

Online Preaching: The Conversation Style

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Figure 1¹

There can be many forms or styles of online preaching. In this essay, I'd like to explore the conversational style in depth, one of the styles that preaching practitioners have enjoyed implementing in their various ministry contexts, especially during the pandemic.

General Description

In this style, the preacher appears as a friendly conversation partner with her “invisible” listeners or sermon viewers beyond the camera. The preacher typically sits behind the table, looking at the camera on the same optical plane/level. The background and the surrounding environment would feel comfortable and friendly, perhaps including a plant or a vase of flowers in sight. Most importantly, the preacher’s presence appears highly pastoral, and her vocal tone and style of speaking is very conversational. With the preacher on the same visual plane/level as the camera, viewers would feel like they are sitting across the table from the preacher. As the preacher realizes that she is now “conversing” with individuals behind the camera lens, the preacher often offers rhetorical or actual interpretive questions to aid the viewers’ perceived or imagined participation in the sermonic event. Rather than using a manuscript, preaching with short notes often works better in this style as the preacher is expected to keep constant eye contact with the camera (that is, with the listeners).

Details of the Style

Who (Preacher’s Role and Expectations)

First off, this style is recommended for the preachers who have adopted the podium style as their mainstay and want to change the mode of sermon delivery, but not too radically. Compared to other styles explored in the following chapters, this style’s creativity level is relatively low (or manageable) and cost-effective (low cost), and still the preacher, like the podium style, has significant control over the sermon content and sermon delivery; that is, a minimum level of spontaneity is required. Thus again, for conventional brick-and-mortar pulpit preachers, this style is an “easy” try. Secondly, for more people-oriented, relational preachers, this style could serve them best. They will be able to create, and even experience for themselves during sermon delivery, better relational-pastoral intimacy between the preacher and the

¹ For a sample, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psICh2IP2-E&feature=youtu.be>, accessed March 1, 2022.

listeners, which is rarely achievable in typical digital sermonic communication, except for the Zoom/chat style (see Chapter Nine).

Why (Merits; Homiletic, Spiritual, Ecclesial, etc.)

As implied above, the relational-pastoral intimacy between the preacher and the listeners is one of the strongest merits of this style. In certain contexts, like during the pandemic or when some listeners have been physically challenged for a long time or permanently,² the in-person contact between the preacher and the listeners could hardly happen, which leads to the natural degradation of the relational intimacy between the preacher and the listeners. The conversation style may become an effective aid in these kinds of unfortunate situations, increasing the impact of pastoral care over the listeners. Another great merit of this style is an active, though limited, biblical-interpretive interaction between the preacher and the congregation. For instance, the preacher could solicit a certain number of questions or comments on the sermon passage from the listeners prior to the worship service and then incorporate them into the actual sermon delivery. This way, the level of the congregation's attention to, and their participation in, the sermon's meaning-making can be more elevated. See below as explained more in Practical Tips.

Where (Worship Space)

Unlike the podium style, which more often than not happens in the physical church building setting, the conversation style can be practiced either in the church building, the preacher's office, or even at the preacher's residential place if needed (in cases like when the church building is closed due to the pandemic or severe weather). In the case of the sample preaching (follow Figure 1's link), which happened during the pandemic in 2020, the pastor set up the "pulpit table" (the author's own term) in front of the actual pulpit area and recorded his sermon during the week for later broadcasting. An interesting thing is that the viewers of the sermon do not actually see the church's pulpit area thanks to the digital curtain—created by digital editing of the original recording—behind the sitting pastor, which may have created a very comfortable seeker-church type of ecclesial environment. Of course, the preacher may want to show the whole pulpit area in an ecclesial setting where the congregation is accustomed to the traditional liturgical ethos. In either case, the preacher, since she will still be preaching from the pulpit area or the theater-type contemporary worship stage, may find herself relaxed in a familiar preaching space. All that considered, again, preaching from the preacher's office and the preacher's home are also fine possibilities. With close collaboration with the digital worship design team (if there is a team!), the preacher should be quickly able to cope with emergency occasions and turn their everyday familiar place into a sacred worship ground, with a simple pulpit table and a digital curtain.

When (Time of Preaching)

² Shannon Dingle, "Quitting Online Church Is Abandoning the One for the 99," accessed March 1, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/02/02/quitting-online-church-is-abandoning-the-one-for-the-99/>. In her article, Dingle presents how much online church or preaching has helped the spiritual life of disabled people during the recent pandemic.

Both live-streaming on Sunday morning or broadcasting after recording are possible depending on the pastor or the church's preference and circumstance. Obviously, when doing live streaming, it is crucial to have close logistical collaboration with the worship design team or assistants, especially in the use of the worship space in the physical building. It would be important to move the pulpit table, if it has to be placed in the desired spot in the middle of the live service, without the worship reviewers noticing it. In order to avoid any logistical issues, either preparing the service with a team or for themselves, preachers may want to record the sermon during a weekday and incorporate it into the rest of the live-streamed worship. In the latter's case, it will be very important for the beginning and ending of the message to fit well into the overall flow of the service.

What (Message Construction)

As the style's name designation indicates, dialogical or conversational message construction works best for the style. This style's major difference, compared to the Zoom/chat style (which is explored in Chapter Nine), is its more designed or intentional formality in message construction. Clearly, this style will present less formality than that of the podium style in terms of its amiable verbal tone and less reliance on fully scripted communication. Accordingly, simple sermon notes (outline), or no notes depending on the preacher's preference and capacity, will help maximize communicative effectiveness as the preacher is expected to "converse with" the sermon viewers through the camera lens. Of course, the preacher may still have a full manuscript—yet left behind at the study desk, from which she gets the useful outline for the actual sermon delivery. It is recommended that even when writing the full manuscript, the preacher would have the imaginative sermon dialogical partner in mind, wittingly creating enough room in the manuscript itself for that imaginative dialogue. For instance, during the conversational sermon delivery, novel questions may pop up in the preacher's head, which is typical in actual in-person dialogue. When that happens, rather than sticking to the (partially memorized) manuscript or the sermon notes, the preacher may develop a new (but not totally new, of course) direction of the sermon. In sum, modest room for spontaneity or impromptu communication works fine in this style.

Useful Homiletical Theory

Several homiletics have provided useful theoretical insights that are helpful for the conversation style, even though their discussions are mostly round in-person conversational preaching. Here is a quick summary of them.

Insight One: Rhetoric of Listening

In conversational preaching, we may conceive preaching as a "rhetoric of listening."³ First and foremost, before actual preaching, the preacher would listen to interpretive insights (on a particular text) of the congregants, stories of their lives (in relation to the text), and previously silenced voices from the margins of the congregation (now empowered by the text). This art of listening can be achieved by a dialogical form of preaching that McClure names "collaborative

³ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Preaching: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 7.

preaching.” By dialogical collaborative preaching, he does not suggest either holding conversations from the pulpit nor a two- or three-party dialogue sermon in which obviously two or three preachers speak for one sermon. Rather, his proposal is “to move closer to a model of single-party preaching that faithfully represents a collaborative process of sermon preparation.”⁴ When this collaborative process is successful, preaching may include “the actual language and dynamics of collaborative conversation on biblical texts, theology, and life,”⁵ and it can empower congregational self-leadership and mission centered around Christian Scripture. This collaborative process can help very much abate the predominant individualized or privatized faith construction of the West today. In life, or even in worship, we tend to look for texts that address our individual lives only and apply lessons and insights of the text to our own situations only. When people come to the interpretive roundtable together and share their (different) thoughts on the text with *others*, especially those from the margins of society or the congregation, people would soon begin to expand their siloed hermeneutical horizons, which could make the interpretation and application of text richer and wider.

Insight 2

“Complete incompleteness” of the sermon is totally acceptable in the conversational style, I argue elsewhere.⁶ We preachers tend to and want to have full control on the sermon’s message and even how the message is perceived by the listeners. For instance, when there is one key message in the sermon, the preacher wants to have that message transferred and “planted” in the minds of the listeners exactly in the way she constructed the message—thus, all listeners must have one single, same message at the end of hearing the sermon! Most preachers know that this is an ideal that is rarely achieved. What actually happens phenomenologically is that listeners will construct their own unique interpretive meanings of the same message. Surely, their interpretive meanings could be similar or even identical to each other at times; but again, not always or only rarely. This phenomenon I call complete incompleteness. In the sense that the preacher’s message is not delivered to or perceived by all the listeners as one single complete message, the sermon is incomplete. But still, that incompleteness of the sermon is *complete*, or at least good enough, as long as the preacher has completed the communication of her message faithfully and sincerely. This complete incompleteness should be a, if not the, *modus operandi*, of the conversational style of online preaching as conversation by its nature is meant to be open-ended communication enabling conversationalists to create their own meanings out of what is communicated back and forth. Simply put, preachers, when speaking in the conversation style, are encouraged to be more conscious about their tendency of full control over the sermon’s message and to be more intentional in allowing the listeners’ own meaning-making of the sermon’s message.

Insight 3

Rotate the roundtable membership. The same group of people may participate in a roundtable for a designated period of time, like three months or six months. Then, it would be

⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ See chapter two, “Picasso and Preaching (Cubism),” from Sunggu Yang, *Arts and Preaching: An Aesthetic Homiletic for the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

recommended to create groups of other volunteer participants from the congregation, in particular “invisible” members of the congregation. In that sense, inviting children or youth into the “adult” roundtable is a great possibility, thus creating an intergenerational group. Also, purposeful creation of a multicultural or multiracial group, as well as groups of different genders and sexual orientations, should be put into consideration. After all, ideally, listening to *the whole congregation* during a certain span of time is highly encouraged.

Practical Tips

Be Open to Fluidity and Polyphony: Fluidity and usability are the two hallmark traits in this style. As the preacher creates a conversation with the listeners akin to the Round Table Pulpit model proposed by John S. McClure, the preached or conversed Word will welcome many different interpretations of Scripture. That is, the preacher’s interpretation and application of Scripture in this style are generally wide open as she invites the listeners’ own fluid explorations and applications of it in their unique *sitz im leben*. In this way, the listeners become virtual contributors to the preaching event.

Conversation over the Text: It is critical, though not required, to initiate pre-sermon conversations on the preached sermon text, at least about two weeks or ideally a month before. As McClure suggests, the preacher and the congregation (the focus group or a random group each week) can do this through regular weekly in-person meetings. Yet, recently, there are two other feasible options “in trend” available: weekly Zoom roundtable talks or Google Docs brainstorming.

Zoom talks must be desirable for the congregation who favors live interaction among (un)familiar church members. A minor disadvantage of this method is that people may not become fully candid in expressing their opinions (about the text) in front of other participants.

Then, Google Docs should be a great option. On Google Docs, the facilitator-preacher may ask participants, as they write their own thoughts on the text, to put their names (first or last name only, or initials) or not to put any identity signifiers so that they could feel much more comfortable. The preacher may want to open a new Google Docs file on a new text at least a month before actual preaching and encourage the congregation to become collaborative exegetes. As Google Docs allows for making comments on each other’s written pieces, the preacher and the participants should be able to have very rich written “conversations” along the way.

Finally, for more tech-savvy and smartphone-using MZ generations, Google Docs may feel quite “boring” and inconvenient (in a practical sense, it’s not really convenient to open and type on a doc via a smartphone). For them, doing similar collaborative textual exploration on such SMS platforms like Twitter, WhatsApp, WeChat, KakaoTalk, or in a Facebook group is much more familiar and convenient. The conversations can become more creative on those platforms (e.g., conversations involving various emoticons). Do a simple survey around the congregation regarding what method or digital platform a majority of the population prefers.

Directional Yet Open-Ended Questions Provided: Without a proper direction, exegetical conversations on a given text could develop in almost every imaginative way, which is not ideal for a single sermon. Thus, a certain direction is needed, with a good degree of open-endedness; this preacher-provided direction, however, should not become a hinderance to the participants’ wide, healthy interpretive imagination on the text. All that considered, simple yet thought-provoking directional questions should be ideal either at the beginning of the Zoom talk

or of the Google Docs file. The following questions are only a handful of samples among endless possibilities (surely, each different text would demand a different set of questions):

What connection do you see between this given text and what comes before and after the text?
What interpretations or ideas have you heard about the given text?
Whose voice is loud and whose voice is silenced in this parable?
If any, what images or personal memories come to mind when reading?
What objects in this story get your immediate attention?
What words or phrases get your immediate attention?
What conflict(s) do you see in this text or story?
What does God seem to be doing in this text?
What does this story seem to want the readers to learn and do upon hearing?
Do you fully agree with what the author of the text seems to say and affirm?

Alternatively, if a more structured direction is preferred, the preacher may want to create sets of questions, based McClure's five languages or stages of textual exploration introduced in the previous section. The preacher will create 3-4 questions for each stage, all relevant to the text in focus.

Sermon Beginning with Questions: Since good conversations can begin with good questions, it would be great to begin the conversational style sermon with a good question or a series of questions as an introduction to the sermon. What questions, then? The preacher may want to utilize the same or similar questions that are used for a particular text, as shown above. As the congregation (or a select group) has explored the text with the familiar questions over the past weeks or month, they would greatly appreciate the preacher's handling of the questions at the pulpit table. Naturally, those questions will draw the viewers' attention and help their active engagement with the sermon.

Several Questions, If Not a Question Per Move: Like the introduction of the sermon beginning with a question, it is recommended that each move (i.e., a significant meaning block) of the main body of the sermon begins with a thought-raising question. Again, this is the conversation style, which means that the preacher should create an imaginative dialogue with the audience and keep her dialogical tone of speaking throughout the sermon. Good questions dropped along the full sermonic movement would help the preacher achieve both well! Of course, the whole sermon should not become like a long Q&A session on the text. The preacher will have a concrete message to proclaim, again with a certain degree of open-endedness. Questions are engineered to smoothly get to the message that is shareable in a friendly way with the dialogical sermon viewers.

Hand Gestures and Facial Expressions. The preacher should know that as the preacher always stays seated, the viewer's immediate attention goes to the preacher's torso, hand gestures, and facial expressions. When emphasizing certain points of the sermon, use appropriate hand gestures as shown in the above sample image. Otherwise, it would be better to put both hands on the table softly and naturally so that the preacher appears well-poised. In the sample image, the preacher holds a hand mic; however, if possible, a lavalier may work better as it gives more freedom to the preacher's hands. Too many dramatic facial expressions would not work best in the conversational style (of course, they would work best for the drama style discussed in Chapter Seven). Before the delivery, the preacher would like to do an exercise of imagining herself naturally talking with a friend over a coffee table.

Simple Props and Background: If needed, small simple props that could assist the sermon's points would work well. Again, those props should not generate too much dramatic impact. Changing the preacher's background image in accordance with the focal message of the day is possible and even at times recommended. The same can easily apply to all styles of online preaching discussed in this book.

Final Remarks

We now live in a time when people are in felt hunger of good conversations. Good conversations give us delight and help us mine hidden or forgotten meanings of life. We all surely love those good conversations. It would be so great if the preacher can be a one who could become a delightful conversation partner for the congregation even though through the screen—again, remember that some folks can be only approached through the screen for various reasons. Then, preaching must be a wonderful source of strength and grace for daily life and a catalyst for the robust *conversational ecclesiological* life.