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The Non-Verbal Illustration: Mcluhan, Postman, and the Emerging Preacher

Emerging Church thinkers generally advocate the multi-sensory, non verbal, mediated in preaching, or even in lieu of preaching as oral communication. This paper will show a multi-sensory driven preaching theory found in emerging church literature, analyzing it with the thought of communication theorist Marshal Mcluhan, and cultural critic Neil Postman.

The Emerging Church (EC) represents a movement to integrate the influence of the early church to the 20 something generation. Perhaps most notable for homilticians is that thinkers within the movement have modified, and in some cases redefined, preaching. No where is this more obvious than in the use of the nonverbal in preaching. In a recent interview with *Homiletics*, Sally Morgenthaler offered a prophetic summation of EC thought on the subject:

Homiletics: Since we've moved into a visual culture, and the arts have become a new language, how does that impact preaching? How does preaching fit into this new emerging matrix? Is preaching losing center stage, or do we need to adapt this presentation to the new emerging reality?

SJM: Preaching is definitely transitioning. It has to. It's not that preaching is moving from center stage, it's that preaching now occurs not just from the pulpit but also from and through the music and video. If the preaching role is changing, and becoming embedded in different forms, then we've got to deal with the pastor's role. The pastor's role is that of one artist in a planning community and this is an exciting move, but it is also a hard move for many pastors. (Morgenthaler, www.sacrimintis.org)

Since preaching is a theological activity, one may appropriately ask whether the change in the mode of preaching has implications on the theology that is presented by the preaching, and the theology which is driving the preaching. Thus a theological analysis of EC preaching would be warranted. However, to posit that the means of communication (in this case more non-verbal communication) is somehow affecting the content of the message communicated, it would be advantageous to instead turn to communication theorists who have thought and published widely in this area. To that end, the purpose of this paper will be to analyze the homiletic theory of EC thinkers in light of communication theorist Marshall Mcluhan, and cultural critic Neil Postman. First, the paper will begin with a sampling of EC thought on preaching. Secondly, there will be a brief introduction to the thought of Mcluhan and Postman. Thirdly, this will be followed by rhetorical criticism of EC thinkers using the thought of the two theorists. Finally, a conclusion will offer summation and potential challenges which emerging church thinkers must address.

Toward a Homiletic Theory of the Emerging Church

In the above quote Morgenthaler notes that the preaching role is changing. The implication is that the preacher is no longer a oratorical stylist, but rather "...one artist in a planning community" (Morgenthaler www.sacramentis.com). This idea seems inviting to those whose passion is to effectively communicate the Gospel to a culture whose primary means of learning is visual. After a brief look at the EC as a movement, this section will examine EC thought on preaching in general, and EC thought on non-verbal communication specifically.

Identifying Emerging Church Worship

In a recent article on an Emerging Church gathering in Nashville, the Tennessean described emerging Christians as

Christians who are impatient with rigid megachurch formulas and noisy doctrinal infighting. They want to nurture a "vintage Christianity" that promotes the love of Christ for the emerging (non-churchgoing) generation. They're hammering out a theology that's friendly to ancient faith practices (contemplative prayer, labyrinths, hospitality) in a postmodern world of quantum physics, 24/7 media and coffee-house culture. (www.gallatinnewsexaminer.com)

Perhaps the most organized and salient writers for the movement can be found at www.emergentvillage.com. They define emergent as "...a growing generative friendship among missional Christian leaders seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ." (www.emergentvillage.com) While this is about as vague as a politician on the first Monday in September, for our purposes it is enough to know emergents seek to capture an authentic faith through a worship experience that values postmodern authenticity and ancient faith.

It is interesting to note that two of the EC's seminal thinkers, Dan Kimball and Sally Morgenthaler both had negative experiences with "seeker" churches. They found the lack of religious symbol, imagery, and conversation disconcerting. Morgenthaler confessed that she "...began to seriously question the whole 'church lite' paradigm" (Morgenthaler www.sacramentis.com). This is significant in that many thinkers in the EC are wholly committed to reconnecting the church to its ancient roots. Thus while the seeker church's reaction to a disconnected mainline church was to present something inviting to seekers, the emergent reaction a perceived blandness of the seeker service is to offer something that is above all authentic.¹ The seeker movement witnesses irrelevance in the main line denominations and decides to be relevant, while EC church leaders can not find sacred in the seeker movement and decide to be overtly religious. To mix metaphors, the pendulum has swung full circle.

To accomplish the goal of reaching a visually driven postmodern culture, they fully integrate the arts into their worship. Since this paper is not interested in the movement, but the preaching in the worship of the movement, it only needs to be said that emergent worship seeks to combine the postmodern artistic sensibilities of a younger culture with the ancient roots of the faith.

¹ Perhaps the most telling critical assessment of the Seeker-Sensitive worship movement is in the EC literature. For a brief glimpse see Sally Morgenthaler's interview with *Passion*, <http://www.sacramentis.com/articles/interviews/screen/passion.shtml>.

Since this is a movement rooted in the idea of reaching those with a postmodern bent, it stands to reason that emerging preaching would engage the postmodern individual on their terms. Toward that end many EC thinkers feel that the sun has set on the idea of the preacher as the classical orator.

The Passing of the Pulpitier

Anyone paying attention the last twenty years witnessed a shift in the style preaching. Evangelical pulpits, especially those targeting younger seekers, have shifted away from the style of the classic orator whose words hold the audience spellbound. In some churches the pastor is more of a storyteller, a motivator, or a business presentation-maker complete with a fast moving PowerPoint presentation. Those who found this trend disconcerting will be refreshed by what some EC leaders are saying. One example is worth noting.

In the landmark book *The Emerging Church*, Dan Kimball begins his discussion of preaching by saying,

Before we continue this discussion of preaching to emerging generations, let me clarify my assumptions:

1. That you will prayerfully study and exegete the Scriptures to accurately communicate their meaning. More than ever, we need to “correctly handle the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15)
2. That when you preach, Jesus will be the ultimate focus of your sermons, and that you will not just be giving information about him but also tell people how to relate to and experience Jesus as his disciples (John 5:39).
3. That no matter what preaching style or method you may use, your goal is to see listener’s lives change so they can truly be ambassadors for Jesus (2 Cor. 5:20) and messengers of kingdom living. (Kimball 2003, 174).

Those insisting that message be driven by an exposition of a text would find this refreshing, and find the following invigorating. In a section on message selection Kimball gives EC preachers the following admonitions:

All preaching should somehow teach on kingdom living as a disciple of Jesus.
 Regularly preach and teach about the triune God.
 Regularly teach what it means that Jesus is the only way to God.
 Address human sexuality regularly.
 (Emphasize) redefining marriage and family to new generations.
 Teach on hell more than ever.
 Teach the trustworthiness of Scripture.
 Regularly preach and teach how our spirituality will be messy. (Kimball 2003, 182)

As a further statement of his commitment to preaching, Kimball asserts that “Preaching is more important and holier than ever as we exercise the sacred privilege of opening the Scriptures and teaching the divine story of God to people who are hearing it for the very first time”(Kimball, 2003 182). Morgenthaler noted that,

Preaching in the past 20 years has focused too much on the pragmatic, so much so that we've really lost out on the narrative concerning God himself. We really thought if we gave people a list of things to do, they would become better people, not understanding that when Jesus dealt with people it was about who God is and how God works and he showed us how we fit in the story.

Evangelicals too often complain about mainliner cerebral worship, but they've done the same thing: it's just that our presuppositions are from the therapeutic community and not the theological community. We've turned our services into motivational seminars: how to manage our money, how to be good parents, and so on. The goal of so much of contemporary worship has been to make us feel good about ourselves, to rid ourselves of any negative emotion after all, we are all happy here, and so we clap ourselves silly, and we sing in a major key. (Morgenthaler www.sacramentis.com)

Thus to assert that all EC thinkers are eliminating the pulpit in worship would be a underassessment of the movement.² However, it would be an equally large overstatement to say that EC thinkers are advocating preaching as it has been traditional understood as oral communication. For some indeed the pulpit is perhaps a bit passé.

The argument is that traditional preaching is driven by a modern philosophical bent toward linear thinking. However this is not how people come to belief today. Thus, a new epistemology demands another form of communication. In “Does Preaching have a Future in the Emerging Church”, an unpublished research project, Jason Clark, leader of Emergent UK gives a summary of the problem when he writes,

Preaching needs to be radically and fundamentally re-imagined and re-purposed for a post-modern culture. If the modern church basis for preaching was to transmit propositions to hearers for providing answers, preaching in the post-modern context becomes something very different. We must move away from the preacher as the enlightened person separate from those being spoken to. Instead, preaching becomes a connection and dialogue. Scripture is not something to be dissected by monologue, but something to be in conversation with communally. (Clark, 2005)

One of the answers Clark asserts is a post-modern hermeneutic, which among other things is more image based. The argument is that post-moderns do not embrace what they are told, rather they embrace what they experience. Thus some emergent churches have abandoned preaching all together, in favor of “shared learning experiences”. Others have kept preaching marginally, being heavily supplemented with nonverbal mediated communication, and others some type of combination of the two poles.

The emergent movement is indeed reactionary (however “The Reacting Church” seems less inviting). It is a movement of post-conservatives and post-liberals, who, tired of the form of traditional and seeker churches, are looking for the roots of their faith in ancient and future expressions. In terms of preaching, there is a degree of rejection of a modern propositional

² It would be easier to argue that emerging preachers are reacting to the perceived “how-to” Gospel of the seeker movement.

homiletic, and a move toward experiencing truth. Thus for some emerging preachers, the sermon is dispensable, however the use non-verbal mediated communication is not.

The Medium is the Message

Marshall McLuhan

When Marshall McLuhan wrote his landmark *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* he was predicting a wired world. A virtual world transposed over a rotting physical world. In a restated popular version of that work, *The Medium is the Message*, McLuhan asserted that,

The circuited city of the future will not be the huge hunk of concentrated real estate created by the railway. It will take on a totally new meaning under conditions of very rapid movement. It will be an information megalopolis (McLuhan, 1967 72)

Replace the word “city” for the word “church” and one has the sense of the emergent church. McLuhan was the prophet of a coming global village whose streets were the wired communication that would come. A virtual city – no walls - would replace the geographical city. In the same way the emerging church, at least as a movement, has attempted to be a movement that exists in space and time but not place. There is almost a value in being a non-movement. It is in this embracing of the need for a present reality that McLuhan and the emerging church leaders share common ground.

McLuhan’s most popular assertion was that the media itself has more impact on culture than the content which it is mediating. Thus the media should be the object of study, and thus “The medium is the message”. The idea is that the medium in which a message is presented is itself a message. Intuitively one understands this. A novel is a different thing all together when told on a stage in the form of a play. A play is all together different in the form of a big screen movie, and a movie all together different than a television drama. McLuhan would argue that not only did the medium change, but so did the content. This is not an example of a drama told four different ways, rather it is four different stories all together. The medium “spoke” so loudly that it became a part of the story. Over time, the medium of communication actually effects cognition.

The immediate application is to the Gospel presentation itself. If McLuhan is right, then the Gospel is itself different when presented in different mediums. Or at least the medium of presentation causes the recipient to think differently about the Gospel. It is at this point that Neil Postman is insightful.

Neil Postman

Postman was a cultural critic who took the academic thought of McLuhan and deftly applied it to American culture in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman bemoans the passing of the age of expositional thought in America which has been replaced with the age of entertainment. In other words to show how “...under the governance of the printing press, discourse in America was different from what it is now – generally coherent, serious and rational; and then how, under the governance of television, it has become shriveled and absurd”

(Postman 1985, 16). The purpose of bringing Postman into the conversation is his insightful look television as a medium for Christianity.

In an effort to understand televised Christianity Postman watches forty-two hours of religious programming, after which he reaches two conclusions: 1.) Televised religion, like all things televised is presented as entertainment, and 2.) "...This fact has more to do with the bias of television than with the deficiencies of these electronic preachers". (Postman, 1985 117).

He concludes that televised Christianity is not like real Christianity at all. "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion, When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion all together" (Postman, 1985 117). Borrowing a page from Mcluhan he again observes that this reality does not have to do directly with the preachers themselves, but rather the medium in which they work. In this sense, Postman extends the work of Mcluhan to Christianity and asserts that it is naïve to assume that one can change the medium of the Gospel message without altering its message.

Summary

In sum Mcluhan broadly believes that media effects cognition. Postman, applying this thought to television, would argue that the cognitive behavior of a generation has already been shaped by television viewing. Thus, both Mcluhan and Postman are media determinist in that they believe that the media, not just the message, can determine thinking and behavior. Thus, the media itself can have a negative effect on the way Christianity is practiced and understood. What remains is to let this thought speak to the emerging church.

The Question for the Emerging Merger

In a sense EC thinkers have merged media determinists who say the medium of communication effects cognition, with the historic roots of the Christian faith. One can not help but applaud the desire for a faith that is more serious, more sobering, more like faith itself. Yet, as will be developed below, there seems to be an unanswered question in this merger.

In EC preaching there is a heavy dependence on the non verbal. This use of the multi-sensory in worship moves beyond using the nonverbal to illustrate a point. Rather, the nonverbal is the message. In other words, the emphasis is not on hearing the truth, but on experiencing the truth.

The NT gives a small record of what early church worship was like; church history, a still smaller picture of early church worship. And, it seems important to distinguish between what worship activities were limited to one time, i.e. the Day of Pentecost; those things for which there is a precedent but are not necessarily normative (earthquakes in jail, the appearance of angels); and those things which are normative for Christian worship: singing, prayer, apostle's doctrine, communion, fellowship. So there are some worship activities, some practices which are clear. Among these very clear practices was the teaching of Christian doctrine. This mandate to pass on doctrine seems especially clear from the Pastoral Epistles. There are multiple examples but three will suffice here,

For the overseer must be...holding fast eh faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict

Titus 1:7,9

Give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.

I Timothy 4:13

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate for every good work. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.

II Timothy 3:16

So, it is easy to argue that the preacher has a primary task of preserving revealed truth. Also, whatever sermons are preached must be explicitly faithful to the revealed truth. Broadly speaking, every preacher is expositional in that he is “ex-ing” out the posit of truth in the text. Therefore, any communication, verbal or non-verbal, must expose people to revealed truth, and in itself be a faithful exposition of Scripture. So the question all preachers, especially those in the emerging church must answer is, “*Is my non-verbal communication a faithful explanation of revealed truth?*”

Emerging church discussions about the way congregants receive messages generally revolve around their understanding of the truth based upon how they receive information, i.e. epistemology. Homilicians often assume that knowing comes through the reception of proclamation, whereas some EC thinkers would say that the postmodern individual’s epistemology demands that knowing come through experiencing. McLuhan, I believe, would say the discussion is slightly off. Yes, the medium is important, but not because of a foundationalist/post-foundationalist, or modern/post-modern epistemology. Rather the mediums are important in what they themselves say about the message, in this case the Gospel message. The message is the medium. Therefore if the preacher accepts that his responsibility is to expose people to revealed truth, then he must ask whether *his method itself is expositional*. Interestingly, this seems to be the thrust of the entire book of Titus – the message of the preacher’s life must run congruent with the message. At least, therefore, the manner of preaching, experiencing, storying, or facilitating should itself be a theologically informed exposition of the text.

The same question posed another way would be, “*Is my sermon, non-verbal or verbal saying about God what God says about God, the way God says it?*” One example will suffice. An emerging church pastor allowed his congregation to sit in individual circles, each with a colored ball of yarn. As they discussed the topic they would hold one place in the yarn, and then throw the yarn to another participant with whom they connected. At the end of the discussion, the congregants saw a multicolored circle before them. The preacher then noted that this was like unity in that all of the variant opinions and thoughts connected with each other. To some, this would seem like a wonderful visual for unity. However this seems to be different from what Paul is saying about unity in Ephesians 4, namely that because of God’s nature we are to do the hard work of rallying ourselves around revealed truth as presented from pastor-teachers. That concept however is very possibly impossible to explain using primarily non-verbal communication. For that matter, aren’t most theological concepts? There is yet to be a non-

verbal illustration that could clearly posit the nuances of the atonement, or regeneration, or the incarnation, or the trinity, or the host of other theological/biblical concepts unless they are buttressed with some plain verbal explanation.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper it has been noted that emergent church thinkers/practitioners assert that individuals in a postmodern hermeneutic must experience the truth as much, if not at more than hear the truth. To facilitate this experience, some opt for no sermon, others call for a non-verbal mediated driven sermon. With a brief look at McLuhan and Postman, it was noted that these thinkers, in the vein of media determinism, believe that the media can actually affect cognition. Thus on one level it seems that EC thinkers have embraced a media that best adapts to the proposed cognitive processes of a postmodern epistemology in a technological age. What remains at question is whether the media itself is a faithful exposition of revealed truth, a question that must be answered affirmatively if the EC thinker is to be consistent in claiming that their future faith is indeed ancient. The following conclusion will first illustrate how certain church traditions have adapted to the changing culture.

The culture has indeed changed. There is a decrease in morality and interest in biblical Christianity, while there is an exponential increase in the use of non-verbal media to communicate in our culture. While homileticsians may tire of hearing it is still true that “The arts have become the language of the culture - we now live in a visually stimulated culture.” Evangelicals who want to use non-verbal communication often look at the non-verbal in preaching like a calf looking at a new gate. Others have looked at the arts as a gate to let in the more visually driven calves. Postman speaks to all of the traditions when he writes,

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 naïve to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value.
(Postman 1985, 117)

In fact the naïve, undiscerning calf becomes veal, unable to lead others with discernment. It is to this naivety to which these final thoughts are addressed.

The Traditional Evangelical Response

In some traditional evangelical churches there has been reticence to change anything in worship, especially the use of mediated communication. The methodology itself is sacrosanct, learning styles are ignored completely. This manifests itself in the refusal to project words on screens, or acknowledge any other forms of communication in worship. It would seem that this radical approach is somewhat naïve of the culture.

The Seeker Approach Response

Some churches billed as seeker friendly have uncritically embraced all forms of technology. The service may appear professional and technologically adept. The idea is that if we change the method, but keep the message, we can show the relevance of the Gospel message. However, if the media cannot be separated from the content of the message, this approach is also naïve in that it underestimates the power of the method to become the message. It is possible in this scenario for the message of the Gospel to only barely be heard over the mediums in which it is presented.

The Emergent Church Response

Emergent Church leaders, acknowledging the above implications, strive for authenticity in communication which acknowledges the culture. Simultaneously they strive for some ancient forms which acknowledge Christian roots. Thus, they tend to be highly multi-sensory (what the postmodern culture demands), but will mediate the faith in an ancient way (what the ancient narrative of the faith demands).

In this way, they are perhaps naïve about the power of the spoken word. It is granted that there is not a specific formulaic methodology in the NT regarding preaching. The author would argue for a model of exposition book by book, but would concede, as any honest homilician would, that this is a theologically-driven methodology more than an explicit command from the Pastoral Epistles. On the other hand, some go so far to say that the form of propositional exposition of Scripture is not valid because this is more a reflection of Greco-Roman rhetoric than it is the form of the early church. However, this makes two assumptions. First, this assumes that the Greco-Roman form of rhetoric is ineffective. Could not one effectively argue that, considering the timing of its development, the reason God allowed the Greeks to develop rhetoric was for the propagation of the Gospel?

Second there is the assumption that the non-verbal is more effective at communicating than the verbal. Some EC thinkers use “non-verbal” synonymously with “experiential”. Their emphasis follows their epistemology. However, listening is also an experience. And, since the verbal is clearly what Paul had in mind in the pastorals quoted above, there needs to be a strong rationale for moving away from it totally. It is hard to argue that truly ancient/future worship would not include the proclamation of Scripture.

In other words, EC thinkers seem to be media determinists in that they believe that the content of the message must be shaped by its medium. Yet in this practice, the medium of the communication has become a strong message itself, and perhaps at times the volume of the medium is louder than the message. One could then ask if preachers have the freedom to change the medium so radically from that of the NT church. Of course this is essentially the argument EC thinkers use to be critical of expositional, propositional, foundationalist preaching. Still, it is difficult to argue that a non-verbal emphasis in worship is the heart of the NT church. In that way the EC thinkers have changed the medium significantly from that of the New Testament church. The question is, has the message changed as well.

Appendix
The use of Non-verbal Mediated Communication in Worship

All those who use nonverbal mediated communication in preaching should consider the implications of their use. The following list is influenced by a discussion of the emerging Church, however these are thoughts for the use of media in worship.

1. If we want to be a Christocentric church, we must be biblical.
2. If we are Biblical, we must be honest about what the text says.
3. If we are honest about the text, then all we do should reflect the text. Thus, all non-verbal communication must say what the text says, the way the text says it.
4. Any nonverbal must pass the Titus test. Does this support truth that will protect sheep?
 - i. Entertainment does not do this.
Some use mediated arts in the worship as a form of entertainment alone with no relationship to a revealed truth to be communicated.
 - ii. Connecting with them alone does not do this.
Some want to use mediated communication as a way to connect with the audience. This however is never a stated goal of preaching Scripture. Connecting with people is a worthy goal in so much as it accomplishes the larger goal of drawing people into the text.
5. Any form of communication that distracts from the text does not meet the mandate of exalting the revealed truth, and thus knowing the God of the Scripture.

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