

Preaching and the Thirty-Second Commercial

*Lessons from Advertising
for the Pulpit*

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AND
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*Preface to the
“Preaching and . . .” Series*

Preachers are not just preachers. When they step into the pulpit they are also theologians, storytellers, biblical teachers, pastors, historians, psychologists, entertainers, prophets, anthropologists, leaders, political scientists, popular culture commentators, ethicists, philosophers, scientists, and so much more. It is not that they are expected to be masters of homiletics and jack of all other trades. Instead it is that when preachers strive to bring God’s good news to bear on the whole of human existence, a lot is required to connect the two in existentially appropriate and meaningful ways.

The Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence (PCPE),¹ directed by Alyce M. McKenzie, has worked with Westminster John Knox Press to create a book series that contributes to that work in a new way. While homiletical scholarship has long drawn on the full range of biblical and theological disciplines as well as a variety of philosophical and rhetorical disciplines, this series attempts to push the interdisciplinary dialogue in new ways. For each volume, the PCPE brings together as coauthors two scholars—a homiletician and an expert from another, nontheological field to bring that field into conversation with homiletics in a way that offers both new insights into preaching as a task and vocation and new strategies for the practical elements of sermon preparation and delivery.

This volume brings together the first two “odd bedfellows” of the series, as the authors refer to homiletics and the study of advertising. Preaching and marketing/advertising serve significantly different purposes, but the sermon and the ad share

a same central concern: how to get a message heard in today's noisy and changing communication environment so that it might have its intended impact on its intended audience.

O. Wesley Allen, Jr.
Series Editor

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The Problem

The question driving this book is what can preachers, who shape sermons (monological speeches that last anywhere from twelve to forty-five minutes), learn from the best of advertisers (who must communicate their message in thirty seconds or less). Granted, preaching and advertising are odd bedfellows. In one sense their purposes can even seem to be opposed. Whereas advertising celebrates culture and promotes the values of commercialism and materialism, the gospel proclaimed in Christian pulpits is often critical of and countercultural to and promotes values that challenge a materialistic worldview. Moreover, advertising and preaching employ radically different media.

In another sense, however, the purposes of preaching and advertising are aligned: both are communicative endeavors aimed at persuading the audience to consider new options for their lives. As such, they both also share some similar hurdles to jump over in order to present those new options effectively, hurdles not present for advertisers and preachers of the past.

MULTIMEDIA NOISE

It has been two decades since the twenty-first century began, and in that time the world has changed dramatically. According to *Business Insider* (2018), the global population went from 5.9 billion in 1998 to 7.6 billion in 2018, while 2007 found the world's urban population surpassing that of people living in rural settings.¹ Technology has allowed more people to communicate around the world than ever. Social media did not exist in 1998, but today more than two-thirds of Americans are on Facebook, with more than 3 billion worldwide estimated to be using social media by 2021. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2019, 81 percent of Americans owned a smartphone and 96 percent owned some type of cell phone device.²

In today's multimedia world, people are barraged with communication all day, every day. It is not just the information age but the age of constantly competing information. In such a setting, both preachers and advertisers struggle with how to get people to hear a unique and specific message, engage it, and respond to it, instead of that message simply being lost in the noise or ignored in the midst of stimulus overload. According to the CEO of Hootsuite,³ the average consumer in the United States in the 1970s was exposed to five hundred ads per day. Today many estimate that number has jumped to five thousand per day. For advertisers the new question becomes, how do you get consumers to notice and take interest in a product or service in the midst of a plethora of competitors all striving for attention? How, for instance, is a single thirty-second commercial to stick with consumers when television, radio, websites, billboards, and social media venues present them with thousands of advertisements every day? Similarly, how is a twelve- to forty-five-minute sermon on Sunday to stick with hearers when it must compete with seven days of the people being barraged by and attending to different values being promoted by advertisers, politicians, news pundits, television, movies, magazines, Twitter feeds, friends at work, and Facebook friends from the time they rise in the morning until they go to sleep at night?

POSTMODERNISM

In addition to the significant increase in the amount of information available to consumers and congregations, multimedia technology has also helped create a situation in which no one person or institution is an authority or expert and everyone is able to contribute to and distribute online content. The shift from one-way communication based on a centralized broadcasting source to a decentralized, social media and individually driven environment has not only broken down traditional parameters of time and space but also has redefined communities, individual identities, and communication norms.

This is part of a shift from a modern to a postmodern epistemology that has been under way since the middle of the twentieth century. In the modern era, truth was viewed as absolute. What is true in New York is true in Wichita, Moscow, and Cairo. Persons and institutions with the correct knowledge, then, were authorities who could declare what was true in specific arenas. In the young, postmodern era, however, truth is viewed as local, relative to perception. "That may be true for you, but this is true for me." People *choose* what is true for them. In a sense, what has happened is that meaning has replaced truth as the category by which people align their lives, even though they continue to use the word "truth" to describe what they consider meaningful. Indeed, whereas in the past people sought to discover "truth" to be applied to all, today they "make" meaning for themselves and are fine with others doing the same.

One result of this shift is that, in our postmodern culture, authority has shifted from reason to experience. People are less persuaded by truthful facts than they are by meaningful experiences. What does this mean for advertising? With an emphasis on multiple realities and continually fragmented presents, people do not buy products for their functional use as conveyed by an advertiser via linear transmission.⁴ People buy the lifestyles that products represent to help them create and experience multiple identities to enhance the meaning of their life stories.⁵ Consumers want to co-create meaning, reinvent

themselves continuously, and use products and other symbols to represent different life projects and self-identities. Consumers want to be included in the process of defining brands, and technology has allowed them to create their own messages and share their opinions en masse at the push of a button.

Preachers have an analogous problem. With the shift from public reason as the authority for discovering truth to individual experience as the authority for making meaning has come a shift from affiliation with and dedication to communal religious institutions to greater emphasis on individualized spirituality. More and more citizens of postmodernity feel no need for a religious authority to speak truth or meaning to them. Just because someone does show up for worship, however, does not mean they are there to listen in the same way past hearers did. They will not simply accept the preacher, Scripture, or the church as having the authority to prescribe meaning for them. They will take from sermons what they find meaningful and discard what they do not.

How can preachers persuade postmodern people to accept the theological message of their sermons when individualized experience has replaced public reason as the authority for meaning-making? Even if preachers are able to be heard through the noise, what new methods might they use to offer listeners experiences of their message, making sure people's hearts are engaged along with the heads?

PLURALISM

The proliferation of forms of communication and shift of authority from public truth to individualized experience is complicated further by the fact that these two dynamics foster and are fostered by a rising pluralism in American culture. Whether true or not, past communicators assumed a shared knowledge base, ethos, and broad value system in our culture. These were, of course, defined by those in power. The "melting pot" was reductionistic, taking the diversity of our population and creating one

common stew whose recipe was determined primarily by white, heterosexual, cisgender, Christian men. However, the intersecting civil rights movement, multiple waves of feminism, sexual revolution, rise in immigration from non-Christian countries, and globalization have replaced the “common” with “particulars.” Instead of a shared culture we have numerous overlapping yet dividing subcultures. At times we as a culture celebrate such diversity, and at others the pluralism leads to intense conflict. Effective communication is difficult in such a context.

Advertisers not only must deal with the problem of trying to develop long-term relationships with consumers while consumers have multiple brands vying for their attention (multi-media noise). They not only have to deal with the ease with which consumers change brands because their identities are in flux (postmodern emphasis on experience). Advertisers must also adjust their campaigns to the reality that no longer does one size of advertisement fit all. An advertisement that appeals to white, middle-aged men may turn away young persons of color or elderly women. A diverse market makes for opportunities to sell to more groups and individuals, but how does an advertiser reach very different segments of the market?

Preachers also struggle with pluralism. To imagine homogeneity in a congregation is naïve. A preacher may look out over the pulpit and see the pews filled with people who are of the same race or ethnicity, live in the same geographical area, and fit within a certain socioeconomic range. Yet as surely as people in the pews watch different news networks, get their news from late-night talk shows, or watch no news at all, there are differences in values and perspectives in the congregation. Laity are influenced by, participate in, and contribute to a wide range of subcultures that preachers must consider. How does a preacher create a meaningful sermonic experience that cuts through the communication noise of the world and is effective for the twenty-eight-year-old lesbian accountant in the choir, the seventy-seven-year-old man who has ushered every Sunday since he retired from his postal route twelve years ago, the middle-aged couple who bring their children to church only

once or twice a month because of their work and their children's sports busyness, and the visitor about whom nothing is known beyond first impressions?

While preachers often lack the tools and resources, advertisers spend considerable time and money to systematically study consumers and communication challenges in an effort to develop effective messaging. Advertisers use a variety of research techniques stemming from secondary research to surveys and interviews to focus groups. Research focused on understanding market segmentation issues such as the needs, wants, values, and attitudes of consumers is very important. Advertisers are also interested in testing different advertising concepts and messages for how they hold consumers' attention, how well consumers comprehend the message, and to what degree they like the ad. Brand recognition and recall are also important, as well as perceptions of brands, satisfaction with brands, and loyalty to brands. Since advertising and preaching share some of the same obstacles in communicating their messages, can preaching benefit from advertising's study, resources, and methods in trying to communicate the gospel more effectively?

HOMILETICS AND ADVERTISING AS ODD CONVERSATION PARTNERS

The initial answer to the above question might seem to be a resounding no. Homiletics and advertising are different disciplines with very different objectives, even objectives in direct conflict. Many people have argued that advertising encourages materialism, leads to poor social values, supports selfishness, and causes insecurities and anxiety.⁶ In contrast, the gospel is good, true, and meaningful with the intent to better people and society, to offer them God's grace and justice. Advertisers are primarily motivated by profit. Their goal is to sell products to make money for the stakeholders and to continue to improve profits each year. Conversely, preachers are motivated to liberate people, proclaiming the Word of God, forming people

in Christian identity, and offering people Christ. Some advertisers even knowingly provide deceptive messages in hopes of misleading or confusing the consumer in order to garner sales. Such tactics are eventually condemned by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and often caught by competitors or consumers, but the practices occur nonetheless. They usually cause short-term damage, such as monetary loss to consumers and market share to competing companies. When conveying the Word to a congregation, preachers work to provide truth as presented in the gospel, helping people find God-given meaning in their individual lives and in the wider world.

The views of advertising listed earlier portray the worst of the field. Indeed, we could easily list the sins of the pulpit in such a way that would show why so many people dismiss the efficacy of preaching. While much advertising may convey radically different messages than Christian preaching, the best of advertising offers preachers approaches and techniques that can be helpful in their communication. For a moment then, let us consider what the best of advertising can look like.

We need to begin by properly defining *advertising*. Advertising in one form or another has been around for centuries, dating back to evidence of ads in the form of posters and notices in Egyptian steel carvings, wall or stone paintings, and papyri. As changes have occurred in economic systems—especially the evolution of free-market capitalism—and with advancements in technology and media—so too has advertising changed. The first U.S. newspaper advertisement ran in 1704 in the *Boston News-Letter* informing readers of property for sale in Long Island.⁷ Over the years advertising has grown to become an integral part of our economy and culture. Typically, advertising is seen positively from an economic perspective yet criticized for its social and cultural influences.

A traditional definition of *advertising* is “a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future.”⁸ However, this definition has been questioned with changes in technology and in light of how brands have had to

add value to their offerings by thinking in terms of social responsibility in their business practices and supporting socially good causes and messages. One standard advertising textbook offers a definition that takes account of advertising as not only providing messages about goods and services but also conveying ideas more broadly. The authors define *advertising* as “a paid form of persuasive communication that uses mass and interactive media to reach broad audiences so as to connect an identified sponsor with buyers (a target audience), provide information about products (good, services, and ideas), and interpret the product features in terms of the customer’s needs and wants.”⁹

Two other advertising scholars, Dahlen and Rosengren, shorten the definition while broadening the scope of coverage to “brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people” and leave open how “impacting” might be interpreted.¹⁰ Traditionally, advertisers have hoped, and often still hope, that impact to be one of persuading an audience to buy the product or service. Today, however, consumers demand that advertisers be held accountable for their products and the culture that advertising messages create. This shift has taken place as the general public has become more aware of and concerned about issues such as threats to the environment and sustainability as well as the ability of consumers to voice concerns about products and related issues online anytime. Strategically, advertisers cannot afford to succeed at any cost today, and in order for brands to flourish they must respect the consumers they serve. This mode of doing business is very different from the announcement and linear style of advertising of the past.

With this understanding of advertising in hand, we can appreciate some of the more positive aspects of the field. For example, in discussing the morality of advertising, one scholar argues that poetry and art are similar to advertising as both try to entice thoughts, produce an emotion, and assert a truth—and each requires an audience for validation.¹¹

Advertising can also offer positive images of humanity. An ad for Thai Life Insurance begins with music but no words while viewers watch a young man walking down the street. Runoff

water from a spout on the side of a building surprises him when it splashes on the top of his head, but instead of getting upset, he moves a pot with a dead plant into the spot where the water hits the sidewalk. From there we watch the young man do a series of thankless good deeds. He helps an ornery woman get her food cart up over a curb, gives a street dog half his lunch, puts two of the three bills in his wallet in the cup held by a girl and woman begging with a sign that says, "For education," and leaves bananas on the door of an elderly neighbor. All the while observers are watching and shaking their head at the naiveté of the young man. The round of good deeds concludes with the narration, "What does he get in return for doing this every day?"

Then we see the young man doing the same deeds again. The plant is still dead. The woman and child are still poor. Observers still scoff. As we see the young man at home in a small, simple, even poor apartment, the narration starts again: "He gets nothing. He won't be richer. Won't appear on TV. Still anonymous. And not a bit more famous." Then the cycle of good deeds begins again. Only this time the woman with the food cart is laughing and the dog follows him on his way to become his companion. When the man reaches the place where he gives money to the woman and her daughter, the girl is not to be found. The woman is there begging alone, raising a question in the viewers' mind (and that of the young man) about her well-being. But then from behind him a girl's voice yells, "Mom," and the young man turns to see her dressed in a school uniform. The narration begins again: "What he does receive are emotions. He witnesses happiness. Reaches a deeper understanding. Feels the love. Receives what money can't buy. A world made more beautiful." And as the camera shows a small green plant being watered by the runoff water from the spout with a butterfly alighting on one of its flowers, the narration asks, "And in your life? What is it that you desire most?" Of course, the Thai Life Insurance company can help protect people and secure their dreams. But in the end, the advertisement presents the brand in a responsible way with a

socially responsible theme focused outside of materialism and financial wealth.

Many other brands also convey positive social messages in the process of promoting a product. In a 2011 advertisement for its smartphone, an LG Electronics ad showed three young adults walking by a warehouse in an urban setting. They see inside an older man by himself working with difficulty to restore an antique carousel. He is struggling to lift a wooden horse into its place. Two of the adults immediately run in to help. Before also joining in, the third uses his LG phone to tweet, “Restoring carousel. Come help.” People see the Twitter update on their LG phones along with maps to the location and begin heading that way. The viewer sees people of different races, ages, and lifestyles working on the carousel and finally standing in wonder as the carousel lights up and begins spinning. It is a sweet, emotional scene showing that the phone doesn’t just help with communication but with building community. The narration that closes the commercial says, “Is it a simple way to make a difference? The new LG Vortex: is it a smartphone or something better?”¹²

Advertisements can also promote a cause at the same time they promote a product. Examples include TOMS, BOMBAS, and Warby Parker. Each of these companies do well by doing good in that the model of these companies is to have consumers buy one of the products offered—shoes, socks, or eyeglasses, respectively—and then they give away one to a person in need.¹³

Finally, some of the best and most memorable ads appear as public service announcements (PSAs) without promoting a product at all. They raise awareness and teach about important social issues, critiquing destructive behavior and practices or offering models for good ones. The Ad Council is a nonprofit organization that has been around for more than seventy-five years and is the leader in spearheading such socially beneficial messages through advertising.¹⁴ The ads are typically created pro bono by an advertising agency with media space in magazines and on television provided either free or at a greatly reduced cost. Some of the famous PSAs produced by the Ad

Council include topics related to Security of War Information with the campaign “Loose Lips Sink Ships” (1942–1945) or “Wild Fire Prevention with Smokey,” to safety belt and polio education, AIDS prevention, and pollution: “Keep America Beautiful—Iron Eyes Cody.”¹⁵ Two fairly recent examples can highlight the power of such ads and show why advertising may have something to offer preachers.

First is an ad in which a middle-school-age girl steps out on stage to read an essay she has written during an assembly. The beginning looks sweet and innocent. The girl’s essay is about Patty, who is shown in the audience. But then the essay shockingly begins speaking ill of Patty in short sentences calling her stupid, ugly, poor, and the like. At the end of the essay, words appear on screen with the clicklike sounds of a computer keyboard: “If you wouldn’t say it in person, why say it online? Delete cyberbullying. Don’t write it. Don’t forward it.” Then the words are highlighted as they might be on a computer screen and deleted with another sound of a keyboard click.¹⁶ The message clearly illustrates the hurtful nature of cyberbullying and further suggests that people who pass along these types of messages, even if not the initial producer, are also doing wrong and should just delete texts that are intended to bully.

The second PSA begins with a shot of an older woman in her home surprised to hear a man outside performing a cheer that starts, “Oh those boys are much too much. Those boys are much too much.” As the cheer continues with “We got the spirit!” the woman sees a large man through the window dancing, clapping, and wagging his finger. “We got the spirit! We’re hot! We can’t be stopped! We’re gonna beat ’em!” After several seconds of this, the camera pans out to show what the woman cannot see: the man is practicing a cheer with his young cheerleader daughter. At that point, as the cheer continues, Tom Selleck begins a voiceover: “The smallest moments can have the biggest impact on a child’s life.” As the cheer concludes, Selleck starts up again, “Take time to be a dad today,” and then we hear the father in the ad say, “One more time.”¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Highlighting the best that advertising offers does not erase the fact that much advertising is involved in consumeristic, materialistic elements of human society that countercultural strains of the gospel seek to resist and reform. Nevertheless, the high points of advertising along with the effectiveness of the discipline in communicating its messages, embedding those messages in consumers' memories, and creating brand and value loyalty suggest it has lessons to teach preachers who strive to convey the gospel in a world in which communication must evolve to deal with the challenges of multimedia noise, post-modernism, and pluralism.

Both advertising and preaching are communicative endeavors aimed at persuading their audiences to consider new options for their lives. Without promoting material benefits and new options such as those that come from automobiles, televisions, shoes, and the like, preachers can still apply in their sermons advertising techniques to promote new life in Christ.

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