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BOOK REVIEW

Digital homiletics: The theology and practice of online preaching

Yang, Sanggu A. (2024) Fortress Press: Minneapolis. 173 pages.

The author, Sanggu A. Yang, lives in Portland, Oregon, and is a lecturer at George Fox University in Newberg. This book, *Digital homiletics: The theology and practice of online preaching* was published in 2024 and written during the pandemic in 2020-2022.

With the outbreak of the global pandemic, online preaching was a useful tool for ministers and faith leaders to continue delivering and designing sermons. However, prior to the pandemic, many preachers did not use or rely on online preaching and were forced to explore and make use of the possibility of online preaching. Even after congregations regathered in person, online preaching became a consistent part of most of our ministries. With the sudden onset of the pandemic, many preachers were not allowed sufficient time to learn and adapt to the unique techno-theological reasoning and ways of social communication embedded in online preaching. This has led, in many instances, to the practice of online preaching standing on “shaky theoretical grounds”, as Yang calls it, and the ineffectiveness of the online pulpit.

With his book, Yang provides preachers with a theological homiletic framework for the practice of online preaching and applicable homiletic strategies. This educational, theological, and critical resource for online preaching provides preachers



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with insights on how online preaching can be done faithfully. The structure of the book moves from a firm and unique theological homiletic framework for the practice of online preaching (Chapter 1) to the remainder of the book (Chapters 2 to 11), where ten different styles of online preaching with hands-on strategies and tips for online preaching can be found. With slight modifications, these ten styles are also applicable to in-person preaching.

Yang made use of Karl Barth's threefold definition of God's Word (the written Word of God (Scripture), the revealed Word of God (Christ), and the proclaimed Word of God. He proceeded to a fourth emerging digital dimension of God's Word – the Word digitalised. He presents it in three ways, similar to the threefold definition of God's Word (Karl Barth). He continues to discuss its theological and homiletic implications, by focusing on the seven new traits it includes, in addition to the six "traditional" traits that can be identified in the threefold definition of God's Word.

According to Yang, many homileticians across different cultural contexts have built their homiletic practice on these six traits. For them, this six-trait Word suffices for effective preaching in most of the contexts. But for him, online preaching differs from conventional preaching and has its own unique ways of social communication.

To him, a fourth dimension of the Word arose with the pandemic, including the emergence of online preaching. The pandemic contributed to the vital role the digitalised Word plays in the practice of preaching. There are three forms of the digitalised Word, namely written, incarnated, and preached. The digitalised Word generates seven new traits: fluidity, usability, cross-cultural ubiquity, connectivity, instant communication, holistic artistry, and shareability. According to Yang, effective online preaching would be wise if combining the "old" six traits with the new seven traits and creating a new configuration for homiletic practice and theory. The threefold definition of God's Word engendered six theological homiletic traits such as immutability, reliability (the written Word); proximity (reality), presence (the incarnated Word), transformance, and assurance (the preached Word).

The seven traits can be naturally or intentionally included in the ten styles of online preaching to which Yang refers in his book. He admits that there are more than ten styles of online preaching. He chose these ten because they are the most widely available and reliable options at this point for the preached Word digitalised. Some homiletic overlapping occurs between the ten different online preaching styles regarding the utilisation of the seven traits in terms of the way in which the different styles share several traits. Yang advises that each style is best developed by maximising a selection of traits.

The publication of this volume was called for by the practical homiletic ramifications (including online preaching) of the global pandemic. According to Yang, the practice of online preaching stands on shaky theoretical ground, for the sudden onset of the pandemic did not allow enough time for preachers to adopt these new traits of the digitalised Word. In many instances, this has led to the ineffectiveness of the online pulpit. He thus sensed a need for a concrete theology of online preaching and applicable homiletic strategies. This book intends to help preachers consider the options of the Word digitalised (including the opportunities and challenges different styles invite) and spur others on to continue to develop homiletic tools that are communicatively effective and theologically sound for the online era.

Yang provides preachers with a theological framework to approach online preaching from a more theological perspective. He also provides practical tips for preachers in congregations (who have to do some form of online preaching) to consider when using the different styles. The presentation of the ten different styles of doing online preaching (including an artistic illustration of each style) provides readers with various options to consider when choosing an online preaching style (apart from the survival mode style one often uses!). He categorises the ten styles, to which he refers, in such a way that it can help preachers be aware of various strategies that are available for adaptation with the various different online contexts and audiences. Complementary to his discussion of the ten different styles, he presents useful homiletic insights that preachers can consider, in order to enhance the effectiveness of their communication within a specific style of online preaching. The flow of the argument and structure of the book are easy to follow. The book is written in such a way that even non-academics will be able to follow.

HyeRan Kim-Cragg writes in his Foreword to this book that the theological homiletic framework encountered in the work of Yang “is timely, theologically grounded, and helpfully practical”. The book is primarily written for preachers who deliver and design sermons for an online congregation (in other words, preachers who have only the medium of a digital screen to communicate with the online “viewers”, without any in-person congregation in front of them). Although Yang briefly refers to the fact that the seven traits can be slightly adapted for an in-person congregation, the book primarily focuses on preaching to an online congregation, and with this, he not only leaves behind, to some extent, preaching to an in-person congregation, but also preaching to a “hybrid” congregation, where the congregants are found online as well as in-person. I still view this book as a helpful and valuable resource for those considering different ways of creative and innovative preaching. Every congregational minister should read this book.