**Dialogical preaching: Recovering the lost art of sermonic conversation**

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Should preachers spend less time writing sermons?

I know this is a dangerous question. I was trained up under the adage, “sweat in the study, fire in the pulpit.” If a preacher didn’t spend 15-20 hours a week tightly refining a sermon manuscript, they were committing an injustice against God.

But might the sun be setting on a time when preachers could read carefully prepared sermon manuscripts to the packed-full-pews of already-Christians? Has anybody noticed that no matter how compelling our monologues might be, most congregations are still shrinking?

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For many decades, clergy have been quite literally “preaching to the choir.” Inherited church systems are primarily designed to nurture already-Christians in the life of faith. Meaning, the attractional church model is largely a pastor-teacher centered one in which training up the existing flock is the main work. Those with more apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic gift sets have been pushed to the periphery.

The [2021 Springtide Research](https://www.springtideresearch.org/research/the-state-of-religion-2021) demonstrated that 58 percent of young people ages 13-25 do not like to be told answers about their faith, but indicated they would prefer to ask questions and discover their own answers. 55 percent of the same group don’t attend religious services because they don’t feel free to be who they are in those gatherings. This research suggests that the hallmarks of engaging young people will be curiosity, wholeness, connection, and flexibility.

In fact, the words “getting preachy,” “preaching,” “sermonizing” and so on have negative connotations in the wider culture, and can even be trigger words for those who have been harmed by the church.



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This necessitates a shift in the way we communicate the Gospel. Proclamation must look different in a post-Christendom setting.

We might be surprised to discover that scripted and monological sermons were not the norm across wider church history and cultures. They became the standard of proclamation primarily with the renaissance and the reformation.

Is there a lost form of preaching that needs to be recovered, forgotten behind the curtain of history? Do we have the courage to adapt homiletical practices that have dominated for 500 years?

C.H. Dodd in *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* explains the difference between preaching and teaching, suggesting that preaching “is the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world."[1]

Many scholars agree that the first apostles likely carried an oral tradition about Jesus for a period of time before the gospels came into written form. This treasury of stories about Jesus’ life and teaching came to be known as the *kerygma*, related to the Greek verb κηρÏσσω (kÄrússÅ), literally meaning “to cry or proclaim as a herald.” The apostles traveled the ancient world proclaiming these stories about Jesus and inviting hearers to respond. This ultimately became the core of the early church’s teaching about Jesus.

Further, the art of the sermonic conversation is not a new phenomenon. It is old—*very* old! This was in fact the preferred method of Jesus’ own proclamation.

In his classic *Jesus, The Master Teacher*Herman Horne examines the pedagogy of Jesus. Consider a point from Horne’s analysis:

We may also say that Jesus received attention because he paid attention. He saw and was interested in what people were doing and saying, and in their needs, and in helpful sympathy he drew his soul out unto them.[2]

Can we achieve what Horne calls a “point of contact” with people in a sermonic event? Can we create spaces where we can “pay attention” rather than “command attention”?

Indeed, the idea of standing up delivering a carefully scripted monologue is foreign to the preaching of Jesus. The primary way that Jesus engaged the attention of his hearers was through *questions*. Biblical scholar Martin Copenhaver reports that Jesus asked a total of 307 questions.[3]

Jesus’s parables are also a story-based form of questioning. They invite hearers to locate themselves in the parables. These stories are an intimate matter in the soul of the hearers, inviting even deeper questions, then and now.

When we examine Jesus’s teaching form in this way, we can see where the dominant approach to preaching in the western church misses the mark. Most sermons spring from an interaction between the text and the preacher, with little-to-no input from the congregation.

Of course, when we open the sermonic forum to questions, the exploration will take unexpected twists and turns. This is indeed a different kind of skillset from those often associated with pulpit work in the inherited church. Even the most creative preachers are more skilled at presenting points than guiding a conversation. In some ways, scripted preaching is the easy way out, rather than having to work through the actual reflections people have on the Bible.

In our various Fresh Expressions—forms of church for people who don’t go to church—we have taken a page from the early church’s playbook regarding the *kerygma*. Perhaps their strategy for a pre-Christian world can be adapted to a post-Christian world?

We train our laity to do a simple version of the apostolic practice in home, work, and third places where these small contextual Christian communities gather. Many people who participate can’t or don’t want to attend more traditional forms of church, so we incarnate church with them where they are. These gatherings promote open and honest conversations about the joys and struggles in our lives.

In the context of these conversations, we share “Jesus Stories,” simple, short, retellings about something Jesus said or did in five minutes or less. We equip our laity with simple questions to frame the conversations: What would this story look like today? What if this Jesus story is true? If it is true, how would it make a difference in my life? What is this Jesus story saying to me? What is one small thing I can change in my daily life because of this Jesus story? What is one thing I might do differently? These questions give access for non-Christians to join in the conversation. They are intentionally designed not to be questions with “right” or “wrong” answers, but to invite curiosity and reflection.

People who are not quite comfortable getting “preached at” on Sunday mornings find space to ask questions and join this sermonic conversation. If a formal sermon is a play, with a director guiding the community through a predetermined script, a sermonic conversation is an improvisational sketch. We gather together as a community of equals, and someone offers a line. Then each person improvises their contribution in real time. It’s entirely contextual and particular to the people in that circle. People respond with personal insights, questions, and challenges. The “proclaimer” must shift into the role of “facilitator.”

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This interactive dialogue replaces the proclamation monologue with a didactic, inquiry-based approach. The engagement draws from the collective wisdom of the group. It is modeled after Jesus, the master teacher, who asked more questions than he gave answers. Jesus, who internalized Scripture, rarely read manuscripts, probably never wrote one, but who told lots of stories and parables that invited deeper questions and reflection. These sermons are more dialogue than monologue, but they are a form of proclamation none the less.

Sermonic conversations are not “Bible lite” or “almost sermons” they are deeply transformative for the community. We start with a biblical text, we engage that text together, locate ourselves in the story, and finally wrestle with the implications for our lives.

Here are some key advantages to proclamation in this form, particularly outside traditional church settings:

* Anyone can lead these Biblical dialogues. It’s an “every member” ministry (1 Pet. 2:9).
* Enquirers can easily join in, even if they are agnostic, atheist, or “spiritual but not religious” (Acts 8:26-40).
* Scripture does the evangelism and disciple-making, as the Holy Spirit works on each person’s heart at his or her own pace (Rom. 10:17).
* Christians share their faith almost without knowing it. You don’t have to be a long-term disciple or seminary trained to tell a story and ask some questions (Matt. 25:37-38).
* Seekers see how the Bible and the Christian community impact life (Jn. 8:30).
* Leadership is shared with newcomers, increasing their commitment to the group (Jn. 4:29).
* New Christians learn how to study the Bible, apply it to their lives, share it with their friends, and find helpful resources (Jn. 4:39-42).
* If the leader moves on, the group has the means to keep going. Sustainability is built in (1 Thess. 2:17).

This helps inherited congregations expand to become a constellation of little communities spread across an entire parish. These gatherings are distributed throughout a seven-day work week, meeting at different times and places, making church more accessible to those not currently connected with any congregation. Perhaps dialogical sermons are a reawakening of early Methodism’s field preaching for the 21st century?

If you find these ideas resonating in your bones, here’s two resources that go much deeper. In [*Fresh Expressions in a Digital Age*](https://www.ministrymatters.com/product/9781791023843) Rosario Picardo and I provide an entire chapter titled “From Monologues to Dialogues.” Additionally, in [*Fresh Expressions of the Rural Church*](https://www.cokesbury.com/Fresh-Expressions-of-the-Rural-Church?refq=fresh%20expressions)Tyler Kleeberger and I devote an entire chapter to “Preaching Non-Downloadable Content.”

If I can help you implement these resources, please reach out at [michaeladambeck.com](https://michaeladambeck.com/)

[1] Dodd, C.H. *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (Harper & Row, New York and Evanston, 1964) 7.

[2] Horne, Herman. *Jesus, The Master Teacher* (HardPress Publishing, Miami, FL), 13.

[3] Copenhaver, Martin*. Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), xix, 71.