



Preaching 2.0

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Of average height, slight of stature, and graying around the temples, he didn't look like the kind of guy who was about to make an earth-shaking confession. We were participating in a group discussion at a preaching conference when he raised his hand. "After the worship service at my church," he began tentatively, "we have what we call 'fellowship hour.' It's really just coffee and doughnuts, but it's when folks, having sent their kids to Sunday school, talk about what's going on in their lives." A few heads nodded.

"Usually I get pulled into a conversation or two in between making sure everything is running smoothly. But over the last couple of weeks, I've been just listening, moving quietly from conversation to conversation, not talking, just listening. And do you know what I realized?" he asked, giving us a moment to wonder as he took a sip of his coffee. "I realized that the things they talk about with each other are the things that matter to them, the things that make up their daily lives. The soccer match, the PTA meeting, the conflict with a friend, or promotion at work. They talk about *events*, those things that are *happening* in their lives and are worth sharing with each other."

He paused again, but this time not to sip coffee; it was more like he still couldn't quite make sense of the insight he was about to share. "The thing is," he said, looking slightly forlorn, "they never talk about the sermon they just heard, the sermon I spent hours working on, or the worship service either. It's like the whole

Why do not our sermons connect with people in ways that make the sermon a topic of ongoing conversation among parishioners and between parishioners and others? Perhaps we need a more participatory form of preaching, not unlike the participatory nature of Web 2.0.

experience we've just shared *never happened*." The silence that followed was palpable, as almost everyone in the room first recognized that probably much the same could be said of each of our congregations and then wondered what that meant. Or, really, wondered whether it meant what we feared it meant.

I would wager that each of us who regularly preaches has had moments just like this. We may not often talk about them—perhaps not even admit them—but I'm willing to bet that each of us has at times wondered and worried about the efficacy and relevance of our sermons. Some of this insecurity is undoubtedly part and parcel of the preaching task and appropriately so—How else should one approach the daunting task of making manifest the word of God through our mortal words? At the same time, however, I suspect that this anxiety has increased as we have witnessed our congregations diminish, our denominations decline, and our influence in the culture slowly disappear. Who cannot help but wonder what responsibility we bear for such dismal trends?

In the paragraphs that follow, I want to identify what I believe is an undetected combination of factors that contribute to our current, if often unnamed, anxiety about preaching. Based on that analysis, I will then offer what may at first appear an unconventional response. Both the analysis and response are simultaneously tentative and urgent—tentative in that I am exploring these issues even as I write and have come to no hard-and-fast conclusions; urgent in that they are calling into question much that I thought I knew about preaching and have created what I would describe as a "fruitful vocational crisis." If you are willing to venture into that crisis in search of good fruit, I invite you to read further.

PREACHING UPSTREAM

Mainline traditions have been in decline for the better part of the last half-century and have accordingly lost significant influence in North American culture.¹ During this same period, conservative and evangelical Protestant traditions have grown. Recent research suggests these two trends are *not* causally linked. It is not, that is, that many mainline Protestants leave their congregations to join conservative ones, but rather that many of the former simply stop going to church altogether.²

At the heart of this decline is the mainline church's failure to offer a compelling and central narrative identity that not only informs but also guides the lives of their congregants by providing a resilient religious identity. In a culture that values the individual's right to pursue religious fulfillment alongside life, liberty, and hap-

¹As early as 1967, Peter Berger pointed to the "crisis of credibility" and "problem of plausibility" experienced by traditional religious faith. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) 126–153.

²The overwhelming cause of the disparate rates of growth is that birthrates among Evangelicals have been significantly higher than among mainline Protestants, although it appears that as the economic gap between Evangelicals and mainline Protestants closes, so does the gap in fertility rate. See Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 33–34.

piness, increasing numbers of mainline members discover numerous sources for their spiritual sustenance outside the walls of their congregations. Family, civic institutions, voluntary associations, and the imbedded values and patterns of meaning inherent in these things now exist side by side with local congregations as potential sources for spiritual identity.

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This proliferation of valid spiritual resources represents a tremendous shift in the religious landscape. For the better part of the last three centuries, legitimate sources of religious identity have been few. For this reason, one's religious identity was far more a matter of passive reception than active construction. In the wake of the proliferation of spiritual options, that is no longer the case. By way of analogy, think of the shift confronting television viewers: a generation ago there were three networks—all of which had relatively similar programming—while today there are hundreds of channels representing multiple perspectives. The overabundance of options in our postmodern, 24/7 digital world—in terms of news, political ideas, and religious perspectives—compels persons, first, to recognize that there are multiple versions of reality coexisting and, second, to choose from among them. For this reason, “individuals must play a larger part in constructing their personal belief system” than ever before.³

Conservative churches have flourished amid this same proliferation of sources for religious identity by creating and maintaining a distinct “Christian worldview” that functions both as an internal norm for personal and corporate behavior as well as an external filter by which to assess competing religious claims. In the face of religious pluralism, conservative congregations have adopted a “traditionalist” stance that promotes a single, stable, and preferably unitary narrative identity that shields adherents from the tumult of competing truth claims.⁴ Mainline congregations, on the other hand, have consistently adopted a more “cosmopolitan” stance that values greater interpretive freedom and thereby leads to more variation—and consequently less cohesion—in narrative identity.⁵ Lacking the “strict code” of beliefs and behaviors prescribed by their more conservative coun-

³Wade Clark Roof, *Community and Commitment* (New York: Elsevier North-Holland, 1978) 33.

⁴While no tradition is entirely unitary—each will have proponents with differing interpretations—such variation in interpretation is discouraged. See Anthony Giddons and Christopher Pierson, *Conversations with Anthony Giddons: Making Sense of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 127–131.

⁵“Members [of liberal churches] often form beliefs with relatively little guidance from others and without benefit of rigidly prescribed doctrinal standards. Thus it is not surprising that they share so little in the way of consensus about the nature of Christian faith and the demands of commitment it places upon them” (Roof, *Community*, 33–34).

terparts, mainline congregations have had to compete in the marketplace of spiritual meaning and have often come up wanting.⁶

Interestingly, and perhaps contrary to popular belief—given numerous mainline arguments over social policies—the biblical and theological narrative that mainline churches proffer has neither changed dramatically during these decades nor has it caused significant numbers of members to leave church.⁷ Rather, mainline congregants simply no longer know that narrative well nor hold it as primary. Bereft of this primary narrative to supply a religious identity—or, rather, finding sources for a compelling identity from numerous narratives outside their congregations—many mainline members have lost any incentive to continue attending a church that doesn't meaningfully contribute to their understanding of and life in the world.

In this setting, one more easily appreciates the ambivalence of the preacher. Increasingly, if often unconsciously, we find ourselves offering interpretations of a narrative that few in the congregation know well enough to be able even to appreciate our interpretations, let alone to apply them to life outside the congregation's walls. Such an effort can feel like swimming upstream: it is cold, exhausting, and yields little progress. A generation ago, the dominance of the mainline Protestant worldview ensured numerous cultural reinforcements of the story preachers sought to interpret—children learned it in school, artists from all genres drew upon it, even early television programs regularly invoked it. Today, however, those supports have been all but stripped away. It's not that schools and popular culture no longer refer to Christian symbols and language, but rather that such language, placed alongside the linguistic systems of multiple religious and other meaning-making systems, is now ambivalent, ultimately testifying more to a pervasive religious relativism than to its original referent. Hence, and excepting the banal religious rhetoric of most politicians, unambiguous Christian conversation happens almost exclusively within the church.

Concurrent with the cultural decline of the Christian narrative, numerous other valid interpretive schemas have presented themselves. Many of them connect more directly to the lived experience of our congregants simply because they are promoted by the multiple channels that our people regularly draw from—pop culture, news, the Internet, and more. Hence, while the mainline Christian story may appear alive and well *within* the walls of the congregation, *outside* the church all these other valid sources from which to construct a religious identity have a distinct competitive edge.⁸

⁶See Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, new and updated ed. (1972; New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 78–81.

⁷See Chaves, *Congregations*, 34, and Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 236–243.

⁸While Jean-François Lyotard famously declared that we live in the age “of the death of the meta-narrative,” I am inclined to agree with Walter Brueggemann that we live rather in the age of the “competition of meta-narratives.” See *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 712.

As a consequence, many of our congregants experience a sizable gap between their meaning-making experience on Sunday (where the dominant narrative is the biblical story) and on Monday through Saturday (where, in the absence of an unambiguous Christian narrative, they navigate through multiple other, and often more familiar, narratives). It is not that the Sunday sermon makes *no* sense, only that the sermon makes the *most* sense inside the church's walls where it can be most easily connected with the larger story to which it refers.⁹ Little wonder, then, that outside the sanctuary the talk turns to the recent PTA meeting or high school soccer match with nary a mention of the sermon. These events are more easily identified as part of the fabric of a shared comprehensive narrative that informs and guides our life in the world. The sermon, while meaningful, is constrained in its applicability because the scope of the biblical narrative to which the sermon refers has itself been restricted to our life and identity in, rather than beyond, the church.

WEB 2.0 AND THE INTERACTIVE SERMON

I have identified the problem facing Christians in the twenty-first century as an overwhelming plethora of sources from which to construct religious identity. Christian congregations will, therefore, thrive in this environment only to the degree that they offer the biblical narrative to their members as a creative and compelling resource with which to create an identity that brings greater understanding of both self and world. For this to happen, Christian churches need not simply promote biblical *literacy* (knowing the content of the Bible) but also and more importantly biblical *fluency* (the ability to think—without thinking—in the target language).

How might Christians develop this kind of fluency? Two options animate the contemporary religious scene. A conservative, traditionalist approach confronts the postmodern challenge by constructing a religious identity for its adherents that stands over and against other sources. Preaching, from this framework, is equal measures (1) teaching of the basic worldview and how to apply it to life and (2) exhortation to do so. The dominant homiletical preference has naturally been expository preaching, where the preacher isolates the central cognitive idea of a passage so as to apply it to the life situation of the hearer today.¹⁰ The enduring concern for traditionalist preachers is *fidelity*: Has the sermon accurately and convincingly presented the cognitive truth embedded in Scripture? While this method has served conservative congregations well in recent decades, it is questionable

⁹As Thomas Long describes, "On the one side is the religious side of us, and on the other is the 'just trying to be human and make it through life' side. We go to worship, and we sing the hymns, pray the prayers, listen to the sermons, and then we go back out into the real world, where we have to deal with the mundane realities of life and make compromises and hard choices." *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004) 39.

¹⁰See Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2d ed. (1980; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

whether it will continue to be able to stem the tide of multiple channels of meaning-making systems and possibilities that surrounds its members.¹¹

In contrast, the mainline, cosmopolitan impulse has been to engage culture, confessing that the work of the Triune God is manifest in culture as well as the church. Consequently, mainline preaching has been far more interested in facilitating an experience of God through its interpretation of the biblical text—preaching as *event*—rather than isolating a cognitive truth. Narrative preaching has lent itself to this goal by placing the biblical story alongside contemporary stories from art, culture, and current events so as to invite hearers to make experiential connections between the two.¹² The pressing concern for the narrative preachers is *relevancy*: Does the sermon help hearers make sense of the biblical story in light of the immediate context? While this method flourished when there were cultural structures in place to reinforce the biblical narrative, in recent years it has not only floundered, absent such structures, but its very affirmation of multiple contemporary stories as sources of religious identity has contributed to relativizing its own message.

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It would seem that we have reached an impasse—either adopt a rigid formulation of a Christian narrative that negates much if not most of the cultural forms we live with, or affirm those cultural forms at the expense of the primacy and even relevancy of the biblical narrative as constituent of our religious identity. It's at just this point that turning to recent trends in the ongoing development of the Internet may be instructive.

In many ways, the Internet epitomizes the relativistic world of competing value systems and sources for religious identity in which we preach. The ability to click between alternating, even opposing, worldviews instantaneously captures the essence of our postmodern context. While we may visit the website of our local congregation or national denomination, we know those sites are only two of literally millions that offer the resources from which to construct a compelling narrative identity.

Recently, however, observers of the Internet have noticed an increasing preference among users not only to receive information but also to interact with it. Ten years ago this was represented by the growing phenomenon of chat rooms; today, we see it in social networks like Facebook, e-commerce sites like eBay and Amazon that rely heavily upon user-ratings of their experiences, the immense success of a

¹¹ “[T]he rate at which evangelicals lose people to secularity and to religions other than Protestantism, though still lower than for moderate and liberal Protestants, is increasing.” Chaves, *Congregations*, 34.

¹² See Edmund Steimle, Morris Niedenthal, and Charles Rice, *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

volunteer participation-driven encyclopedia like Wikipedia, and the actual cooperative production of open-source software. Even now, this kind of interaction is being pushed further, as Second-Life and similar avatar-driven, virtual worlds allow users to construct and experiment with multiple digital identities.

The heightened value users assign to interacting with and through computer programs has not gone unnoticed by software developers. Recognizing that interactive use not only leads to greater fluency with and allegiance to particular web-based platforms like Twitter, but also leads to better technology as in open-source programs like Mozilla Firefox, programmers have increasingly designed software that is not “complete” apart from user interaction, adaptation, and improvisation. This emerging trend has been named Web 2.0, a term first coined by Darcy DiNucci. Writing in 1999, DiNucci predicted, “The Web we know now, which loads into a window on our computer screens in essentially static screenfuls, is an embryo of the Web as we will know it in not so many years... [when] the Web will be understood, not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens.”¹³

What if the sermon provided not simply the content of the biblical narrative as a source for religious identity but also promoted lively interaction with that story?

I am intrigued by the possibility Web 2.0 holds as a metaphor for an approach to bridging the gap between the identity and meaning making that we experience on Sunday and that of the rest of the week. For instance, what if we imagined that the purpose of Sunday worship, and in particular of the sermon, was not to present “screenfuls of text”—a finished message, an artful interpretation of the biblical text—but instead “a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens.” What if the sermon provided not simply the content of the biblical narrative as a source for religious identity—either in the “strict” prescriptive form of conservative preaching or in the “lenient” suggestive form of mainline preaching—but also promoted lively interaction with that story? Is there room in our homiletical imagination, to put it another way, for an interactive sermon?

Most if not all mainline preachers earnestly wish and sometimes exhort our hearers not only to apply their faith to their lives but also to share that faith with others. But how can we expect our hearers to accept our invitation unless we also provide them the means and occasion by which to practice what we invite? It is precisely the gap between our experience of Sunday and the rest of the week that makes it nearly impossible for most mainline churchgoers to imagine applying or sharing their faith. Even if they know the biblical narrative (literacy), they have lit-

¹³Darcy DiNucci, “Fragmented Future,” *Print* 53/4 (1999) 32; online at <http://www.cdinucci.com/Darcy2/articles/Print/Printarticle7.html> (accessed 30 April 2010).

the competency or confidence in connecting it meaningfully to the tasks of everyday life (fluency).

PARTICIPATORY PREACHING

Because the sermon is the most unscripted part of the worship service, it presents itself as an ideal candidate to provide the arena, guidance, and encouragement for those gathered to practice applying the biblical narrative to daily life as a valid and useful meaning-making system. In order to do so, however, we will need to shift from what I would describe as a performative homiletic to a participatory one.¹⁴ In a performative homiletic, the preacher is the chief, and often sole, interpreter of Scripture. The emphasis is almost entirely upon the preacher's role to study, interpret, and proclaim the text in our hearing. At its best, performative preaching "renders" the biblical text, making a passage written thousands of years ago three-dimensional, contemporary, and compelling. As desirable as this most certainly is, however, it does not necessarily equip hearers to do this kind of interpreting in everyday life. Further, it may have the unintended consequence of impeding the hearers' facility at interpretation either by promoting the preacher as the professional interpreter (in which case the hearer has no need to interpret) or setting the bar for competent interpretation dauntingly high (in which case the hearer does not dare interpret for fear of failure).

On this next point, I want to be most clear: It is not that a performative homiletic is *wrong*—artful interpretation of the text is only to be esteemed. Rather, the performative homiletic is simply *insufficient* in and of itself to the demands of the day and therefore must be supplemented by a homiletic that invites, nurtures, and expects a lively interaction between hearer and text. Here we are perhaps not far from Kierkegaard's oft quoted affirmation that while most of us assume that in the divine drama of worship the minister is the performer, God the prompter, and the congregation the audience, in genuinely biblical worship, God is the audience, the congregation the performers, and the minister the prompter.¹⁵ Only by "rehearsing" lively interpretation and "performance" of the biblical text in the relatively safe space of the sanctuary can our people be expected to do the same in their daily lives and amid all the competing contenders for religious identity.

Several developments in homiletical and theological literature both signal an openness to this move and provide assistance in making it. I will mention four briefly. (1) In his *Preaching Jesus*, Charles Campbell invites us to "build up the

¹⁴There have been a number of salutary treatments of the relationship between preaching and performance in recent years. See, for instance, *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton Schmit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), and similar monographs by contributors to that volume. While I recognize that none of these authors advocate a homiletic that privileges the preacher over the hearer in the act of interpretation, the metaphor of "performance," while certainly highlighting a valid dimension of preaching, nevertheless shifts attention to the preacher as the primary "performer" in the "divine drama" enacted in the sermon.

¹⁵Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (1846; San Francisco: HarperOne, 1956) 180–181.

church” by training hearers in the distinct language of the Christian faith, who through diligent practice and discipline redescribe the world in terms of the patterns and figures of the biblical narrative.¹⁶ (2) John McClure and Lucy Rose have both advocated for including hearers in the interpretive work leading up to the preaching, with Rose inviting the participation of all of the gathered assembly in the proclamation.¹⁷ (3) Several theologians have taken up the topic of “Christian practice” to good effect, and those works open the door to conversation regarding how preaching can foster authentic Christian practice.¹⁸ (4) Thomas Long provides guidance to Christians seeking to speak and share their faith in the many venues that constitute their everyday lives.¹⁹ What I suggest is to take these initiatives that have largely been on the border of the sermonic enterprise and bring them to the center in order to equip our hearers to be competent, even fluent, interpreters of the Christian faith.²⁰

Here, however, be warned: inviting the active—as opposed to only cognitive—participation of hearers may initially seem odd, even awkward, to both preacher and congregant alike. I would, therefore, suggest taking small steps over time in introducing a more interactive style of preaching. (At the same time, given most people’s familiarity with the interactive character of life in a Web 2.0 world, I would also be prepared for a modicum of enthusiasm once people get used to this in the worship service.) A measured introduction of participatory preaching might involve the following sequential steps undertaken over several months or a year.²¹

1. Visit people in the venues of the Christian vocations—at home, work, places of volunteer activity. There is no better way to relate one’s preaching to the real lives of our congregants and, thereby, invite model-making connections between faith and life by knowing more about their “real lives” and referring to these in the sermon.
2. Invite congregants to leave worship to “look for” the biblical message they just heard interpreted in their daily lives. Where, that is, do we see a prodigal son (or daughter) in our midst, and what would it mean to run out to

¹⁶“A genuinely new hearing will require more than the technique of the preacher; it will also require a disciplined community of hearers grounded in the practice of Scripture, sacrament, and discipline.” Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 247. For Campbell, however, the primary work of biblical interpretation in the church rests with the preacher, who is the one to “perform” or “enact” Scripture and, in particular, the story of Jesus (see pp. 211–220).

¹⁷See John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), and Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) esp. 123.

¹⁸See, for instance, Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2d ed. (1997; San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), and Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).

¹⁹Long, *Testimony*.

²⁰This is manifestly not simply a call to return to the dialogue sermon. While a dialogue style of preaching may suit some situations, there are manifold other forms that invite the hearer to participate in the sermon.

²¹This sequence presumes no prior experience with participatory preaching. Preachers with more experienced hearers can certainly start anywhere they deem fitting.

receive him or her back? In what ways are we tempted like Adam and Eve to secure for ourselves knowledge of the future to dispel our native insecurity apart from relationship with God?

3. Invite congregants not only to look for the biblical text but to e-mail you and tell you what they have seen. Plan then to incorporate some of what you have learned in a future sermon, and tell folks that you plan to do so to encourage them to look, see, and report.
4. Take time during the sermon to have listeners share with each other where they see connections between the biblical passage and their lives.
5. Invite persons to share some of the connections they are making between their faith and their daily lives during different parts of the worship service, including the sermon.
6. From time to time, have this kind of sharing occur not only during the sermon but offer it as the sermon. Invite, that is, three persons to make connections between the biblical passage appointed for the day and their daily lives. Meet with them ahead of time, study the passages together, provide resources, but then allow their interpretations not only to illustrate the sermon but actually to *be* the sermon.

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I suspect that particularly with regard to this last point, many preachers will be concerned with the accuracy of the interpretation of Scripture that may occur. Given the penchant of all of us to read our prejudices into Scripture and the relatively little exegetical training that most of our members have to avoid this pitfall, this is a fair concern. Yet I would also contend that, as with any skill, excessive fear of failure greatly inhibits the kind of practice that is necessary to attain competence. For this reason, I agree wholeheartedly with Richard Nysse and Donald Juel who write, “While many [pastors] have been convinced that sound method is a way of avoiding mistakes, in most cases the greatest danger is not wrong answers as much as lack of engagement.”²²

There are, of course, other places in the worship service (the Prayers of Intercession, for instance) and congregational life (adult and youth education) where we can directly bridge the gap between the biblical narrative and daily life. But both the prominence and public nature of the sermon make it an ideal place to move from passive to active identity construction. If we can imagine making a leap similar to that made by users and programmers who left the static world of Web 1.0 to

²²Richard Nysse and Donald Juel, “Intepretation for Christian Ministry,” *Word & World* 13/4 (1993) 353.

inhabit the more dynamic and interactive world of Web 2.0, we might be able to offer the sermon as, indeed, a “transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity [between God’s word and God’s people] happens.”

I’ll close with a confession. This is not the way I was taught to preach, nor is it the way I have thus far taught others to preach. I am for this reason unsure of the way forward and seek guidance to move along the path. But I am increasingly convinced that if we want equip hearers to navigate the demands, challenges, and possibilities of the postmodern world with an active Christian imagination and identity, then we need at least to start the journey in this direction. Perhaps as we set out we would be well served by taking on our lips the classic prayer from Matins:

Lord God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.²³ ⊕

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²³*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 304.