

THE PASTOR IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A FORUM



EDITOR'S NOTE: In what follows, four pastors answer questions about preaching and leading a church in the digital age. Each of the participating pastors are also on faculty at Southern Seminary.

What technology have you found helpful for sermon preparation?

DENNY BURK: The two programs that I use the most are Bible study software. I work from a PC platform, and BibleWorks9 is the best software for PCs. In fact, BibleWorks is arguably better than Accordance, which some consider the best for the Mac platform. It's a software package for those who are working with the text of Scripture. If you want a digital library, BibleWorks is not for you. But if you want to dig into the original languages with the ability to do complex searches on English, Greek and Hebrew texts, then there's nothing better than BibleWorks. I use it all the time.

On my phone, I use Olive Tree's Bible software. I have both Hebrew and Greek texts along with a bevy of English translations. It's an easy, clean interface with searchable texts, and I highly recommend it.

ROBERT L. PLUMMER: I still prefer printed commentaries to digital versions. I usually read five to 10 commentaries about a passage that I am preaching.

From my experience, nothing compares to Luther's advice: *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio* (Prayer, Meditation and Trials). As we approach the Scripture, we begin with a humble posture of prayer. Then, we soak meditatively in the Scripture — seeking the Spirit's illumination. Thirdly, we trust the sovereignty of God in teaching us the beauty, truth and comforts of Scripture through the trials we face. These experiential realities then enable us to convey passionately the truth we know to others. Of these three core elements, only *Meditatio* is served through technology — potentially enabling us easier access to texts and tools to think, sing, pray and speak the Scripture in meditative fashion.

HERSHAEL YORK: While I'm usually old school in my exegetical work — a Greek text, a desk pad and a few pens — I use Evernote to collect and collate information, ideas and illustrations that I will use in explaining the text. The ability to link sites, edit text and organize my thoughts saves time and sharpens my focus.

What encouragement and cautions would you give pastors who are

still debating whether or not to be active on Twitter and/or Facebook?

YORK: I find Facebook and Twitter extremely useful as a means of encouraging church members, sharing gospel thinking and disseminating information. It's another way my church members have access to me and, consequently, feel closer to me. While these tools prove useful, they bring the same dangers that any other means of communication brings. We can use them to feed our pride, our lust, our anger or other sinful tendencies. People often feel less inhibition in online communication, and pastors can get in trouble showing sarcasm or disdain in their posts or using them to say things to others that would be better said personally and privately.

BURK: Use social media not to promote yourself but the truths that you care most about.

DAVID E. PRINCE: Social media allows a large number of church members to gain a window into my daily life and feel more connected to the one who preaches to them each week, and it allows me a small window into their lives as well. It also allows me an opportunity to com-



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communicate a gospel-centered worldview on a daily basis in the midst of the routine of life. Church visitors frequently communicate with me through Facebook and Twitter before I get to speak personally with them at church. I am convinced I need to be engaged in the conversation because I have a shepherding responsibility to bring proper biblical, gospel reflection about its use in our culture.

With that said, it also can be a tool that helps accelerate the problem of isolation and superficiality in our culture. There is really no such thing as a cyber friend. Genuine community demands face-to-face relationships and accountability. Another danger of social media is the ability it creates to live an unaccountable virtual life, as Brad Paisley humorously sang, “I’m so much cooler online.”

What technology has your church found most helpful for communicating within your church body?

PRINCE: We find text messaging is the best way to make sure that someone gets reminders and brief information. Email is the next most effective. When we are promoting anything within the congregation we almost always employ a layered approach that involves Web,

Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and email.

Technology has also been a vital tool in continually communicating our mission, vision and culture to the Ashland congregation. We presently meet at two locations on Sunday morning and the ability to communicate live with one another and celebrate baptisms together has been vital for our Lexington campus and our church plant in Richmond, Ky. Our mission teams have been able to talk to our congregation during worship services via Skype from the unreached people group we have adopted.

PLUMMER: Perhaps a weekly informative email to members is still the most useful tool, though we have also used blogs, sermon podcasts, Facebook pages, etc.

YORK: We use Facebook and Twitter as well as a church website, but we still have a lot of members, particularly older ones, who will never use either one, so we still have more traditional means of communicating like a church newsletter. We also use One Call (onecallnow.com), a telephone messaging system by which I can communicate with everyone in our church or any subgroup like deacons or Sunday School teachers.

Would you encourage or discourage your church members from tweeting during church services?

PLUMMER: I think we already face too many distractions in our gathered assembly. Barring some emergency, the smartphone should be ignored during the church service.

PRINCE: We live tweet the services from the church’s official Twitter account but we neither encourage nor discourage members from live tweeting the service. We consider it a matter of individual conscience and not dissimilar from traditional note taking for a new generation. Of course, tweeting one another in a distracted, flippant way during the service is simply a techno version of note-passing and is certainly discouraged.

BURK: I would discourage it. I wouldn’t want to be legalistic about it, but I would say that it’s difficult to be engaged fully during worship when you’re trying to tweet about it. I recommend holding off on tweeting until after the service is over. ➤