”⁹ One study notes that sixty five percent of people would prefer to watch a sermon live than on

⁷ Grant Gaines, “Exegetical Critique of Multi-Site: Disassembling the Church?” 9Marks, Last modified February 26, 2010, accessed November 9, 2021, [https://www.9marks.org /article/exegetical-critiquemulti-site-disassembling-church](https://www.9marks.org/article/exegetical-critiquemulti-site-disassembling-church).

⁸ Ibid. Gaines points to Paul’s use of the phrase ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ in the context of ἐκκλησία where what characterizes the church is their assembly “in the same place,” in 1 Cor. 14:23, Acts 4:22.

⁹ Bob Smietana, “Research: Americans Prefer In-Person Preaching to Video,” LifeWay Research.

video.¹⁰ The norm ought to be the in-person preaching of a live sermon by your local pastor who is living out his Christian walk alongside you, who has the God-given authority over the local church, who understands the specific needs of the body, and properly prioritizes the preaching of God's Word as a means of Christian growth. We live in a time where multi-site churches and simulcast preaching are the current trend in evangelicalism, yet we live in a time where the church is in dire need of authority and authenticity from the pulpit – neither of which can be achieved by multi-site churches and simulcast preaching. As a next generation preaching pastor myself, I fear this current trend is rapidly devouring the local church the opportunities that lie within. What is the next generation preaching pastor to do in light of such challenges? I believe as Christians we are called to continually work to reform our churches in light of Scripture. I also believe that as preachers we are called to trust in God's sovereign plan and what He's called us preachers to do in light of the current movement toward adopting technology as the medium for formation from the pulpit.

Conclusion

This paper explored the current movement toward adopting technology as the medium for formation from the pulpit and examined the benefits, dangers, and limitations, while providing a defense for in-person preaching over mediated preaching as a pathway forward in light of long-term implications for the health of the local church.

¹⁰ Bob Smietana, "Research: Americans Prefer In-Person Preaching to Video," LifeWay Research.

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