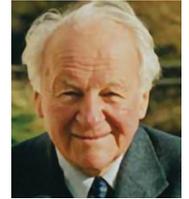


The Argument against Preaching I: The Cybernetic Revolution



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Would you be kind enough to take this, and let's have a look at it together. Dr. Lloyd Perry has been kind enough to let me see his syllabus for his homiletics lectures, and I've seen the extreme thoroughness with which he gives his own homiletics course. And mine is a very amateur show, in comparison, I'm afraid. But my concern, in a sense—and I'd like to introduce it to you like this—is not so much to talk to you about homiletical techniques. I believe there is a place for learning homiletical techniques, but it's frankly not my burden. I speak to you, not so much as an academic, as just a pastor who's been trying to do this for some twenty to twenty-five years.

So I want to introduce and approach the subject from rather different points of view. That's why, if you look down at the analysis, you'll see that the first three lectures are under the heading of "The Argument about Preaching." I didn't think it would be right for me to assume, as we begin the course, that preaching is a permanently valid form of communication. There is an increasing volume of voices in the Christian church today, as I imagine all of us know, who are saying that the day of preaching is over. And they are advancing some powerful arguments to say to us that the day of preaching is over. I didn't feel able to omit this from our consideration, and that's why we are going to look into the argument about preaching. We are going to look at the attacks upon it and try and answer them, and I'm going to give you my own reasons why I believe preaching is a permanently valid form of communication.

That will take us the first three lessons, and then three more on the nature and purpose of preaching. I want to define what we are talking about. I believe all true preaching is biblical preaching, and all true biblical preaching is expository preaching. And I want to make a plea for expository preaching. That is what the next three lessons are about.

Four [lessons] after that are about biblical authority and biblical interpretation. Now you can very well say to me neither of those subjects is strictly relevant to homiletics. And yet it seems to be absolutely clear that one of the very first three suppositions for any biblical preacher is that he is convinced about the authority of the Word of God. And if he is not convinced about this, he will never sit under the authority of God's Word. He will never become a servant of the Word and get under the message that he is preaching.

I want to talk to you about biblical authority, why I believe it, and the importance of this subject, even if it is not strictly relevant to homiletics. Then biblical interpretation, again, is vital for the biblical preacher. We have got to know how to interpret the Scripture that we are communicating; and I want to talk about principles of biblical interpretation.

Then I am going to give you a couple of ideals, one biblical and one historical, and then moving on to characteristics of biblical preaching, six of them. And then, not until fifteen and sixteen, do we get to anything you might call techniques. I am only going to give you one on preparation and one on delivery.

Then I thought we might take some examples, and take some paradigms: the verse, the paragraph, the chapter, the book; the power to exposit or expound; and then I end on two indispensable prerequisites: discipline in study and dependence on the Spirit. So that's the course, and it is a fairly varied one, as you see. I hope that will not disappoint you.

Then turn over the page. I'd just like you to look at the bibliography. I would like every student to read three books. One of Marshall McLuhan's books, and I am going to talk to you about him in a moment because, I suppose, it is a McLuhanism which represents the chief assault upon the concept of verbalized preaching today. And I think all of us ought to read at least one of his books and see the serious nature of his assault on verbalization. Then I would love you all to read one of the older classics and, if possible, *The Reformed Pastor*, Richard Baxter's classic, which is a most memorable and wonderful book. It is not all on preaching, but a lot of it is; but you can take one of the others if you prefer. They're both very fine. Bishop Phillips Brooks was an evangelical Episcopal bishop at the end of the last century in this country. P. T. Forsyth, of course, was the principal of the Congregational New College in London at the beginning of this century. *Positive*

Preaching and the Modern Mind is a very stimulating book. Then I've suggested a modern work, and I know Dr. Lloyd-Jones's book is in the bookstore in some quantities, and I found it a very moving book. I see it's on Dr. Lloyd Perry's bibliography. I'd like you to read one or the other of those three.

I reckon that a lot of your hours in our study will be taken up by reading those books. Then you will see the projects, and I will give you dates later. I would like a couple of sermon outlines and one original sermon, but that will be later in the quarter. Are there any questions about practical things before we go on?

I begin, apologetically, by saying it is a rash enterprise for any preacher to preach about preaching to preachers or budding preachers. And I think anybody who gives courses in homiletics feels how rash an enterprise it is. I have only consented to talk on preaching with great diffidence. I think just as a scientist, the further he gets in his research, becomes ever more aware of the territory that remains unresearched; so a preacher, the more he searches the Scriptures, becomes aware of the unsearchable riches of Christ and of the immense problem of communicating these riches to others or, as Paul says in Ephesians 3, of "making men see."

I, frankly, confess to you at the beginning that I do not regard myself as in any way an expert. I confess to you that, in the pulpit, I am frequently seized with what I call a communication frustration. That is to say I am bursting with something to communicate and find it frustrating to know how to communicate what I long to communicate to others. I seldom descend from the pulpit without feeling at least a partial failure and getting on my knees, praying, and longing that I may do better in years to come.

Nevertheless, having said that, and what I have just said to you is truth, I go on to declare myself an unrepentant believer in the indispensable importance of preaching in the church. And I am an unrepentant believer in the priority of preaching for men who are called to the ministry, as I imagine most of you are in some way. To be sure, the contemporary situation has made preaching more difficult, but it has not made it less necessary.

My own conviction is that the church can never dispense with preaching and, at the same time, remain true to itself as the church; because the church exists and owes its existence to the Word of God. Therefore, the church depends for its nurture and its

direction and its reformation upon this same Word. It is the Word of God that brings the church the fullness of stature. The church is charged to proclaim the Word to the world, and the church will one day be judged by the same Word, which has been committed to it to believe, to obey, and to communicate. If God creates, rules, and judges His church by His Word, as I believe He does, then we cannot neglect it. Indeed, insofar as the church ceases to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches through the Word, in that measure the church is failing in its divine vocation. I am convinced that the measure of the church's deadness is commensurate with the degree of its deafness to God's Word. If it is true that "man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," it is equally true of the church.

Let me give you some examples in history of people who have been convinced of this. Take the great Hugh Latimer, the popular preacher of the Reformation. In one of his sermons he attacked, especially, bishops and others who neglect the ministry of the Word and become what he called "unpreaching prelates." Brother, do not ever become an unpreaching prelate, wonderful phrase. "Bishops," he says in his sermon, "are so taken up with ruffling in their rents, dancing in their dominions, . . . munching in their mangers, and moiling in their gay manors and mansions," that they have no time for preaching. It's the devil, he says, who's the greatest preacher in England. The devil "is the most diligent prelate and preacher in all England," busy poisoning the hearts of men." Latimer, who had a wonderful gift of the English language, was convinced that the devil was the greatest preacher of all, the one who goes around communicating error. And he says we've got to confound the devil by being better preachers than he.

Or take P. T. Forsyth, in his *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, I've just mentioned. "It is perhaps an overbold beginning," he says in his book, "but I will venture to say that with its preaching Christianity stands or falls."

Or take Emil Brunner in his book *Revelation and Reason*. He says that where there is true preaching, where in the obedience of faith the Word is proclaimed, there, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, the most important thing that ever happens upon this earth explodes. And he means, of course, an encounter between God and man.

Or take Helmut Thielicke. In his book *The Trouble with the Church*, he locates the problem with the church in our poor preaching.

So then let us get launched into the argument about preaching. I am sorry if some of you will be impatient with these early lectures and want to get on with learning how to preach; but I long that all of us, first, will be convinced about the rightness, the indispensable importance of what we are going to try to learn to do. That is why I am not going to skip this. We have got to try to understand the case against preaching so that we can weigh it. And then, insofar as it contains substance, modify our method accordingly; and, insofar as it is found wanting, answer it and refute it. I am going to attempt to deploy the most cogent arguments for and against. I hope, having examined these, that we shall be newly convinced that the scales come down heavily on the side of preaching in undiminished importance.

For the argument against, there are those who assert confidently that the day of preaching is over. It's a dying art, it is an outmoded form of communication, and within the foreseeable future it will have died and been buried. The devil, whom I've already hailed as the greatest preacher, is himself anxious to teach us that preaching is not important. Archbishop Donald Coggan, who is the Archbishop of York and an evangelical man, has written in his book on preaching called *Stewards of Grace*. In fact, his first chapter is called "A Specious Lie." And he quotes, "Our father below," so C. S. Lewis would have us believe, "our father below is subtle and insidious in his attack on the truth; and for that reason, all the more difficult to controvert than if he were direct and open. If therefore the devil can insinuate almost into the subconscious of present-day Christians that the day of preaching is over, a major piece of strategy has been achieved. Preachers will go to their tasks as regularly as before, but they will go as men who have lost their battle before they start, ground of conviction has slipped from under their feet."

I am going to bring you five arguments, five factors that combine to make people unfriendly to sermons; one today, and the remaining four tomorrow. The first is the cybernetic revolution of Marshall McLuhan and all that.

The Cybernetic Revolution. I suppose we all know that cybernetics is a pop word for the study of mechanisms of communication, both in the human brain and in the electronic brain; or, if you prefer, in men and in computers. More simply, cybernetics is the science of communication means, or the media of communication. The cybernetic revolution denotes radical changes in communication,

occasioned by the development of electronic equipment in our generation.

All Christians are involved willingly in the communications business. Christianity is a religion of communication. God, we believe, has communicated with mankind. He has spoken, Scripture says, and He requires us to communicate with others what He has communicated with us. But His communication, now recorded in Scripture, was given before the invention of printing, let alone the invention of the telephone, the radio, or television. The question is whether these things that form the cybernetic revolution have outmoded speech.

The “high priest” of the cybernetic revolution, although (he says so himself) that by temperament he is neither a crusader nor a revolutionary, is the said Marshall McLuhan, a Roman Catholic professor at the University of Toronto, the rector since 1963 of the University of Toronto’s Center for Culture and Technology. Some of you will know his books well and therefore will not need me to expound them to you; but, because I find a good many people are not familiar with what he is saying or the radical nature of what he is saying, I thought I ought to attempt to give you a summary of it before subjecting it to a brief critique.

Marshall McLuhan is best known for his reading of human history and also for his interpretation of media. His bestselling books are the two I’ve listed, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*—Johannes Gutenberg was, of course, the inventor of printing—*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media*, and there was another in 1967, *The Medium Is the Massage*, a deliberate play, of course, on “the medium is the message.” By that he means that the medium so gets to work on people, irrespective of what they’ll say, that it massages and manipulates them, and people become victims of the medium itself.

Reactions to Marshall McLuhan vary from brilliant to baffling, outrageous, and demented. In my study of McLuhan, he is a mixture of brilliance and lunacy. I leave it to you to decide, and I hope I shall not be held guilty of slander or libel in saying that.

His reading of history is roughly as follows: Right at the beginning primitive tribal men enjoyed a harmonious existence as a result of the balanced and simultaneous use of all his five senses. All his five senses were employed harmoniously at the same time. They were all in operation as he learned things. Primitive man

sat round his campfire. He was looking, listening, smelling, touching, and tasting, and so on. He was assimilating knowledge, and information was being communicated to him in this very cool way, assimilated through all five senses gradually.

Members of the tribe were conscious of their kinship and their interdependence and of their belonging together; but that idyllic situation, as McLuhan regards it, was spoiled by two inventions. He might almost say diabolical inventions. The first is the invention of the phonetic alphabet several millennia ago, which upset men's sensory equilibrium; so that, instead of learning through the five senses simultaneously, the eye became the dominant sense. As soon as people started writing, they got the alphabet, they committed it to writing, they started writing. And it was by the eye, and what they were reading, that they chiefly took in their knowledge.

The second diabolical invention was the invention of movable type, or print, in the sixteenth century. Johannes Gutenberg is the archenemy in Marshall McLuhan's system, because the invention of printing accelerated this process of decline and made the eye ever more prominent in processes of learning. I am going to quote a lot from McLuhan, and some of it you will be amused because it comes from an interview he had with *Playboy* Magazine. Let me hasten to say I'm not a reader of *Playboy*, but somebody was kind enough to cut the interview out for me, which didn't, I think, corrupt me too much; and I've studied this. It was a very long interview indeed, but a very interesting one to supplement his book.

He writes, "If the phonetic alphabet fell like a bombshell on tribal man, the printing press hit him like a hundred-megaton H Bomb." Now these inventions, the phonetic alphabet and printing, broke up the collective unity of prehistoric society. They made man a fragmented specialist and a selfish individualist. These two inventions, in the McLuhan system, are the ultimate causes of social phenomena like nationalism, industrialization, war, and all the horrors of the modern technological society, and even of psychological states like alienation and schizophrenia. He attributes them all, ultimately, to the invention of the phonetic alphabet and printing.

This is the point: As he sees it, this degeneration from the idyll of primitive man is now beginning to be reversed, because another invention has heralded the dawn of a new age. This was the

invention of the telegraph in 1844, for the new age is the electronic age. To quote him again, “The Gutenberg Galaxy is being eclipsed by the constellation of Marconi.” In McLuhan’s conviction, the promise of this revolution for the future is enormous, because, ultimately, he thinks that the electric or electronic revolution is going to retribalize man. That man, who has become detribalized by printing and the alphabet, is going to be retribalized. His individualism is going to be destroyed, and society is going to become collective again.

Indeed, through the computer, a global collectivism will be created. When this global situation is created—what McLuhan calls “the global village”—all privacy will finally disappear. Everybody will be simultaneously conscious of everybody else at the same moment. It seems to be more like hell than heaven to me, but still this is McLuhan’s idea of the bliss to come.

Now this “global village” will have various benefits and dangers. This is what he says: “TV could conduct daily plebiscites by presenting facts to 200 million people and providing a computerized feedback of the popular will.” And this totally new society which is going to come would include the forthcoming demise of spoken language and its replacement by global consciousness.

I turn now from his philosophy of history to his understanding of media and, in particular, his critique of merely verbal communication. He has a fourfold critique of verbal communication and of Gutenberg, the inventor of printing, who enslaved the world for five centuries to this medium. His thesis is that electric circuitry has totally changed the communication media, although the world has not woken up to it much yet.

Here is the fourfold limitation of print, particularly he is thinking of reading, but the same is true really of speaking and all verbalization, over against television. It is a great advocate of television. This is the fourfold weakness of print against television:

1. It is detached. It alienates the reader from the author. Now I’m an author, of a sort, and when I write I have a cottage in the southwest corner of Wales, which I saw from my jumbo jet as we crossed Wales two or three days ago, 2,000 feet up. I tend to go there to my little retreat when I want to write; and I shut myself up in a little room

I have that is called “the hermitage.” And there in my hermitage I write, and woe betide anybody who interrupts me. Now you, if you’ve been foolish enough to buy any of my books, will probably read them in the privacy of your own room. I’ve written in privacy, you read it in privacy. It’s true we are talking to one another now, but you might never have met me, because print detaches the author from the reader. That is his first point: The printed book added much to the new cult of individualism. Literacy conferred the part of detachment and of noninvolvement, while electric technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement. The instantaneous world of electric informational media involves all of us, all at once, and no detachment or frame is possible. “Ours is a brand-new world of all-at-onceness. Time has ceased, space has vanished. We now live in a global village of simultaneous happening. We’ve begun again to structure primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us.” That is his first critique of print. It detaches you.

2. It is unisensual. It involves only one of our senses. You may think of this as the ear, if you’re listening; or you may think of it as the eye, if you’re reading. But in reading, the eye sees only print and is, in effect, transformed into an ear. Most people find it difficult, says McLuhan, to understand purely verbal concepts. They suspect the ear. They don’t trust it. And, in general, we feel more secure when things are visible, when we can see for ourselves. Television is a totally new technology which demands different sensory responses. It involves all the senses simultaneously, rather than that of sight alone. Television demands participation, an involvement in depth of the whole being. It won’t work as a background. You can’t switch it on and leave it as a background. It engages you. The example he gives is the funeral of President Kennedy, and he says television invested the occasion with the character of corporate participation, involving an entire population in a ritual process.

3. A book, or print, is linear. It appeals only to the logical, linear meaning in that it goes along a line. It is of the essence of words, both spoken and especially printed, that they follow each other in ordered sequence. They appeal most to people trying to think in a linear, logical, sequential way. But, McLuhan says, there are many people who have not been so educated. People who learn by intuition, who learn by participation, by personal discovery, by gradually gleaning fresh ideas. Television lends itself, he says, to that; whereas, there are people who cannot listen to sermons. They cannot concentrate in linear and logical forms of thought.
4. Print is inflexible. It cannot adapt to the particularity of any person or situation. That is, what is written is written. Print reproduces itself hundreds of thousands of times in identical books. Although the readers may be totally different from one another, the book is unable to adapt itself to its reader. The reader may be different in background, temperament, and understanding, but the book cannot adjust. Some television programs, however, can; those, at least, that involve the interview, the dialogue, the debate, which are increasingly popular forms of television.

The distinction that Marshall McLuhan has popularized, as I imagine most of you know, is between what he calls “hot” and “cool” communication. I am quoting now from *Understanding Media*:

A hot medium is one that extends one single sense, maybe the eye or the ear, in high definition or concentration. High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is visually high definition. A cartoon, on the other hand, is low definition, simply because very little visual information is provided, and you are left to supply a great deal that isn't given you in the cartoon. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. Hot media are therefore low in participation. Cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience.

By that means, preaching to him is a hot medium, and he is in favor of the cool media, in which you assimilate gradually and participate in the learning process. So let's apply all that. I hope I have not confused you and am hopeful that this is not new to all of you.

Applying it to our subject, we have to say that sermons and lectures and books with unbroken print are hot. Because listening to the one and reading the other requires a high degree of concentration by virtually one sense—the eye in reading, the ear in listening—there is very little need for fill-in by audience participation. You are given everything. Some of you are almost taking down verbatim what I am saying; or if I went a bit slower, you would be able to. This means it is a hot medium, because I leave you very little to fill in. I am not leaving anything to your imagination.

Television is cool, both because ears and eyes are together involved, and because what is conveyed by most television programs comes over gradually, the plot unfolds slowly, information is gleaned bit by bit, and the viewer participates in the learning process.

Most modern communicators, the argument runs, who are in the communications business, are busy trying to cool hot media. The preacher is the silly fool who hasn't learned what is happening in the world today and is still happy with a hot medium and trying to "hot" it up even more. That, you see, is the argument. Everybody else is trying to cool hot media. Books are increasingly full of illustrations. Newspapers have photographs. They use headlines. They break up the print. The average man, McLuhan says, does not read newspapers. People get into their newspapers every morning like a hot bath. They just absorb them, you see, gradually. They open their pores, but they're not reading. They're not concentrating.

Politicians rely on repetitive slogans. If you've read Joe McGinniss's frightening book, *The Selling of the President*, you'll know how popular Marshall McLuhan's ideas were in the whole Nixon 1968 campaign. McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was actually circulated to all Nixon's aides in order to teach him to play it cool on the medium and how to get across. Get the people to like the guy was the idea. People don't listen to arguments, they can't think logically. Just project an image. It's an image that will win the election. It's not issues. That is very dangerous.

Not issues, but an image. In saying that, I hope I've already begun to say one of the reasons why I so profoundly disagree with Marshall McLuhan. I think that this is acquiescing in a dehumanizing process of encouraging men and women not to use their brains. But I believe men and women are rational creatures, and God has made them rational creatures. It is one of the preacher's tasks to get human beings to be human beings, and to think about the great issues of life, and not to be content with stereotypes, images, and slogans. But I have anticipated, perhaps, my own argument.

But everybody else is trying to make hot media cool. Manufacturers do the same: "My goodness, my Guinness," "Next to myself I like B.V.D. best," and all these advertisements that just give you a little phrase or slogan you can get hold of. The modern advertising industry of Madison Avenue specializes in these things. You pick up a glossy brochure advertising a car, or camera, or a refrigerator. It's the pictures that give you an image that make you buy the car, and all the technical data are relegated to small, microscopic print at the end of the brochure.

That's the cybernetic revolution. Now what is the Christian reaction? There are opposite positions that are being taken. There are some who are saying that Marshall McLuhan is right, and he has sounded the death knell of preachers. Gavin Reid, who is an evangelical Anglican minister in our country, has written a little book called *The Gaggling of God*, which I do not think has been published over here. He has assimilated a lot of McLuhan's stuff, and he says the greatest threat to the gospel in the West today is neither communism, nor apathy, nor humanism, nor impurity of doctrine, nor worldly compromise; but the breakdown of communication. Unless Christians can solve it, not only is the church facing extinction, but Almighty God Himself is gagged. He cannot speak. He can't get through to people.

The group of factors which appear to have effectively gagged God are urbanization; the development of a well-conscious, nonliterary man living in an atmosphere of secularity; the accelerating introversion of practically all forms of Christian activity; etc. We are voices crying in a wilderness of concrete and plastic, full of people who are looking the other way. In other words, they are simply not listening to what we're saying. So what are we to do, he goes on. Should we scrap sermons? The ultimate answer may be yes, he says; but realism demands that we make haste slowly.

Well, that is one extreme. I do not agree with Gavin Reid. He's a friend of mine, but I think he has assimilated McLuhan too uncritically. McLuhan has important things to say, but I do not believe he has sounded the death knell.

Now at the other extreme is Dr. Lloyd-Jones's wonderful, moving book *Preaching and Preachers*. Chapter one is "The Primacy of Preaching." He says this kind of thing: "To me, the work of preaching is the highest, the greatest, the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called. If you want something in addition to that, I would say that, without any hesitation, the most urgent need in the Christian church today is true preaching. Preaching is the primary task of the church, the primary task of the leaders of the church," etc. A little later on in the same book, he says:

There is nothing like it. It's the greatest work in the world, the most thrilling, the most exciting, the most rewarding, the most wonderful. I know of nothing comparable to the feeling one has as one walks up the steps of one's pulpit with a fresh sermon on a Sunday morning or evening, especially when you feel that you've a message from God and a longing to give it to the people. This is something one cannot describe. There is no romance comparable to that of the work of the preacher.

Well, there you get the opposite extremes; one giving in to McLuhan, one virtually ignoring McLuhan. I want to argue for a midway position. Preaching, that is verbal communication, is to me an eternally valid medium. Indeed God Himself has appointed it. I shall say more about this tomorrow. But it does need to be adapted to the modern age, and it does need to be supplemented by other media of communication. Preaching is not the only way by which the fruit of the gospel is to be learned. We've got to be willing to learn from modern educational ideas.

All of us know that in today's schools kids are educated as much by learning as by being taught, as much by undertaking their own projects as by listening passively to teachers. This is a so-called child-centered education, or a heuristic method of learning, the method of learning in which you are finding out, heuristic. The child finds out for himself, as in math and science. He is doing his experiments and so on. This is common in high schools today; and the same is true, I imagine, in many colleges. It may be that even lecturing is largely out of date, and I should never have crossed the Atlantic for this particular cordis.

I expect you know the definition of lecturing, that it's the communication of information from the lecture of notes to the students without it passing through the mind of either. Well, it may be; yet even in lecturing there is a certain encounter between us, as there is in preaching, which I do not think we can do without. There are many colleges today that are learning more by seminars than by lectures only, but that will be a good place for us to stop. Because what I am going to ask is how do people learn, and tell you there are four ways by which they learn, and how this relates to preaching.