Changing the Medium and Keeping the Message

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Introduction

Reaching a Secular Age

Christianity Today reported, "This is not a fad, this is not some sort of temporary trend – multisite churches are here to stay" (Stetzer, 2014). Multisite churches are built on the basis that a pastor is successful and engaging, and the best way to expand the congregation is to plant another church to accommodate the growth. However, no new pastor is hired; instead screens carry the image and message of the successful and engaging pastor to the new location. It is a logical answer to a society indoctrinated in media. Because of this, 67% of Protestant churches now use screens in their church services or at their events (Barna Group, 2015). David McDaniel, a multisite video venue expert, when asked how long a church could survive on video preaching, responded to this question (as cited in Stanley, 2012, p. 285), by stating, "When we sense that video teaching is no longer an effective means of leading people in a growing relationship with Jesus Christ in that particular church, we will transition to a live communicator."

Traditional churches are struggling to engage the culture, and, to address this, many new churches are beginning to model businesses. The intense individualization in America now dominates the culture. Whereas traditional Christianity used to be the norm, and truth was synonymous with fact, religion is now completely personal and truth is relative – even within the church. James Taylor describes an age of "contested belief" in which "religious belief is no longer axiomatic" (Smith, 2014, p. 142). If Christianity is optional, then many Christians believe they must make their religion appealing to the culture. This has caused the landscape of churches in America to shift from an intimate gathering of Christians to a more business-like, tech-savvy

industry. If deviating from hymnals used to be shocking, the light shows and telecasted sermons of the modern church should cause Christians to stop and seriously consider this change.

Multi-site churches must carefully consider why this shift toward screens has occurred within the church, and what long term ramifications, both positive and negative, it will bring. Projecting a sermon to various remote church locations is a phenomenon that quickly took hold of the modern-day church, leaving little time for analysis. This phenomenon has changed, and will continue to change, Sunday sermons and the overall structure of the church. Four theories of communication can be used to illuminate why multisite church planting is so successful, as well as the implications of this type of preaching.

<p style="text-align:center">A Successful Persuasion</p>

In Mark 16:15 the Great Commission is given to the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. Chester and Timmis (2008) contend that the way people "do church" should be shaped by gospel and community. They nuance the gospel aspect of this statement to mean the church should both center around the gospel message, as well as the call to missions and evangelism given by Jesus. For many churches, the best way to create community, proclaim the gospel and reach the lost is through expanding an already-present church into a multisite church.

In order to better understand the present and the future of multisite churches and their swift expansion, it is important to first understand how, in a matter of years, churches went from hymnals, pulpits and suits to projectors, lights and screens. Why did this trend start, and why is it likely here to stay? There are two theories of persuasion that can be used as lenses through which to view this cultural phenomenon: Social Judgment Theory and the Theory of Cognitive Dissonance.

Social Judgement Theory

Those who regularly attend church usually have a high ego-involvement in church. This means that the issue is part of the person's self-concept and is held in high esteem (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Church is an activity of central importance in a Christian's life, and Christians often include church membership as a part of their self-concept. Because churchgoers are often highly ego-involved, they hold strong opinions when it comes to preferences and issues surrounding the church. According to research conducted by Lifeway, 65% of people prefer an in-person sermon to a projected sermon, and about a third of people will only visit a church if the sermon is in-person. Additionally, Lifeway reports that less than one percent of people prefer a video sermon (Smietana, 2013). Screens are clearly not the preference, yet people are happily attending multi-site churches with projected sermons. Based on Social Judgement Theory, either people have pacified their uncertainties with platitudes, or there is a far more fundamental reason for the shift. This thought can be further developed under the lens of the Cognitive Dissonance Theory.

Cognitive Dissonance

Festinger (1957) described Cognitive Dissonance as any belief, opinion or knowledge that is inconsistent, or dissonant, with other beliefs. For churchgoers, this means believing live preaching is ideal or morally right and yet attending a church with a projected pastor. Because of the high ego-involvement and the general preference for in-person preaching, cognitive dissonance has occurred among those who, despite tradition and personal preference, choose to attend these churches. Leon Festinger (1957) wrote, "When such inconsistencies are found to exist, they may be quite dramatic, but they capture our interest primarily because they stand out in sharp contrast against a back-ground of consistency" (p. 1). For centuries projected images were not a part of Sunday services, and now, against the backdrop of consistency, the sharp

contrast of multisite churches is drawn. One of the reasons dissonance can arise, according to Festinger, is the addition of new information. For Christians, this new information is technology. The technology of projecting pastors left those attending multisite churches with cognitive dissonance. However, when dissonance is experienced, it motivates people to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance (Festinger, 1957). To achieve this consonance, Christians have used the process of assimilation. Assimilation is a process of changing one's perception of an issue to make it more closely align with one's personal views (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). As it applies to multisite churches, this means that those who attend these churches mentally convince themselves they completely support this style of church. Because of this process, there are now over 8,000 multisite churches and over five million people who worship at these multisite churches. Those who attend stand by the claims that multisite churches spread the gospel more effectively, reach an increased number of people, and streamline church planting.

Putting Theories Together

Overlaying these two theories of persuasion provides a lens through which the shift in the church can be viewed. Stanley (2012) poses the question, "Do we want to be guardians of a model or do we want to be a church unchurched people love to attend?" (p. 285). Stanley's point here is that ego-involvement in the church is high, but ego-involvement in sharing the gospel should be higher. It also suggests that cognitive dissonance in this shift may be uncomfortable, but the knowledge that the church is ignoring a better way to reach the lost should be far more uncomfortable for Christians. Supporting this thought, senior pastor for multisite Summit Church, J.D. Greer, commented in an interview with Michael Bird (2014), "We can bless people when we are closer to them. That's why we plant campuses—to bring the ministry closer to home." These two motivations suggest the church adapted to reach the lost.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

However, with high ego-involvement and a decision that creates dissonance, the decision to use screens should have been one that took time, deliberation, defense and discussion over the course of many years. In a sense, screens have reformed the church as a whole. The Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion suggests that decisions are made one of two ways: The central route to persuasion or the peripheral route to persuasion. The central route is used when scrutiny and critical thinking is involved. The peripheral route uses social cues and reinforcement to skip steps in critical thinking and reach an easier conclusion (Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2015). Robert Cialdini (1984) believes that reciprocation, commitment and consistency, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity can all motivate, influence and persuade people. Even on a decision as important as choosing a church, the opinions of others, the potential to fit in and be loved and the idea of being liked are strongly persuasive; people want to be "cool," and with 72% of people believing the church is out of touch with reality and 78% believing it is old-fashioned, using technology to make the church "cool," is enticing. Dave Ronne, a pastor of a church in Georgia that utilizes video technology, said in an interview with CNN, "We live in an audio-visual society," so people "are accustomed to getting messages via a screens" (Blake, 2010). This is a trend that the church can, and has decided, to meet.

This explains the speed and ferocity with which church culture has shifted. Christianity is one religion among many. Religion today is axiomatic, and the purpose of the church, in both content and mission, is gospel centered. Because of this, the church adapted to continue reaching the culture. Christians are different, and screens give them a sense of social proof and validation in religion. When multisite churches were planted and people approved, the multisite church

model exploded. The screens produced liking for the church both inside and outside the church, and liking is persuasive.

There is nothing wrong with a desire to have social proof and liking, and there is nothing wrong with a secular society approving and liking the church. Of the twenty-four million young people outside the church, less than half a million young people see evangelicals in a positive light (Kinnaman, 2007). This statistic leaves room for image improvement, and the utilization of technology seems to be the answer. The decision to plant multisite churches accomplished its original goal, and the report is good: Multisite churches are growing faster than other churches, have more lay participation and are reaching a greater number of new believers (Bird, 2014). Now that the decision has been made, it is important to look at how the change is affecting the projected sermon itself.

Media Ecology

"Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned" (McLuhan, 2003, p. 5). McLuhan (2003) is known for coining the phrase "the medium is the message" (later altered to "the medium is socially the message"), implying that the medium used to communicate a message will directly influence the content of that message (p. 17-18). Just as the life of Jesus is told differently in a children's book than in a movie, so a sermon that is recorded and digitized will be told differently than a sermon preached in person for a specific moment in time. Digital media has individualized society, removed space and time and eliminated the necessity for context. These four facets of digital communication provide a lens through which one can analyze how projected sermons affect the content of each message.

Individualization

According to McLuhan (1962), "Corporate individualism had become the scandal of a society long invested with corporate and collective values" (p. 12). Typography transformed the landscape of space as people began to read silently and passively – People became consumers of media (McLuhan, 1962). If typography individualized society centuries before mass media, social networks and individualized media shattered the communal experience. The choice to use virtual sermons and utilize media removes the pastor from the congregation and allows people to "consume" the sermon, re-watch the sermon and decide with which aspects of the sermon they agree or disagree. For example, 67% of people believe that the church is full of hypocrites who condemn and criticize others for doing the same things they are doing themselves (Steter, Stanley, & Hayes, 2009). However, 63% of people also report that if the church presented truth in an understandable, personally relatable way, they would attend (Steter et al. , 2009). This presents a dichotomy for pastors attempting to teach Christians while also reaching the lost. Within a congregation, this tension can be evaluated and weighed. When preaching to thousands, there is no winning side. People will watch and analyze the sermon in private and make personal verdicts. Because of this, recorded sermons often seem more like self-help messages or outright gospel presentations rather than sermons crafted to challenge, convict, edify and disciple Christians that they may know God more and share the gospel. The individualization of projected sermons deters messages of controversial nature and replaces them more consumer friendly messages that appeal to universal audiences.

Space and Time

McLuhan (2013) wrote that media has created a world in which everyone lives in close proximity to one another via a network created by electronic involvement in one another's lives. He quotes W.B. Yeats (as cited in McLuhan, 2013, p. 54), who wrote, "The visible world is no

longer a reality and the unseen world is no longer a dream." Time is both saved and evaded with media. Words spoken in a pulpit are heard and forgotten. They are suspended in air for a fragment of time before they disappear. For multisite churches, words are documented and recorded forever. For pastors who project themselves on a screen, this is worth noting. For example, Jim Burgen, pastor of a church in Colorado, preached a sermon where he addressed the legalization of marijuana for about 90 seconds. His son called him the next day to tell him his sermon had gone viral (Lee, 2014). Despite what Burgen may have intended, his words are now immortalized outside time and space. This begs the question: Would Burgen have changed his statement had he known it would be immortalized?

Knowledge of sermons existing beyond the words that form them will change the sermon content. A journal entry and blog post on the same topic will look different because the audience is different. In a journal, brutal honesty and raw emotions are recorded; on the other hand, in a blog post these same emotions will be tapered, edited, and revised to be aesthetically pleasing, less controversial and more universally appealing. The moment a work is recorded and put outside time and space, the message is tailored. The opportunity for viral sermons means the opportunity to reach millions of people with the gospel. However, sermons on topics like gay marriage, tithing, drunkenness and even evangelism will look radically different when the sermon is presented to thousands of people, most of whom the pastor will never know.

For example, 91% of people outside the church think that the church is antihomosexual (Kinnaman, 2007). If Stanley is preparing a sermon on a passage addressing sexual sin, he must choose his words extremely carefully so as to not perpetuate the image that Christians hate homosexuals while also holding true to the gospel. For a pastor whose sermons are mere words to a congregation, concepts are remembered and the congregation is left thinking, but the pastor

need not weigh each word in fear that a single slip could wreck their public image. Words that are recorded need to be carefully considered not simply because they exist outside of time, but also because they can be taken out of context.

Context

Virtual sermons provide the opportunity to take words out of context. This may not change the message so much as the attitude with which the message is presented. Jim Burgen's comments were aimed at the medical uses of the marijuana, but the context was not conveyed when the story went viral. He had to go back and comment on the context of his comment and clarify his statement (Lee, 2014). Before mass media, this would never have occurred. Everyone present to hear the sermon would have known the context, and when the story was retold, it would be retold as it was understood in context. The need for context lies in the fact that Christians are seen as homophoics, bigots, and hypocrites in modern American society. It is easy to take comments made by pastors and tweet them out of context. Choosing to record and project sermons in multisite churches is a choice to allow for this possibility. Because of this, sermons tend toward less controversial issues that, while beneficial, leave Christians with sermons that ignore portions of scripture. Fear that remarks in that type of sermon could be quoted out of context and immortalized outside time and space create a powerful deterrent for pastors.

Conclusion

Neil Postman (1985) wrote that, "Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images" (p. 93). People want to be amused. They want to be engaged and entertained on an individual level. Religion is axiomatic in 2016 American society, and churches have adapted to meet that shift. The temptation for multi-site churches to become businesses whose sole purpose is to attract people and entertain is

overwhelming. If Christians are claiming to use multisite churches to further the gospel, it is important for them to take a step back and evaluate why they are using the screens, the way this shift has affected the message they are proclaiming and their motivation for the sermon itself. The persuasion for using the screens lies in the fact that Christians' ego-involvement and cognitive dissonance is outweighed by the need to share the gospel. In a desire to meet society and achieve liking, the church has decided to use screens. Now that this shift has occurred, however, the sermon content has changed. The message is adapted to accommodate the individualized nature of society, the immortalization of words said, and the knowledge that controversial words can be quoted out of context and used as weapons against Christians. This looks different for Tim Keller than it does for Andy Stanley, but nevertheless, the message changes. Like McLuhan stated, the medium is socially the message. The church has changed their medium, and they are now faced with the challenge of not changing or watering down their gospel or their God. The reasons for the shift are persuasive, but Christians must hope that McLuhan was incorrect and their use screens will fulfill the church's mission of creating community, proclaiming the gospel and evangelizing to the lost. The outstanding question for Christians remains: Can they change their medium and prove McLuhan wrong by keeping their gospel message?

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