PIXELATED PREACHERS:

SIMULCAST PREACHING AND THE QUESTION OF EMBODIMENT IN MULTI-SITE CHURCHES *

Gray Gardner[†]

ABSTRACT: How does digital mediation change the nature of the preaching event? What is at stake—theologically, pastorally, and spiritually—when the preacher is pixelated rather than physically present? How important is embodiment for simulcast preaching? The present study aims to answer these questions by setting forth a critical—if not preliminary—discussion about the importance of embodiment for simulcast preaching by drawing together theological insights from perspectives on technology, embodiment, and a Reformed theology of preaching. The digital mediation of the preaching event in simulcast preaching not only has the effect of reconstituting notions of the preacher and the message, but also the congregation and its experience of God. The absence of the preacher's physical presence in the delivery of a simulcast sermon does not constitute the preacher's disembodiment, nor does his or her pixelated presence constitute a presence that is unreal or dis-incarnate. In this way, simulcast preaching may still be embodied and real, even if in ways that do not fall along traditional lines. These points, in dialogue with a Reformed theology of preaching, reveal both opportunities and shortcomings with the simulcast preaching method. While the complexity of the issue of embodiment in simulcast preaching demands further inquiry, this study concludes by asserting the Reformed conviction that the faithful preaching of the Word of God will always be accompanied by the presence of the Spirit of God—whether preached in person or in pixels.

INTRODUCTION

The multi-site church movement is no longer just an innovative fad on the American religious landscape, but is now a staple expression of Evangelical Protestantism in the United

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[†] MLitt 2020 University of St Andrews

States. Over the last decade the number of multi-site churches has exploded, more than doubling the growth of single-site megachurches during that time and reaching millions of worshippers through their ministries and weekend services.[1] Commonly defined as "one church meeting in multiple locations," multi-site churches operate under a variety of different models, each using technology in a variety of ways to connect campuses, produce worship services, and create communality online.[2]

As the multi-site church model continues to grow, the preferred means of sermon delivery at campus locations—also referred to as "satellite sites" or "video venues"— is becoming increasingly digital. In 2019, a leading research firm studying the movement found that roughly 33% of multi-site churches use simulcast preaching *exclusively* at their campus locations, while another 33% use simulcast in combination with in-person ("live") preaching. This represents a significant *increase* in the number of churches using some amount of video preaching in their services over the last ten years, as well as a significant *decrease* in the number of churches relying exclusively on live or traditional preaching.[3] When one considers the fact that many multi-site churches have more combined attendance at their satellite locations than at their main campus where the preaching is often live, a startling reality becomes evident.[4] For the several million people who worship at multi-site churches in the United States each week, a majority of them now experience simulcast preaching as an increasingly normative means of sermon delivery.[5]

Research Question

This significant shift in liturgical practice raises several questions for consideration: What is at stake when the preacher's physical presence is removed from the preaching event? What is lost, theologically, pastorally, or spiritually, when the preacher is pixelated rather than physically present? What is gained? How does digital mediation change the nature of the preaching event?

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[1] Warren Bird, "Big News - Multisite Churches Now Number More Than 5,000," *Leadership Network*, accessed March 23, 2020, https://leadnet.org/big-news-multisite-churches-more-than-5000/.

[2] Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon, and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 18. "For some churches, having multiple sites involves only a worship service at each location; for others, each location has a full range of support ministries. Some churches use video-cast sermons (recorded or live); others have in-person teaching on-site. Some churches maintain a similar worship atmosphere and style at all their campuses, and others allow or invite variation."

[3] Leadership Network, "Multisite Movement Continues to Grow: Latest research from national survey reports top line findings," accessed February 5, 2020, 7.

[4] Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 252.

[5] Leadership Network, "Multisite Movement Continues to Grow," 8.

How does it change congregations? In other words: *How important is embodiment for simulcast preaching?*

Relevance and Importance of the Study

While there exists a growing body of literature studying digital mediation and religion—in addition to the megachurch and multi-site movements—academic research exploring the practice of simulcast preaching is sparse.[6] Popular-level publications on the topic abound, but few move beyond pragmatic affirmations or surface-level critiques to address more fundamental questions about how digital mediation challenges and enhances theologies of embodiment and preaching. Further, while simulcast continues to grow as a standard model of preaching in the United States, there exists very little sustained discussion about it from a Reformed theological perspective—a tradition which boasts a rich homiletical heritage. If the trend within multi-site churches is any indication as to the potential influence the simulcast approach may eventually have over other denominational groups, it would serve Reformed congregations well to be thinking critically about how simulcast may integrate with a Reformed theology of preaching.

Plan and Structure of the Study

The present study aims to enter this gap by setting forth a critical—if not preliminary—discussion about the importance of embodiment for simulcast preaching by drawing together theological insights from perspectives on technology, embodiment, and Reformed views of preaching.

The first section begins with a study on digital mediation, human embodiment, and multi-site churches, problematizing common conceptions of technology and the body and showing how multi-site churches use technology to create *atmosphere.* This is followed by a section exploring the Reformed tradition's rich theology of preaching in order to draw out those points which speak most relevantly to the issues at hand in simulcast preaching, providing a grounded theological foundation from which to evaluate the practice. A subsequent section integrates the material from the aforementioned in an attempt to discover the importance of embodiment for simulcast preaching. Issues related to the preacher's presence, incarnation, and pastoral ministry feature as

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[6] Only one full-length study (Robert Herrington, "A Theological and Philosophical Evaluation of Simulcast Preaching within the Multi-Site Church Movement," [PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017]) and a sampling of articles are able to be found.

prominent points of contact. Finally, this study concludes by offering a brief analysis of the findings herein, suggesting a number of theological and practical points for preachers and congregations which should not be overlooked in the evaluation of simulcast preaching.

Simulcast represents a new understanding of the preacher, one in which the preacher is pixelated, rather than physically present. Exploring this fact requires an investigation into the nature of digital mediation and human embodiment more broadly, a task to which we now turn.

Digital Mediation, Human Embodiment, and Multi-Site Churches

While interest in the integration of media technologies and religion has continually increased over the last thirty years, relatively little research exists around the practice of simulcast preaching in congregational worship environments. Most contemporary studies focus on online church environments and virtual liturgical practices in which users engage screen-driven religious content *individually* rather than in the context of a physically co-present social group (Figure 1, below). Such studies only go so far in assessing the scenario of a physically co-present congregation viewing a simulcast sermon at the same time, on the same screen, and in the context of a corporate worship service (Figure 2, below).

What is needed is a study specifically aimed at the new situation created by the integration of video technologies in the preaching event, particularly as experienced in multi-site churches. To that end, the present section aims to draw together the relevant material from the existing literature in order to establish several lines of inquiry into the practice of simulcast preaching to be later discussed in conversation with a Reformed theology of preaching. The structure of this section moves from a consideration of largely sociological and theological perspectives on the relationship between technology and religion, toward a more focused examination of the technologized worship environments found in many multi-site churches. This consideration will result in several conclusions that frame the critical evaluation of simulcast preaching and its effect on notions of embodiment found in the final section.

Figure 1: Digitally mediated preaching streamed online

Main Campus

Sermon preached by a physically present preacher in the context of a physically present congregation.

Individuals stream digitally mediated preaching through private devices such as smart phones, tablets, or computers.
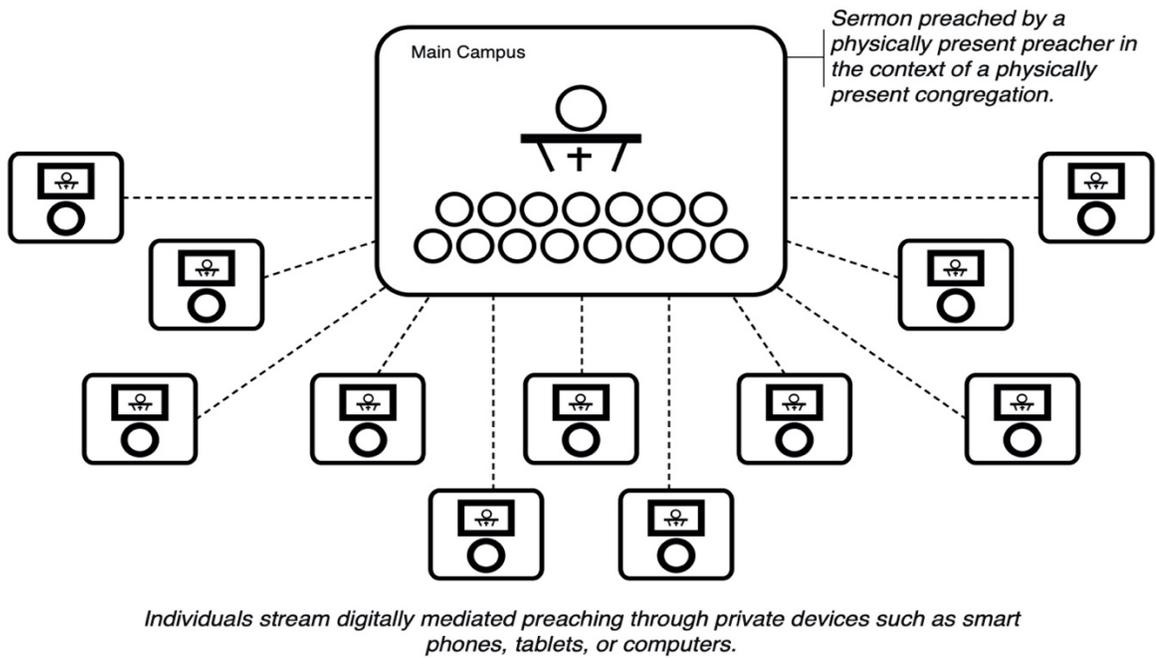
**Figure 2: Simulcast preaching in multi-site churches**

Main Campus

Sermon preached by a physically present preacher in the context of a physically present congregation.

Campus #1
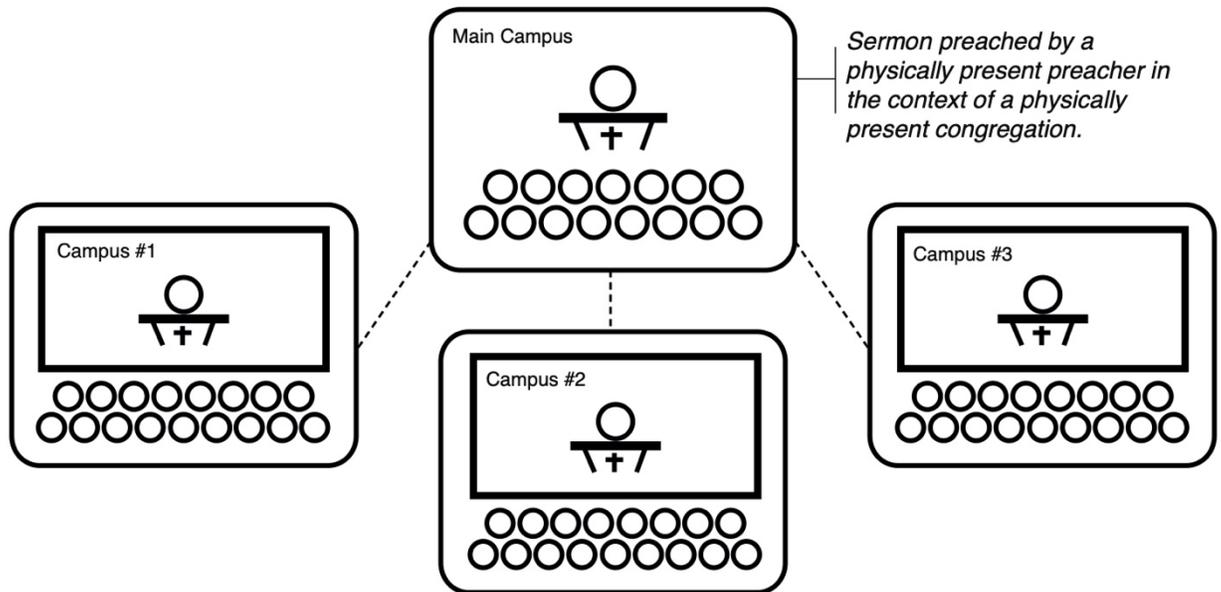
Campus #2

Campus #3

Physically co-present worshipers view simulcast preaching on large projection screens in multi-site church campuses, also referred to as "video venues" or "satellite sites." These digitally mediated sermons are streamed from a main campus, also referred to as the "broadcast location." While three campuses are displayed in this diagram, churches need only have one additional site to be considered a "multi-site" church.

Perspectives on Technology and Religion

What has Jerusalem to do with Silicon Valley? We might imagine Tertullian asking such a question were he alive today, particularly considering the church's increasing level of comfort with the integration of cutting-edge digital technologies and religious practice. Steven Garner makes such a point in his article overviewing theological perspectives on new media, showing how the relationship between theology and technology is always a point of negotiation, similar to theology's interaction with philosophy, sociology, and various other fields. Garner demonstrates that while some do not see a connection between "the internet [and] a faith tradition rooted in identification with a physical community and a God who became flesh and blood and relocated to the physical world," others believe that "the internet represents a new location for theological reflection and exploration."[7]

Garner uses Ian Barbour's simple framework to classify theological responses to technology into three distinct approaches: "technology as liberator," "technology as oppressor," and "technology as instrument."[8] These perspectives operate on a spectrum: while the *technology as oppressor* approach represents one pole, articulating a mostly pessimistic view of technology, the *technology as liberator* view takes the opposite stance, offering what is perhaps an overly optimistic – if not uncritical – attitude towards technology. Sitting between these two poles is the *technology as instrument* approach, to which we turn presently.

Reconsidering the notion of "tech as tool"

Garner argues that those who espouse the *technology as instrument* view see "technology as an instrument of power" in which "technology is presented as value neutral until it is applied in some way, and the consequences of that application demonstrate whether it was used positively or negatively."[9] Operating within this paradigm, he suggests that the church has mostly operated with a 'cautious optimism' towards technology throughout its history.[10] Garner notes that since the early 1990s, much theological work on technology and, specifically, the Internet, has been written by lay people and pastors with a desire "to provide the church with practical insights into this new

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[7] Stephen Garner, "Theology and the New Media," in *Digital Religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 251.
[8] Ibid., 253-55.
[9] Ibid., 254-55.
[10] Ibid., 251.

online world" by focusing their studies on "how to live as Christians on the Internet, and how the Internet might reshape and challenge the church."[11]

The focus in this view tends toward practicality and, at times, short-sightedness, seeing in technology a tool to help accomplish the church's mission with greater efficacy and efficiency without much consideration for greater sociological, theological, or even ontological issues. Indeed, for many in the church today, technology is viewed through a predominantly pragmatic lens in which *the end justifies the means.* For example, one prominent leader within the multi-site church movement argues that "more people need to meet Jesus" and that, like Paul, we must use "all means" to win as many people to Jesus as possible." He argues further that "[i]f multiple campuses and video are ways that God the Holy Spirit chooses to reach more people for Jesus, then we would be wise to not criticize or oppose it, even if our church decides not to do it."[12] More recently, a widely regarded podcast for evangelical church leaders featured an interview with a multi-site church pastor who decided to close multiple campuses in favor of investing more resources in a digital plan for outreach and discipleship, suggesting that he will use any methodology *that works* in order to reach more people.[13] These pastors are not alone in seeing technology primarily as a pragmatic tool to be used toward the end of accomplishing the mission of the church—similar examples are easy to find.

Such perspectives, while in many cases certainly providing the church with valuable practical insights, tend to miss deeper sociological and theological issues at work in the application of various technological tools. These views of technology see technological tools as something *out there*—artifacts that are value-neutral and able to be used for good or bad. However, as Garner demonstrates, not all perspectives within the *technology as instrument* perspective tend towards the pragmatism mentioned above. More academic perspectives within this framework tend to evaluate the church's use or misuse of technological tools, showing how online and offline worlds influence and shape one another.

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[11] Ibid., 257.

[12] Driscoll and Breshears, *Vintage Church*, 259.

[13] Carey Nieuwhof and James Emery White, "James Emery White on Why He Shut Down Multisite, the Future of Digital Outreach and How to Grow Your Church Younger as the Leader Grows Older," 18 February 2020, in *The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast* produced by Carey Nieuwhof, podcast, MP3 audio, 18 1:40:00, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/carey-nieuwhof-leadership-podcast-lead-like-never-before/id912753163#episodeGuid=https%3A%2F%2Fcareynieuwhof.com%2F%3Fp%3D108758.

A prominent example of this is Christopher Helland's notion of "religion online," which for years provided researchers with uniform language by which to speak of religious institutions using the Internet to mediate offline religious practice, such as in the creation of church websites, the streaming of worship services online, and in the replication of other offline religious practices *online*. Over time, Helland recognized that the Internet not only provided a forum for offline religious practices to be replicated, but also functioned as a space where new forms of religiosity could be shaped—what Helland refers to as "online religion."[14]

In the last decade or so, many authors have come to recognize that digital technology is not simply a tool to be used; it actually constitutes the reforming of the religious, the social, and the body. Heidi Campbell shows that even Helland's more recent writing "recognizes that the separation between religion online and offline is becoming increasingly blurred and blended."[15] Campbell articulates these blurred and blended worlds of online and offline religion under the category of "digital religion." Digital religion may be defined as "the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated."[16] Campbell argues that religion online and offline can no longer be defined or discussed as isolated occurrences, but work together to constitute new realities which she refers to as "third spaces."[17] This point, now widely embraced by scholars of religion and technology, recognizes what Campbell calls the *religious-social shaping of technology*, offering a helpful corrective to some of the pragmatic expressions of "tech as tool" alluded to above. Campbell's view of technology as a social apparatus can be extended further by examining it through a theological lens.

Practical theologians are helpful at this point in showing that one's use of technology always results in a negotiation and reconstitution of existing relationships and practices. For instance, Lutheran author Philip Hefner argues that the process of becoming human is a spiritual journey located *inside* technology: "Everything we think about religion, everything we think is spiritual, is rearranged by technology. If spirituality means something about creation to you, if it

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[14] Christopher Helland, "Online-Religion/Religion-Online and Virtual Communities" in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, eds. J.K. Hadden and D.E. Cowan (New York: JAI Press, 2000), 205–23.
[15] Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction: The rise of the study of digital religion" in *Digital Religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.
[16] Ibid., 3-4.
[17] Ibid., 4.

means sin and forgiveness, if it means overcoming adversity, if it means love, if it means personal fulfillment, if it means hope—all of these must be reconceived and reexperienced in the medium of technology."[18] Hefner's point is to say that technology is not simply constitutive of things we create and use, but of the very environment in which we live, think, and operate—what he describes as the new evolutionary moment in which we find ourselves. Further, Hefner views the human imagination and capacity for meaning-making as the locus both of religious pursuits and technological creativity. Technological tools, then, operate as a sort of "techno-mirror," revealing to us our desires, our finitude and mortality, our desire "to bring alternative worlds into being," and the reality that we often do not know "why we create or according to what values."[19] For Hefner, "technology is a sacred space" and is "one of the major places today where religion happens."[20] Not only that, but "[t]echnology is itself a medium of *divine* action, because technology is about the freedom of imagination that constitutes our self-transcendence."[21]

In short, technology is not simply a tool to be used for pragmatic means; it also mediates our experience of being in the world and the ways we think, relate to one another, and practice religion. Moreover, technology reconstitutes the space in which we speak of and experience the sacred. That is, all technology carries in it a certain *ontology*.

Networked spheres in a technologized world

The ontological nature of technology—the ways in which technology implicates, mediates, shapes, and changes both the social and the sacred—are explored in detail by interdisciplinary social scientist Sam Han. Han's argument is worth following in depth as it culminates in an ethnographic study of this phenomenon in technologized multi-site churches—a focus which sheds light on several areas of interest for the present study.

Han begins his argument by problematizing assumptions of secular modernity relating to Weber's conceptualization of disenchantment. Against this view, Han shows that the world has actually become *re-enchanted* through digital technologies, demonstrating that modernist concepts must be reconsidered because they do not account for the changes in the relations between humans,

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[18] Philip J. Hefner, *Technology and Human Becoming* (Minneapolis: Facets Press, 2003), Kindle locations 105-107.
[19] Ibid., Kindle Locations 241-279.
[20] Ibid.*,* Kindle Locations 584-589.
[21] Ibid.*,* Kindle Location 584.

nature, and God—what Han refers to as "onto-cosmology"—which come as a result of evolving digital technologies.[22]

Han sees religion and technology not as two disparate, bounded "spheres," but as interconnected realities that effectively transform one another. The evolution of digital technologies reveals that worlds are better conceived as unbounded and networked—"modular milieux, dispositifs, and assemblages"—ultimately "recombinant" in nature.[23] In line with Campbell's notion of third spaces, Han argues that "[r]eligion and new media technologies come together to create 'spheres,' digital environments that recast prior theological definitions of religious participation and community."[24]

In other words, Han suggests that the integration of the technological, the social, and the religious results in them collapsing into one another in the creation of *new* realities. Further, Han argues (in concordance with Hefner) that technology is not simply *outside* of us, but also implicates our very *embodiment* in the world. Practical theologian Elaine Graham argues "that it is important to see technologies not simply as mere instruments of doing and making, but as vehicles of transformation: not only of the world around us, but as a critical medium of our own becoming; indeed, *the very theatre and crucible of our embodied humanity*."[25] In Han's argument as well, the body plays a significant role in understanding the relationship between religion and technology. The question of embodiment demands a fuller discussion as it sits at the center of our inquiry into digital-mediated preaching.

Towards a Theology of Embodiment

While Han's argument is helpful in that it ultimately ends in a detailed study of these phenomena in multi-site churches, it must be brought into conversation with Ola Sigurdson on the issue of human embodiment. Sigurdson is a Scandinavian theologian whose work features as one of the most significant theological treatments on the topic to date.[26] Given the depth and breadth of Sigurdson's work, it is important to provide a general layout of his argument before highlighting

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[22] Sam Han, *Technologies of Religion: Spheres of the Sacred in a Secular Post-Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 25.

[23] Ibid., 31.

[24] Ibid., 12.

[25] Elaine Graham, "Being, Making and Imagining: Toward a Practical Theology of Technology," *Culture and Religion* 10, no. 2, (July 2009), 227-28. Emphasis mine.

[26] Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016).

a few significant areas of overlap with Han. My goal in this section is to set the table for more nuanced discussions of embodiment and digitally-mediated preaching in the final section.

Embodiment and the Incarnation

Sigurdson situates his argument in conversation with Nietzsche's claim that Christianity is nihilistic and body-denying. Against this view, Sigurdson constructs a theology of embodiment that is both theologically robust and sensible for a contemporary society by employing a systematic examination of the three topics addressed in the volume's subtitle: incarnation, the gaze, and embodiment, respectively.

In the first part of his study, Sigurdson recounts the theological history of the doctrine of the incarnation. He begins by providing a summary of the major voices in the patristic age, followed by an in-depth analysis of Chalcedonian Christology. He then narrows his focus with a discussion on the incarnation, transcendence and immanence, as well as the similarity and difference between humanity and the divine. Sigurdson sees the need for a Christology that avoids both ahistoricism and pure abstraction—the qualities found in the works of such authors as Schleiermacher, Barth, and especially in John Hick's *The Myth of God Incarnate*—in favor of one which provides concrete implications for humanity's being-in-the-world. Sigurdson aims to formulate a contemporary theology of incarnation by constructing a theological anthropology of human gaze and embodiment that is not only informed by Chalcedonian Christology, but that also critiques and extends it in ways that are better representative of the author's contemporary context. In other words, his goal is to provide a theological understanding of embodiment which aligns with confessional Christology and takes account of contemporary perspectives on anthropology, sociology, technology, and liturgy.

Embodiment, perception, and "the gaze"

The second part of Sigurdson's book focuses on "the gaze," which although intricately connected to the biological sense of sight, refers primarily to the historical and cultural conditions for sight, or *perception*. Sigurdson's goal in this section is to examine "how the relationship between the human being and her existence has been configured by different ways of seeing."[27] Here, Sigurdson spends considerable time providing the context by which to understand "gazes"

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[27] Ibid., 153.

or "scopic regimes" which represent epochs of time from the Enlightenment to the present day: 1) the Curious Eye (Enlightenment era); 2) the Mechanical Eye (1839–1989); and 3) the Virtual Eye (1989–present). Such a structure models one of Sigurdson's primary and recurrent themes: that human sight (specifically) and human embodiment (more broadly) always have a history, and are therefore always the products of their cultural and social situatedness.

Such a conclusion leads Sigurdson to draw parallels between different understandings of sight and phenomenological studies in order to "formulate a theology of the gaze as a concrete, anthropological reception of the doctrine of the incarnation, and thus link to an embodied way of being-in-the-world."[28] Sigurdson builds his case by examining the gaze of Jesus as attested to in the Gospels and Paul's letters, engaging in a critical discussion of iconography, and, finally, by constructing a theology of the gaze that questions the relationship between faith and sight. Through sustained dialogue with French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Luc Marion (among others), Sigurdson offers a phenomenological and historical theology of sight in the Christian tradition, resulting in what he calls a "Christian scopic regime." The Christian scopic regime shapes one's entire being by transforming the way one sees (or perceives) the world. This transformation is not abstract, but concrete, and is accomplished through mediated liturgical practices.

Reconsidering individual and social bodies

The final section of the project deals specifically with the question of human embodiment, thematizing the human experience of being-in-the-world and examining it through the lenses of philosophical inquiry, theological ritual, erotic desire, and pain. Sigurdson begins this section by sketching a history of philosophical theory on the body, landing in broad agreement with feminist and critical theories which argue that the body is never *given* in an immediate way, but is always mediated through socially constituted representations. This emphasis on the shared physicality and sociality of the body is a significant theme in Sigurdson's overall contribution, and is denoted in philosophical terms via the notions of transcorporeality and intercorporeality.

Sigurdson extends these ideas in a chapter on theological ritual, stating that Paul's vision of the body of Christ may also be viewed in terms of transcorporeality, meaning one's individual body may never be separated from the social body in which it is situated, especially as it relates to

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[28] Ibid., 181.

ecclesial bodies. The importance of ritual, or liturgical practices, comes firmly into view in this section as the very means by which the relationship between the individual and social body is mediated, suggesting that a person's body is "an assemblage of embodied aptitudes" which may be imagined as "individual nodes linked in a field by rites." Classical theories of embodiment suggest that individual bodies are closed systems, thus requiring Sigurdson to find a different way of describing the individual body such that it is seen as open and subject to ongoing transformation through its relationship in its historical and social contexts.

To accomplish this task, Sigurdson refers to the idea of the "grotesque" body. By grotesque, Sigurdson does not mean unsightly, monstrous, or malformed. Rather, he uses the term in its classical sense in order to refer to the individual body as "excessive and generative"—unable to be reduced to something familiar. It is through the body's "grotesqueness," Sigurdson argues, that the physical body of Christ may be tangibly present through the ecclesial body and her "sacraments, writings, and ethical testimony."[29] As it relates to humanity's propensity for relationship to the divine, this means that the body is a medium for pain (the past), the presence of God (the present), and hope (the future).[30]

Sigurdson concludes his work by discussing how the winding themes of incarnation, the gaze, and embodiment finally converge in view of an eschatological horizon. Sigurdson turns his attention first to an analysis of heavenly bodies, concluding that

> the body [is not] a fixed and finished object, seen from the perspective of Christian theology. The body cannot be reduced to a three-dimensional, material artifact, but is a complex intertwining of materiality, experiences, and linguistic concepts. . . The body, in the Christian tradition, is thus not an autonomous, delimited, entity, but something that is unfinished, permeable, and excessive, which exists in the very act of giving oneself to and becoming participatory in other bodies.[31]

For Sigurdson, the body is not able to be known directly. It is, rather, a medium for knowing the unknowability of the divine, "a dimension of ourselves whose mystery continually turns toward the invisible."[32]

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[29] Ibid., 516.
[30] Ibid., 576.
[31] Ibid., 582-83.
[32] Ibid., 599.

Human Embodiment and Digital Technology

Several points of contact exist between Sigurdson and Han. Both authors argue for the relative *openness* of human bodies to integrate and mesh with other bodies, as opposed to modern notions of the body (or world) as a given, bounded sphere. Just as modern notions of the social and the sacred must be reconfigured in contemporary society, so must one's view of human embodiment. Han refers primarily to social bodies in speaking of worlds as unbounded and networked—a foundational reality appealed to by Sigurdson in his notion of the body as grotesque, or open to constant transformation rather than simply being given.

Additionally, both authors argue based on the point above that one's embodiment in the world is mediated primarily through visual perception, as it is "[t]hrough our gaze [that] we stand in an active relationship to the things and persons around us."[33] Sigurdson's notion of scopic regimes seeks to show that how one sees—the gaze, or perception, of a person or society—is culturally, historically, and physically situated, "anything but abstract."[34] While he seeks to establish a broad picture of perception and its relationship to embodiment, Han focuses on how perception is technologically enacted.

Han interacts with the work of philosopher Don Ihde in suggesting that technology is representative of a new "lifeworld" which changes one's perception of the world. Han explains that "[l]ifeworld, according to Ihde, is the multidimensional structure of experience . . . the environment or the milieu in which humans situate themselves."[35] Quoting Ihde, Han explains that lifeworlds supply "the dominant basis for an understanding both of the world and ourselves."[36] Perception, both sensory perception and cultural perception, is essential in Ihde's example, demonstrating how one's perception of self, place in the world, and purpose and/or meaning is "technologically embodied." An apt example in Ihde's perspective is the use of corrective lenses. After years of wearing glasses, one hardly notices that they are even there as they recede into the background. Similarly, one rarely notices the milieu of digital technologies surrounding them on

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[33] Ibid., 152.
[34] Ibid., 292.
[35] Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 39.
[36] Don Ihde, *Existential Technics,* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983)*,* 10. Quoted in Han, *Technologies of Religion,* 39.

any given day—they have receded into the background of conscious awareness. Ihde argues that in the digital age, technology "withdraws" as we "embrace the technics."[37]

Networked bodies, affect, and digital media

In both Sigurdson and Han, the focus is on the *materiality* of embodiment *vis-à-vis* visual perception, as opposed to a predominantly conceptual or rational understanding of one's being-in-the-world. According to Han, religion and new media technologies are enmeshed and implicated with a milieu of other systems, co-evolving in a way such that a basic cause is impossible to locate, resulting in a new entity altogether. As media technologies "activate" sensibilities or affinities within certain fields of perception—a process that is "universalizing without totalizing"—new connections are formed as people relate through collective emotive, affectual experiences.[38] This is precisely what Sigurdson refers to when he suggests that individual human bodies are implicated in a network of interconnected social and spiritual relationships which mutually transform and shape one another. Further, in alignment with Han, Sigurdson argues that the connective points for these networked assemblages are physically-mediated practices or habits—in theological language, *liturgies.* Sigurdson suggests that the Christian scopic regime, or the "gaze of grace," is a learned way of seeing the world through training in practices of faith such as worship, liturgical ritual, prayer, and Scripture reading. These affective, liturgical practices train the eye against the dominant scopic regime of the person's historical or social location in order to see the invisible in the visible.[39] Han likewise grounds the notion of world-forming in a phenomenological approach which emphasizes "affectivity and participation."[40]

The key insight here is that different worlds or bodies may integrate into a new assemblage even in the absence of a shared rationality or belief system. Bodies, both argue, come together by activating similar affective, gut-level resonances: "networks, or spheres, are models of 'worlding' rooted in sensibilities and affinities, rather than ideas, beliefs and doctrines."[41] Whereas Sigurdson focuses on liturgical practices or rites as the connective tissue between networked worlds, Han focuses on the unique and powerful ways that digital media activate such affinities.

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[37] Don Ihde, "A Phenomenology of Technics" In *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology,* ed. D.M. Kaplan (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 139. Quoted in Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 41.
[38] Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 45.
[39] Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies,* 244, 274.
[40] Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 45.
[41] Ibid., 48.

Through the proliferation of digital images, two seemingly unrelated bodies may come together to form a new sphere by means of shared affective responses. Han uses William Connolly's description of the "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine" created during George W. Bush's presidency in the United States as an apt example of how this happens.[42] Connolly's work shows how in the Bush administration, American-style market ideology ("cowboy capitalism") and evangelical Christianity—two belief systems which on the surface seem incompatible or, at the very least, dissimilar—came together in the creation of a new intertwined relationship through the activation of right-wing media:

> The complex becomes a powerful machine as evangelical and corporate sensibilities resonate together, drawing each into a larger movement that dampens the importance of doctrinal differences between them. At first, the parties sense preliminary affinities of sensibility; eventually they provoke each other to transduct those affinities into a massive political machine. And the machine then foments new intensities of solidarity between these constituencies.[43]

Through the proliferation of right-wing media, resonant "affinities" or "sensibilities" between cowboy capitalism and evangelical Christianity are activated, resulting in a new assemblage of politics, religion, and media technologies.[44] It is this process which Han believes to be operative both theologically and practically in the heavy use of digital technologies in multi-site churches.

More will be drawn from Sigurdson and Han's approaches to human embodiment and world-forming below, but for now it is sufficient to summarize the most relevant themes as follows: (1) human bodies can be described as open systems, "grotesque" and susceptible to ongoing transformation and change, therefore problematizing the idea that being physically present is the essence of being embodied, whereas the absence of physical presence is the essence of disembodiment; (2) embodiment is primarily mediated and experienced through visual perception, which is tied to one's biological sight and shaped by historically and culturally learned ways of seeing or perceiving; and, finally, (3) digital media has the potential to act as an unstable third entity, activating resonant impulses in different bodies and drawing them together into new networked realities or assemblages.

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[42] William E. Connolly, "The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine," *Political Theory* 33, no. 6 (December 2005): 869-886.
[43] Ibid., 871. Quoted in Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 47.
[44] Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 48.

We turn now to Han's study of one of the largest multi-site churches in the United States in order to examine how these themes are at work in highly technologized worship environments.

Embodiment and Atmosphere in Multi-Site Churches

Han's argument continues by examining the creation of digital environments in multi-site worship spaces through a focused ethnographic study of Bright Church—a pseudonym for one of the largest multi-site megachurches in the United States—as well as by focusing on literature from the Christian tech industry. Han argues that designed worship spaces cause a "relooking" that draws technology, God, and people together in a way that reconfigures traditional relations. Here, Han is furthering the claim that visual perception, and especially that which is digitally construed, activates certain affinities and sensibilities in the creation of a new world, or *third space*, to evoke Heidi Campbell's language. Here as well we see Sigurdson's notion of a Christian scopic regime at work, in which one's physical and metaphorical sight implicate and inform one's being-in-the-world. Han emphasizes that individual parts are not morphed into a single entity, but are "drawn together" into a "foam" with "plural and insular structures."[45] The resulting "technologized worship space" emphasize "embodiment and affectivity that are specifically actualized by digital, especially visual, environments."[46] Han argues that, specifically, it is "church architecture, digital technologies, and pastoral administrators [that] come together and form a 'regime of design' that constructs . . . *atmosphere*."[47]

"(Atmo)sphere," as Han refers to it, is the primary object of perception, the "presence of some kind of invisible entity within a specific space."[48] In contemporary worship spaces, the infusion of digital media creates an atmosphere in which participants experience a feeling of transcendence that interweaves the individual's private spiritual encounter within the greatness of the larger body of the church. Digital technologies, Han argues, have the effect of creating a sense of the "mega," in which the social body or network is bigger than the individual. In multi-site churches, digital images work to "activate" sensorium through perceptual experience, "creating an orientation of the worshipper's affect to receive God."[49]

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[45] Ibid., 57.
[46] Ibid., 57.
[47] Ibid., 54, emphasis original.
[48] Ibid., 67.
[49] Ibid., 69.

Han's notion of *atmosphere* helps us see that the integration of digital technologies in worship environments is never incidental to questions of embodiment; rather, the embodiment of everyone involved, from pastors and worship leaders to the congregation, is implicated as digital media are used to activate affective responses. What is clear from Han's argument is that digitally-infused atmospheres *do something* to the worshippers, and often that *something* is Janus-faced.[50] Han's description of the way digital media activates affective responses in order to create a certain disposition in a person—in the case of multi-site churches, often a disposition towards the transcendence of God—helpfully moves the discussion surrounding highly emotive worship experiences into the realm of liturgy. The ways in which simulcast preaching interacts with the notion of atmosphere will be explored further in the final section of this project.

Summary: Digital Mediation, Human Embodiment, and Multi-Site Churches

This section argued that technology is never simply a tool to be used for good or ill; rather, the integration of technology with religion results in the creation of new network assemblages, spheres, or third places. Human embodiment is implicated in this process as sensorium are activated by digital media, resulting in certain affective responses that create resonances with other bodies and ideologies. Multi-site churches with highly technologized worship spaces are prime examples of these phenomena, employing digital technologies to facilitate transcendent experiences.

Several questions come to the surface at this point as we transition from these broad considerations towards a focused theological exploration of digitally-mediated preaching. What resonant assemblages are created by the digital-mediation of the preaching event? What affective responses does the digital-mediation of the sermon activate in the congregation? Do these "affinities and sensibilities," as Han puts it, promote or subvert the goals of preaching in Reformed theology?

TOWARDS A REFORMED THEOLOGY OF PREACHING

Despite the Reformed tradition's rich history of preaching, little has been written from a Reformed perspective exploring the nature of the preacher's embodied relationship to the congregation in the preaching event. Of course, this may in large part be explained by the fact that

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[50] David Lyon, *Surveillance After Snowden* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

until the advent of digital technologies, the preacher's physical co-presence in the preaching event was simply a given: if the preacher was not physically co-present with the congregation, then there would not be any preaching event. Even sermons which were written and circulated around parishes to be read aloud in worship by authorized readers assumed the physical co-presence of the readers—what other alternative could be imagined? In the digital age, the preacher's physical co-presence cannot so readily be assumed.

What might a Reformed theology of preaching have to say about the importance of the preacher's physical co-presence in the preaching event? In the absence of any pre-existing literature which engages this question directly from a Reformed perspective, one must build a case from the literature that *is* readily available. In that vein, the aim of this section is to identify some of the foundational themes of a Reformed theology of preaching that come to bear most directly on the nature of the preacher's relationship to the congregation in the preaching event. These themes will be discussed further in the final section in conversation with the practice of digitally-mediated preaching in order to ascertain the relative importance of the preacher's physical presence in preaching.

<u>What is Reformed Preaching?</u>

Thomas G. Long, one of the foremost professors of homiletics over the last three decades, argues that the essential ingredients of preaching include the congregation, the preacher, the sermon, and the presence of Christ.[51] Certainly few would disagree with that statement, but is there anything further we can say in reference to what preaching is and does? What characteristics of preaching are availed to us by the Reformed tradition? What makes preaching Reformed?

The foundations of a Reformed theology of preaching

Preaching in the late Middle Ages reached its zenith in the sixteenth century through the pulpit ministries of John Calvin, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and the other great leaders of the Reformation. Authors writing from a Reformed perspective believe these men "brought the pulpit into the modern age" through their preaching, bringing it "out of the medieval shadows."[52] Of course, it is not that the Reformers *recovered* a homiletical tradition that had been lost or forgotten

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[51] Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 16-17.
[52] Carl C. Fickenscher II, "The Contribution of the Reformation to Preaching," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (1994), 255.

in the medieval period so much as they *renewed* and *refocused* a tradition that was already relatively strong.[53] Even so, the impact and influence of their dynamic preaching broke rank with the preaching common to the day—as well as with its antecedent forms—in several significant ways.

Elmer Kiessling suggests that in contrast to the preaching common today, the Reformers were less concerned with the practical elements of homiletical science and more focused on the event of preaching and in its theological content. Kiessling posits four specific developments of preaching in the Reformation that are found in Luther's preaching particularly: a heightened Christological focus in the sermon, a renewed sense of the sermon being scriptural, sharper ethical exhortation, and an enhanced placement of the sermon in the life of the church's worship.[54] John Broadus, synthesizing the key elements of preaching in the Reformation as a whole, similarly identifies four developments: a revival of friars taking up the task of regular preaching in local parishes, a refocusing of sermon content on the exposition of the Bible, a boldness in preaching controversially, and a commitment to communicating the doctrines of grace.[55]

Carl Fickensher sets forth his own list of distinctives for Reformed preaching in an attempt to bring together these themes from Kiessling and Broadus. According to Fickenscher, the Reformation resulted in a renewed emphasis on preaching, a focus on the primacy and authority of Scripture in preaching, a belief in the centrality of the gospel in preaching, and the reimagining of the relationship between the preacher and the congregation. Fickenscher's focus, like each of the authors mentioned above, is to show how these developments "shape[d] the content and the role of preaching" as well as "the form of the sermon" within the Reformation.[56]

From the past to the present

These summaries show the considerable agreement shared by authors in articulating the distinct ways preaching developed in the Reformation. Although the discussion above is largely historical, determining what made the preaching of the Reformers distinct for their day and age, it

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[53] See Heiko Oberman, "Preaching and the Word in the Reformation," *Theology Today* 18, no. 1 (1961), 16; John Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1889), 113; and Fickenscher, "The Contribution," 262.

[54] Elmer Carl Kiessling, *The Early Sermons of Luther and Their Relation to the Pre-Reformation Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1935), 147-148.

[55] Broadus, *Lectures*, 113-118.

[56] Fickenscher, "The Contribution," 255.

also identifies the characteristics of a Reformed preaching tradition that remains strong even to this day. Fickenscher is keen to note this connection between the preaching of the Reformation and the modern pulpit:

> Since the Reformation, the pulpit has continued to hold a place of high esteem. Scripture continues to be preached. The message of the gospel of justification by grace through faith continues to be heard. And the preacher's role is still defined by his relationship of pastor to people. In a significant sense, these contributions of the Reformation have shaped modern preaching.[57]

Modern preaching has been *shaped* by the Reformation. This is likely true of all *Protestant* preaching to some degree, but of course is all the more the case within the Reformed tradition. How have these themes formed contemporary reflections on Reformed preaching? In what ways might the study of these themes contribute to the construction of an informed theological reflection on the preacher's physical presence in the preaching event?

Answering these questions requires a more in-depth look at the ecclesiological, incarnational, and pneumatological elements of Reformed preaching. These will be analyzed by organizing the relevant material under the headings of *the preacher as pastor*, *the preacher and the Word of God*, and *the sermon as a means of grace*. This structure is not intended to give a comprehensive view of each subject, but to surface the most relevant points about the role of the preacher and his or her relationship with the congregation in the preaching event.

The Preacher as Pastor

One of the great revivals of Reformed preaching came in the realization that the preaching office of the church should be normally carried out by local pastors. Although that fact is taken for granted today, this was not the common practice of preaching in the time of the Reformation:

> In critical ways many preachers of the late Middle Ages were detached from their hearers. Sermons prepared according to the method of the scholastics often were impersonal and beyond the comprehension of the congregation. Even worse, so much of the preaching of the time was delivered by itinerants. The preaching orders,

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[57] Fickenscher, "The Contribution," 275. It should be noted that in many Reformed denominations, the role of pastor and preacher is reserved only for men, although a prominent exception to this rule may be found in the mainline Presbyterian Church (U. S. A.). In an attempt to summarize general points of congruence across the Reformed tradition, I have intentionally drawn from authors who represent a variety of views along typical diving lines across Reformed denominations, not least of which being the role of women in ordained church office. As such, I refer to the preacher with both male and female pronouns throughout.

the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians, had papal authorization to preach anywhere. On the other hand, parish priests were often negligent in that duty. In England absentee rectors lived at some distance from even their parishes. The English solution of homilies prepared by able but unknown men could at best be a stop-gap.[58]

In sharp contrast, the Reformers saw themselves as shepherds of their congregations. "Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin will always be closely associated with Wittenberg, Zurich, and Geneva, and each was well known by the local people."[59]

Luther was uneasy with the concept of itinerant, "wandering" preachers, and was largely responsible for developing the idea that preachers should have "a formal call from a congregation in order to preach."[60] The Reformed emphasis on pastors preaching is evidenced as well in Calvin's breakdown of the four church offices—pastors, doctors, elders, and deacons—in which, interestingly, it is the pastors ("those who have the care of a particular flock"), not the doctors (or teachers, "who presided both in the education of pastors and in the instruction of the whole church"), who are responsible for the regular preaching ministry of the church.[61]

Preaching to the congregation, from the congregation

This conviction that preachers should be relationally connected to the congregation, planted in the life of the community, and responsible to God as shepherds of the flock remains an integral part of contemporary Reformed theologies of preaching. Luther's notion of calling remains relevant in the process of ordination. Long argues that by the laying on of hands and the vows of ordination, the preacher is authorized by the congregation to go to God's Word on their behalf.[62] Long goes on to say that in some sense, the preacher carries the congregation to the Bible with him in sermon preparation: "It is not the preacher who goes to the Scriptures; it is the church that goes to the Scripture by means of the preacher. The preacher is a member of the community, set apart by them and sent to the Scripture to search, to study, and to listen obediently on their behalf."[63]

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[58] Ibid., 272.
[59] Ibid., 272.
[60] Ibid., 272.
[61] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, tran. Rev. William Pringle, vol. xxi (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, Reprinted 2009), 280.
[62] Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 53.
[63] Ibid., 54.

Here, the relationship of the preacher and the congregation is complexified. Preaching in the Reformed view assumes the pastor's embeddedness in a local church community that is inseparable from the act of delivering sermons. The preacher does not come to the pulpit from outside the community, a hired hand called to provide a service to the people. Rather, "we who preach . . . are members of the body of Christ, participants in the worshiping assembly, commissioned to preach by the very people to whom we are about to speak."[64] Long suggests that ideally, preachers

> have been involved with [the congregation], in ministry to and with them, throughout the week, in hospital rooms and living rooms, in town halls and school auditoriums, in kitchens and factories. . . Even if we do not do so literally, we stand up to preach from our place in the middle of this community's life, not from a point above it or at its edge. Moltmann has it right; preachers "come from God's people."[65]

Preaching from a position of relational proximity to the congregation is integral within Reformed theology. It is difficult to imagine how this might be accomplished absent the pastor's *physical* presence in and among the community of believers. Theologically, this point raises important questions of the embodiment of the pastor and the corporate body of Christ, issues that will be addressed in more depth in a later section.

Preaching with simplicity and relevance

One final point worth mentioning in relation to the preacher's embeddedness in the life of the congregation is the importance of the preacher prioritizing *simplicity* and *relevance* in the content of the sermon. Against the scholastic sermons common to the period of the Reformation, Luther argued that preaching should be simple enough to be understood by the people in the pew:

> We preach publicly for the sake of plain people. Christ could have taught in a profound way but He wished to deliver His message with the utmost simplicity in order that the common people might understand. Good God, there are sixteen-year-old girls, women, old men, and farmers in church, and they don't understand lofty

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[64] Ibid., 3.
[65] Ibid., 4.

matters. . . When it comes to academic disputations watch me in the university; there I'll make it sharp enough for anybody.[66]

Such simplicity did not "dumb down" the biblical content or ethical exhortation; in fact, as attested above, the preaching evidenced in the Reformation featured a recovery of "controversial" preaching with deepened ethical content. Simplicity refers to the heart of preaching, which shifted in focus from academic concerns to one of a pastoral concern—the Reformers believed that sermons should be preached in a way that could be easily understood and applied by the congregation. In contemporary theologies of preaching, this concept is often what is meant by the notion of "relevance," in which biblical content is applied directly to the needs of the congregation for the sake of their understanding and transformation.

The relevance of the sermon's content depends much on the pastor's knowledge of the congregation's needs, learned over a period of time in close relationship with individuals and families. The relevance of preaching depends as well on the preacher's ability to faithfully exposit and apply the Word of God, the topic of which the next section is concerned.

Preaching and the Word of God

Perhaps most integral to a Reformed view of preaching is the heightened sense that the sermon actually communicates the Word of God. This conviction takes a variety of shapes in contemporary studies just as it has historically—not only is there significant emphasis on the *written Word*, the Bible, but also there exists the belief that in some sense, the preacher's words in the sermon actually contain or represent *God's words* to the congregation. This raises questions of the relationship between the written Word of God in Scripture, the spoken Word of God in the sermon, and the incarnate Word of God in Christ.

Preaching the written Word of God

According to Fickenscher, the renewal of preaching in the Reformation was essentially a renewal of *biblical* preaching, in which the doctrine of *sola scriptura* exercised considerable authority. Fickenscher argues that "[i]n order for preaching to merit such an exalted position in the life of the church, it was implicit in the minds of the reformers that the preaching be based solely on the word of God, the Holy Scriptures."[67]

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[66] Martin Luther, *Table Talk,* 383-38. Quoted in Fickenscher, "The Contribution," 273.
[67] Fickenscher, "The Contribution," 265.

Long argues that the normative practice of preaching in the church is "biblical preaching," wherein the exposition of a passage of Scripture drives not only the main idea and points of the sermon but also the form of the sermon.[68] The reason is because biblical preaching "reenacts the epistemology of the church" and forms the church "according to the pattern of Christ."[69] Long argues that although many throughout history have disagreed over what it means for Scripture to be inspired, "there is surprising consensus about what the Bible *does*."[70] According to Long, when the church "goes to the Scriptures in openness and trust, it finds itself uniquely addressed there by God and its identity as the people of God shaped by that encounter."[71]

Long's approach requires a commitment to a historical-grammatical approach to biblical interpretation in which the exegete studies Scripture to discover the author's original meaning— the standard interpretive practice in Reformed theologies of preaching. Long, while never naming his hermeneutical approach as such, nonetheless describes the steps of biblical exegesis in accordance with this model.

Preaching the Incarnate Word of God

Long sees this not as a wooden or scientific process so much as a structured means of "listening" for the original meaning, which can then be extended and applied to contemporary audiences. In other words, "the church listens to Scripture because it recognizes that it is addressed there by Christ."[72] In unison with other prominent Reformed authors, Long qualifies the notion of *biblical* preaching as ultimately *Christocentric* in form and content: "If we ask about a particular sermon, 'Is that a Christian sermon?' we are really asking if it bears true and faithful witness to the God of Jesus Christ, and answering that question inevitably takes us to the biblical story through which we know and encounter the God of Jesus Christ."[73] Pastor and author Timothy Keller argues similarly, when he states: "[e]very time you expound a Bible text, you are not finished unless you demonstrate how it shows us that we cannot save ourselves and that only Jesus

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[68] Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 59.
[69] Ibid., 60.
[70] Ibid., 61.
[71] Ibid., 61.
[72] Ibid., 61.
[73] Ibid., 59.

can. That means we must preach Christ from every text, which is the same as saying we must preach the gospel every time and not just settle for general inspiration or moralizing."[74]

Biblical preaching mediates the authority of Christ in the church and, through the church, the world. The authority of preaching is grounded in the authority of Scripture, which itself is grounded in the authority of Christ. The authority of the preacher is therefore measured by his or her ability to faithfully communicate the gospel to the congregation by means of the biblical text.

Is the preaching of the Word of God the Word of God?

There is less consensus in defining the relationship between the spoken Word of God in preaching and the written Word of God in Scripture. Specifically, a significant question exists about the extent to which the sermon may be called *God's Word*. The Second Helvetic Confession (1562), one of the most widely recognized Reformed confessions written in large part by Heinrich Bullinger, states the following:

> *The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God*. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.[75]

Oberman suggests that we take this statement at face value, seeing in the confession an *ex opere operato* reality that the faithful exposition of Scripture is itself the Word of God. This is dependent not on the relative skill or piety of the preacher, but on the power of God's Word. Thus, Luther stated that when a preacher spoke, it was not the preacher he was hearing, but God himself.

Adam and Keller disagree, seeing instead in Bullinger's confession and other writings—in addition to the Scriptural witness itself—a view of separation between the preacher's words and the Words of God. The preacher's words are not one-to-one the words of God; they are, however, to be heard *as* the Words of God when they faithfully communicate the Scriptures according to the terms mentioned above.[76] This slight separation between the preacher's words and the Word of

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[74] Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 48.

[75] *Second Helvetic Confession* (1562), https://www.monergism.com/second-helvetic-confession-ebook.

[76] See Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 112-120; and Keller, *Preaching*, 3-4.

God maintains the authority of Scripture and grounds the preacher's authority in the Scripture, such that the only authoritative preaching is that preaching which faithfully expounds the Bible. Such separation is preferable, as the potential abuses of a pulpit in which the preacher's words are demanded to be heard as divine dictum are far too easy to imagine.

Preaching as an "incarnation" of the Word of God

Charles Bartow argues for a slightly more nuanced perspective in which preaching may be understood as a form of *incarnation*. By incarnation, Bartow means to describe how in the sermon, the human ("*homo perfomans*") and divine ("*actio divina*") come together.[77] Bartow argues that in order for Scripture to be effective, it must be *spoken* in public readings and preaching, as God's Word can be known to us only in the form of human speech. God authorizes Scripture to be His Word by its authoritative witness to Jesus and by the authoritative witness Jesus makes of it. God, thus, authors Scripture and authorizes preaching and is therefore present in each.

While Bartow's view offers a helpfully nuanced separation between the preacher's words and the words of God, his argument introduces an unnecessary separation between the words of Scripture and the Words of God. He explicitly states that God's Word "is not *verbum*, but *sermo*; not *ratio,* but *oratio*."[78] However, as Adam argues, it is incoherent to separate God's words from God's self: "revelation without verbal interpretation is incomplete."[79] It seems better to articulate a view of God's revelation in Scripture as both *verbo* and *sermo*, *ratio* and *oratio*. Does this not simply move the question of possible abuses in the pulpit back to the level of interpretation, potentially giving preachers license for any behavior which may be demonstrated as the faithful exposition of the text? The answer, of course, must be *No*. As aforementioned, in the Reformed schema faithful, authoritative preaching is not simply *biblical* in the sense that it exposits a Scriptural text, but also *Christological* in the sense that the sermon's content and form work together to communicate both the propositional truth of the Gospel and its transformative, redeeming effects. Further, one must be careful not to draw out the incarnational analogy too far. Adam rightly notes that "[w]e may and must worship the Son of God, but we may not worship the

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[77] Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 60.
[78] Ibid., 26.
[79] Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 106.

Bible."[80] J. I. Packer writes that "the analogy between the divine-human person of the Word made flesh, who is Christ, and the divine human product of the Word written, which is Scripture, can only be a limited one."[81]

There is another layer of Bartow's argument that should be discussed, which leads us to the final area of focus in this section: namely, the role of the sermon as a sacrament in the worship of the church.

The Sermon as Sacrament

In the Reformation, preaching not only increased in frequency, but also resulted in "a high view of the sermon as a means of grace."[82] The sacramentality of the sermon is evidenced in various ways.

Real presence, metonymy, and the Word of God

Bartow's notion of divine appointment in Scripture and preaching is based upon the idea of metonymy, which he relates to the sacrament and the concept of "real presence." Calvin uses the language of metonymy in explaining the sacrament of the Eucharist.[83] There, by virtue of divine appointment, bread and wine become signifiers of the real presence of God, even in the face of God's apparent absence. Calvin would say this is "because [the symbol] not only symbolizes the thing it has been consecrated to represent . . . but also truly exhibits it."[84]

In a similar sense, Scripture may be viewed as God's Word not because of any intrinsic value, but by the fact that it has been *appointed* by God to signify the fullness of his presence and sovereignty even in his apparent absence—similar to the elements of bread and wine in the Eucharist. Preaching and the public reading of Scriptures, too, have been appointed to speak that which may truly be known as the Word of God. The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God in the same sense that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are the body and blood of Christ.

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[80] Ibid., 107.

[81] J. I. Packer, "*Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1996), 82-83. Quoted in Adam, 107.

[82] Fickenscher, "The Contribution," 262.

[83] On Calvin's "metonymy" language, see Graham R. Hughes, *Reformed Sacramentality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), 119.

[84] John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion,* trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 574.

The placement of the sermon in the church's worship

Practically, the shift towards pulpit-centered worship services in the Reformed tradition speaks to the development of a high view of preaching as a means of grace. The Reformation featured a turn in ecclesial practice in which traditionally private acts for the priest and congregants became both public and corporate, resulting in significant shifts in the order of worship services in Reformed congregations. Oberman argues that in this way, Reformed preaching was the answer to the modern period's hyper-individualism.[85] As a part of this shift, the sermon's place in the church's worship transitioned from being a tangential (if not inconsequential) element in the service to ultimately eclipsing the Eucharist as the central moment of worship.

Fickenscher suggests this shift was integrally connected with the Reformers' conviction that preaching was itself a sacramental event. No longer was the sermon merely a preparation for the sacraments; it was, in fact, sacramental.[86] This sacramentality of the sermon is evidenced, on the one hand, by the conviction that the words of the preacher are, in fact, the Words of God. It is evidenced as well in the belief that the Holy Spirit, the present Christ, accompanies the preaching of the Word. The high view of the sermon as a means of grace explains in large part why Protestant worship services quickly became pulpit-centered in the wake of the Reformation.

Encountering God in the sermon

Long argues that along with the congregation, the preacher, and the sermon, the presence of Christ is an essential ingredient of the preaching event: "Preaching that happens 'in Christ's name' is preaching in which the risen Christ is truly present here and now."[87] This conviction underscores the nature of what the Reformed tradition means by the sermon's sacramentality—the sense that it mediates an embodied encounter with God.

This is precisely what Oberman refers to when he describes the sermon as an "apocalyptic event:" the place where the listener experiences a "decisive encounter" with the presence of God.[88] Oberman argues that previously in the Catholic liturgy, the sermon could only ever point listeners to the sacraments—to penance or confession—in order to be absolved of sin and met with the grace of God. The Reformers, by contrast, believed that the sermon itself had the apocalyptic

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[85] Oberman, "Preaching and the Word," 21.
[86] Fickenscher, "The Contribution," 263.
[87] Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 17.
[88] Oberman, "Preaching and the Word," 18.

power to "reveal both God and devil alike"—to pull into the present the reality of the Final Judgment in which the listener is confronted both with their sinfulness and with God's mercy in Christ.[89] Thus, the sermon had no need to point outside itself; it was the place of the decisive encounter.

Herein as well, the role of the preacher cannot be ignored. Graham Hughes argues that while the ordering of liturgical space and time are important in facilitating sacramentality, "of singular importance too will be the presence, and manner, of a, or some, sacramental person(s). Again, this is not to deny that it is the congregation, which has gathered to worship God. It is to say that for this to happen, someone has to speak the people's words and, even more crucially, speak God's (or Christ's) words to the people."[90] The presence of the preacher, meaning *not just* his or her physical co-presence in the room, but also the calling, gifting, care, and authority with which they carry themselves, is integral to the facilitation of the sacraments in the midst of the congregation. From the Reformed perspective, this is just as true in the sermon as it is in the Eucharist.

Summary: Towards a Reformed Theology of Preaching

Inherent to a Reformed theology of preaching is the relationship between the human and the divine. Just as questions of *ex opere operato* surround the administration and efficacy of the sacraments, so too does it color perspectives on the task of preaching. The Reformed tradition's commitment to *pastoral*, *biblical, Christocentric,* and *sacramental* preaching provides a helpful descriptive for the interplay between divine action and human responsibility, showing how each is indispensable in the preaching event. Further, it demonstrates various levels of significance for human embodiment to be explored in the final section, particularly as relates to the notion of incarnation inherent in Reformed theologies of preaching.

We turn now to explore the importance of these issues in an evaluation of simulcast preaching in multi-site churches. How might a Reformed theology of preaching interface with contemporary applications of technology in the preaching event? How does the question of embodiment in digitally mediated preaching extend and challenge a Reformed theology of preaching?

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[89] Ibid., 18.

[90] Hughes, *Reformed Sacramentality*, 122.

How Important is Embodiment for Simulcast Preaching?

In the first section, it was demonstrated that digital technologies are not simply tools *out there* to be used at our disposal, but rather integrate with bodies and ideologies to constitute new networked realities. Digitally mediated preaching, or simulcast, exists as a network assemblage in which "the sermon is transformed into a 'sermonic event' that can be reproduced across limits of time, place and context."[91] As such, it bears significant weight on the question of embodiment, particularly as it relates to the physical presence of the preacher and its implications for the congregation. How important is embodiment for digitally mediated preaching?

I seek to answer this question in the sections below by integrating the Reformed theology of preaching set forth previously with the understanding of digital mediation proposed in the first section. I begin by looking at the ways in which simulcast preaching enhances and extends notions of human embodiment and presence, problematizing simplistic dichotomies of the "real" and the "virtual" in multi-site settings. This is followed by an evaluation of the nature of incarnation in simulcast preaching, asking whether preachers in multi-site churches can adequately pastor their congregations. In the third and final section, I identify three consequences of simulcast preaching for multi-site churches as a way of demonstrating the important implications of embodiment for not just the preacher, but also the congregation. The goal in structuring the section in this way is to avoid restricting the discussion to only those questions pre-conceived by Reformed theologies of preaching, while at the same time allowing theological insights from the Reformed tradition to inform, interpret, and challenge aspects of digitally mediated preaching in multi-site churches.

(Digitally Mediated) Preachers, Embodiment, and Presence[92]

This section analyzes the nature of the preacher's presence in simulcast preaching, problematizing the virtual/real dichotomy often employed when talking about issues of embodiment and technology. This is followed by an examination of the claims that digitally mediated preaching promotes a disembodied message and un-incarnational model of life and ministry, which then raises the question of the (digitally mediated) preacher's ability to pastor the congregation.

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[91] Miranda Klaver, "Media Technology Creating 'Sermonic Events.' The Hillsong Megachurch Network," *Cross Currents* 65, no. 4 (December 2015): 422-433.

[92] I bracket "digitally mediated" to demonstrate that the embodiment and presence of preachers in simulcast preaching moves fluidly between digital mediation and physical co-presence.

Does simulcast promote a disembodied, "dis-incarnate" message?

Some argue that technologically mediated communication is not only inherently *unreal* and *disembodied*, but also antithetical to Christ's example of *incarnation.*[93] Such is the position of Danny Hindman, who argues that simulcast preaching "is an extension of the preacher to the point of disembodiment. The preacher is visible and audible, but he is not there."[94] Hindman interacts with media ecologists Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman to suggest that any form of communication that eliminates the limitations of space and time—"two of the core characteristics of embodiment"—is inherently disembodied, unreal, and disincarnate.[95] Arguing from what he refers to as an "*imago dei* ethic," Hindman concludes that preachers who deliver sermons via simulcast in multi-site churches "cut the gospel in half" by using a medium that "communicates a narrative in which the word remains without flesh, and calls us to do the same."[96] This not only reflects a disincarnate message, but fails to embody the hope of the gospel, which is a resurrected *body*. As such, multi-site streaming is, in Hindman's view, unethical.[97]

Similar arguments are easy to find, usually asserted with as much force as Hindman's. For example, pastor Jared C. Wilson argues that "[v]ideo is by definition *un-incarnational*,"[98] and fellow pastor Jonathan Leeman takes it a step further by commenting that "multi-site is ironically *anti-incarnational*: it divides Word from flesh."[99] These authors write with an impassioned sense of care for the church, seeking to protect her from the ruse of digital mediation in the preaching event. However, is digital mediation such an enemy of preaching and the Incarnation? How should embodiment be understood in the context of simulcast preaching?

Does virtual = unreal and disembodied?

Social media theorist Nathan Jurgenson refers to the aforementioned views as "digital dualism," which he defines as the belief "that the digital world is 'virtual' and the physical world

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[93] I am indebted to Robert Herrington's summary of some of the views mentioned below. Robert Herrington, "A Theological and Philosophical Evaluation of Simulcast Preaching," 85-90.

[94] Danny Hindman, "The Word Without Flesh: An Ethical Evaluation of Digital Media in Multi-Site Worship," *Second Nature*, 15 September 2014.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid. Hindman concludes, "We cannot therefore conclude in good conscience that it is *ethical* for our people to worship via multi-site video stream."

[98] Jared C. Wilson, *The Prodigal Church*: *A Gentle Manifesto against the Status Quo* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 116.. Emphasis added.

[99] Jonathan Leeman, "Twenty-Two Problems with Multi-Site Churches," *9Marks*, 1 October 2014. Emphasis added.

real.'"[100] Jurgenson cites authors such as Amber Case, Sherry Turkle, Nicholas Carr, Evgeny Morozov, Mark Bauerlein, and Andrew Keen—among others—as proponents of the digital dualism view.[101] For instance, Jurgenson criticizes Case's view that our existence online constitutes a "second self," arguing that this creates a false binary between first and second selves. Jurgenson believes such a view is fallacious, arguing instead for a view of "augmented reality" which sees "the digital and the physical as increasingly meshed."[102] It is not so much, in Jurgenson's view, that humans create a second self online, but that people's online lives are so enmeshed with their lives offline that the distinction is becoming irrelevant. Jurgenson argues, in line with Han, that the online and offline worlds are networked into new realities that break down strict dichotomies of digital and physical.

Theologian Teresa Berger addresses these issues in evaluating the liturgical habits of online worshippers. Although primarily focused on practices of digitally mediated prayer and worship, her commentary on the nature of real versus virtual presence is pertinent to the present study. Berger begins by affirming the points made by Jurgenson above, showing that the distinction between the digital and the physical "is both inadequate and outdated."[103] Like Jurgenson, Berger argues that "daily living is no longer divided into 'online' and 'offline' times or practices," but is "digitally suffused."[104] Thus, any suggestion that the digital is *not real* is shown to be lacking.

Berger goes on to show that not only are online and offline worlds increasingly indistinguishable, but also that digitally mediated practices are inherently *embodied*. She argues that "no digital world can be entered, no website accessed, and no app installed without a body," and that "digitally mediated practices too are bodily practices."[105] While not following "traditional lines of bodily presence," digitally mediated liturgical practices necessarily involve the worshippers bodies just as much as worship in brick-and-mortar settings. Berger acknowledges that the one thing that may be missing from online worship is the physical co-presence of other worshippers, but she argues that "this physical co-presence of worshippers itself, in a brick-and-

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[100] Nathan Jurgenson, "Digital Dualism versus Augmented Reality," *The Society Pages*, *Cyborgology*, 24 February 2011.

[101] For the full list of authors and their works, see Jurgenson, "Digital Dualism."

[102] Ibid.

[103] Teresa Berger, @ *Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 16.

[104] Ibid., 17.

[105] Ibid., 18.

mortar sanctuary, is by no means a clear-cut category."[106] She is worth quoting at length at this point:

> Worshipping with the help of new technologies is of course not the exclusive domain of digitally mediated practices. In brick-and-mortar liturgies too, worshippers today routinely gather with the help of advanced technologies. Not only have worship technologies, such as sound systems and lighting, been enhanced, human bodies themselves come to worship "enhanced" by various body technologies. Many of these body technologies have become naturalized in our experience of them and therefore do not intrude into our consciousness as "artificial," for example, contact lenses, cochlear implants ("bionic ears"), artificial hips, arterial stents, and cosmetic or gender reassignment surgery. These bodily technologies for the most part are unquestioned elements of contemporary life, which has become technologically enhanced both offline and online. Worshippers may not be cyborgs receiving the sacraments, but many also do not attend brick-and-mortar liturgies with purely "natural," non-enhanced bodies. In fact, a stark separation between "natural" on the one hand and "artificial/ technological/human-made" on the other hand has lost its interpretive power.[107]

Here, Berger is on much the same ground as Don Ihde when he suggests that technology "withdraws" as we "embrace the technics."[108] She seems to be arguing for a view of embodiment consistent with Sigurdson and Han as well, demonstrating a belief that human bodies are open systems, "grotesque" and susceptible to ongoing transformation and change. Berger's work applies this more specifically in the realm of digital religion by problematizing dichotomous understandings of the "virtual" and the "real" and the "natural" and the "technological," showing in greater detail how the human and the technological are co-implicated in networked relationships. This, again, problematizes the dichotomous understanding of embodiment in which *the presence of a physical body = embodied* and *the absence of a physical body = disembodied*. Embodiment is more complicated than that.

If nothing else, this point reveals that more nuanced lines of reasoning are needed to express the issues at stake in digitally mediated preaching. Is there really a significant difference in a worshipper experiencing a sermon in a church in which the preacher is physically co-present but is enhanced by A/V and IMAG technologies, and a worshipper experiencing a simulcast sermon in a multi-site church using those exact same technologies? If, as was argued above, the digital is

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[106] Ibid., 19.
[107] Ibid., 20.
[108] Ihde, "A Phenomenology of Technics," 139. Quoted in Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 41.

both real and embodied, then how might we discuss the difference in the preacher's presence in the two scenarios?

Whereas Berger's study focuses on individual worshippers engaging in liturgical practices online in the absence of the physical co-presence of fellow worshippers, the setting depicted in the present study is one in which the worshipper is physically co-present with fellow worshippers in the absence of the preacher's physical co-presence. Although the setting is different, Berger's line of reasoning applies just as well—the question simply turns from the individual worshipper engaging in digitally mediated liturgical practices to the *congregation* engaging in digitally mediated preaching. The question of the congregation's embodiment will be examined in a subsequent section below, but the question of the preacher's embodiment must be examined first.

The preacher's presence in simulcast and real presence

Following Berger, it can be argued that simulcast preaching is *embodied* rather than disembodied. Even though the resulting experience of the preacher at video venues is digitally mediated, the preacher must first enter a brick-and-mortar worship setting and deliver the sermon "in person" prior to the sermon being broadcast to other sites. The act of sermon delivery is still very much an embodied experience for the preacher. However, this is likely not the issue that most critics have with simulcast preaching. *Of course the first recording of the sermon is embodied,* they might lament, *but in what sense (if any) can the preacher be said to be embodied in the video playback of the sermon in other locations?*

A tentative argument may be proposed in suggesting that the preacher's *virtual* presence in simulcast settings is still *real* and *embodied*, even if in ways that are different than in traditional modes of preaching. Such a proposal can be found in the work of Catholic theologian Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, who argues that digitally mediated encounters might be understood analogously by means of *real presence*. According to Zsupan-Jerome, a parallel exists between the Catholic Church's traditional understanding of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist and presence as it is experienced in digital communication. Although a *real* presence, the encounter with Christ in the Eucharist is not a face-to-face meeting, but rather is defined by Christ's physical absence: "it is his *absence* that allows for the condition of faith to emerge and grow."[109] In simulcast preaching, the

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[109] Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, "Virtual Presence As Real Presence?: Sacramental Theology and Digital Culture in Dialogue," *Worship* 89, no. 6 (November 2015), 534. Emphasis original.

preacher's physical absence is often used to denote his or her failure to be present; however, might this absence constitute a *real* presence in a sense similar to that of Christ in the sacrament? While Zsupan-Jerome does not focus specifically on the issue of simulcast, her conclusions apply equally to all forms of digital communication.

To build her argument, Zsupan-Jerome turns to the phenomenological approaches of Louis-Marie Chauvet and Jean-Luc Marion, demonstrating that sacramental presence is "relational, seeking encounter and engagement in and through the worshiping community."[110] Just as Christ's mediated presence in the Eucharist is multilayered and multimodal, binding "the corporeal/physical . . . with the spiritual, psychological, communal, and relational dimensions of the event, taking place at a certain time and location," so also is mediated presence in digital communication.[111] As a result, virtual/digital presence must be understood within "a broader ecology, one in which different modalities of embodiment offer a spectrum of ways to approach authentic communication."[112] Zsupan-Jerome uses Marion's notion of the *idolatrous gaze* as opposed to the *iconic gaze* to argue that digital communication must be seen as having an "iconic presence" that recognizes the reality of the person on the other side of the screen—"an invitation into true encounter by meeting the other in their infinite complexity."[113] If real presence in the Eucharist is described as "encountering God's loving gift of self," then "envisioning true encounter online necessarily calls us into a posture of seeking and recognizing the person behind the screen, who is both revealed and concealed by the symbols of their presence: the pixelated word, the digitized image and sound."[114] Presence, then, is dependent not on physical co-presence, but on true encounter, which is grounded less in the object and more in the subject.

Real presence and the question of "liveness"

Herein the issue of *liveness* comes into view. Some simulcast preaching is streamed in "real time," whereas other churches pre-record sermons to be played back "live" in the context of campus worship services. What does it mean to be live, and how does it affect understandings of presence in simulcast preaching? Whereas some authors define *liveness* ontologically as the

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[110] Ibid., 535.
[111] Ibid., 534.
[112] Ibid., 537.
[113] Ibid., 539.
[114] Ibid., 541-42.

experience of an event in person, at the same time and in the same place, others argue that *liveness* is better defined in terms of the audience's experience. Philip Auslander argues that "the power of liveness is in fact a function not of proximity but of distance, or more precisely, the power of the live resides in the tension between having the sense of being connected experientially to something while it is happening while also remaining at a distance from it."[115] In simulcast performances of theatre and dance, for instance, the audience's experience of the *liveness* of the performance is measured not by their having been in the same room as the performers at the time of the performance, but by their sense of connection and engagement with the performer(s). In this view, liveness, much like Zsupan-Jerome's notion of presence, exists on a spectrum of *relationality* rather than *spatio-temporality*.

When applied to simulcast preaching, we might conclude that what matters is not the spatio-temporal simultaneity of the preacher's physical co-presence with the congregation in the preaching event, but the congregation's *experience* of interaction and engagement with the preacher during the sermon. These perspectives certainly reveal the complexity of the discussion, problematizing surface-level assumptions about the *givenness* of what it means to be present or embodied in the digital age. They also provide a more intelligent reading of the notion of congregational *engagement* in preaching, an idea frequently talked about in preaching manuals but rarely defined. Even so, it is likely these views go too far in dismissing the ontological nature of embodied presence and liveness, leaning too heavily on postmodern subjectivism in their definitions. Surely it is not simply, or even primarily, the congregation's *reception* of the preacher's presence which makes it *real*, or *live*. Further, while these perspectives helpfully show the ways in which the congregation may encounter the preacher, the interaction is asynchronous— the preacher cannot have a similar experience of interaction with the congregation. While the congregation may look at the preacher on the screen with an iconic gaze, seeing the person beyond the screen, it is difficult to imagine how the preacher might gaze upon the congregation—how can cameras function as icons of the congregation in the preacher's gaze? Such a view certainly stretches the bounds of what is properly envisioned in a Reformed theology of preaching between

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[115] Philip Auslander, "Afterword: So Close and Yet So Far Away: The Proxemics of Liveness" in *Experiencing Liveness in Contemporary Performance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Matthew Reason and Anja Mølle Lindelof (Routledge: New York, 2017), 296.

the preacher and the congregation. Still, these perspectives provide fresh ways of engaging the issue of embodiment in simulcast preaching.

<u>Incarnation and the Preacher as Pastor</u>

Returning briefly to the critical discussion of simulcast preaching offered by Hindman, Wilson, and Leeman, we find a third area of concern that is related to the preacher's embodiment: the issue of *incarnation*. Is simulcast preaching inherently "disincarnate," "un-incarnational," or even "*anti*-incarnational" as they suggest? If so, what are the implications for a Reformed theology of preaching which conceives of the preacher as pastor in an incarnational view of ministry?

Defining incarnation

In order to answer these questions, we must first define what is meant by *incarnation*. In their writing, Hindman, Wilson, and Leeman seem to similarly use "un-incarnation" or "dis-incarnation" (or some other variation of the word) to mean a disembodied, technologically mediated, distant, and decontextualized way of life and/or ministry. This, they conclude, is the *opposite* of what Jesus's example leads us to pursue. Based on this *negative* portrayal of what incarnation is *not*, I suggest these authors assume incarnation to represent a way of life and/or ministry that is marked by the following components:

(1) a person's physical co-presence with

(2) other physically co-present persons,

(3) unmediated by digital technologies,

(4) in the context of a spatio-temporal simultaneity, and

(5) intended as an imitation of Christ's incarnation,

(6) by which God became physically co-present with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ in order to redeem the fallen cosmos.[116]

Such a definition of *incarnation* is not wholly inadmissible. It rightly grounds the practical expression of life and ministry in the imitation of Christ's Incarnation. Moreover, it seeks to move towards others in love in response to God's initiative of love in Christ towards humanity. Finally, it seeks to affirm the goodness of the human body, reclaiming it from rationalistic perversions of

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[116] These authors regularly use the word "embodied" to describe what is frequently referred to in the literature as "physical co-presence." For the sake of clarity, I have articulated their view of incarnation in terms of the latter, consistent with the way I have used the terms throughout this project.

Christianity which see the body as an impediment to the life of faith. Of course, granted the integrity of such a view, simulcast preaching would in fact be *un-incarnational*. However, this definition falls short in that it operates from a modernist anthropology, lacking the nuance required in analyzing the networked relationships between humans, technology, and the sacred in contemporary society. It has already been demonstrated that the notion of a pure and unmediated physical co-presence is problematic when considering the complex nature of human embodiment and the ways in which technology enhances not only the environments in which we regularly interact, but also our very bodies in the digital age. While the authors offer a view of the body that is intended to be helpful, it is possible that they miss *actual bodies* along the way.

What appears to be at the heart of these authors' concerns over the nature of incarnation in simulcast preaching are not just philosophical or theological musings on embodiment and virtual reality, but pastoral concerns related to simulcast preachers (in)ability to adequately shepherd their congregations.

How can simulcast preachers pastor their congregations?

It was argued in the previous section that preaching in the Reformed view assumes the pastor's embeddedness in a local church community that is inseparable from the act of delivering sermons. It is in this sense that some react against digitally mediated preaching in reference to the expected *incarnation* of a preacher within the church community. How can a preacher truly come *from* the congregation as a member of the community in a multi-site context? It is this pastoral question which seems to be at the heart of many critiques against simulcast preaching, particularly in relation to critiques about disembodiment and dis-incarnation.

Long argues that pastoring involves being "in ministry to and with [the congregation], throughout the week, in hospital rooms and living rooms, in town halls and school auditoriums, in kitchens and factories."[117] It seems that pastoring in this view requires living local to the congregation and caring for at least *some* congregants week by week, whether through personal relationships or pastoral counseling or both. What is not clear in this view is what constitutes an appropriate *amount* of pastoring for a preacher. Certainly there are no time ratios envisioned in a Reformed theology of preaching requiring preachers spend x amount of time pastoring and y amount of time preparing sermons. Indeed, such a bifurcation of pastoring and preaching seems to

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[117] Long, *Witness of Preaching*, 4.

be a false binary in the Reformed vision, which sees the act of preaching as the act of pastoring *par excellence.* Nor does it seem adequate that a preacher who does not have a personal relationship with every attendee or member of the church is unfaithful in the responsibilities of pastoral care. Such a view would again seem to lend itself to a critique not just against simulcast, but against any church over the size of a few hundred people. In addition, Herrington notes that in the New Testament pastoral care is imagined to be the shared task of a plurality of elders—not the sole responsibility of the preacher. In multi-site churches, polity structures differ, but the appointment of campus pastors to effectively shepherd the congregation at each location is a nearly universal response to the need for pastoral care.[118]

When it comes to the preacher's responsibility to offer pastoral care to the congregation, the focus seems to lie more on the preacher's ability to know his congregation and preach to them relevant, contextualized sermons from the Bible. Indeed, Long's emphasis on pastoral ministry is tied directly to the act of preaching: 'the biblical word does not come as a disembodied word, speaking timeless verities to all people everywhere. The Bible speaks to particular people in concrete circumstances of their lives.'[119] Whatever we might make of Long's use of the word "disembodied" to make his point, it seems obvious that he means to challenge the notion that a preacher can preach effectively—and indeed, *biblically*—without being pastorally connected to the congregation. A certain proximity and relational responsiveness is envisioned, but it is difficult to imagine how it might be further defined or quantified. With this in mind, it seems reasonable that any simulcast preacher who *strives* to know the congregation both contextually and personally, caring for them where appropriate and spending time where they are, is by definition able to be a *pastor of the people* in the Reformed sense. Indeed, this relational knowledge coincides with another core tenet of Reformed preaching: the ability to preach with relevance, which requires the relational knowledge gained through the experience of pastoring people in the congregation. Pastors in the Reformed tradition may serve as overseers of larger groups of churches in the presbytery, synod, or assembly, but are never meant to supplant the local pastor in the ministry of preaching.

Of course, many multi-site churches have campuses well beyond a metropolitan or regional area, some even spanning across national borders. Consider, for example, Elevation Church based

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[118] Herrington, "A Theological and Philosophical Evaluation of Simulcast Preaching," 151.
[119] Long, *Witness of Preaching*, 71.

in Charlotte, NC, which has 21 campuses stretching from Florida all the way north into Canada.[120] In such settings, how can a simulcast preacher possibly pastor these churches or even preach to them with relevance? Even with the aid of digital technologies for meetings and interactions with congregants in these far-off places, it seems a stretch to conclude that a preacher might *pastor* these congregations in any sense other than the preaching ministry. It is difficult as well to imagine how a single pastor streaming his message across such a vast geographical area might speak with *relevance* to each individual community. In these expressions of multi-site, simulcast preaching must trend towards massification, generalizing spiritual truths for the sake of connecting with people across varied geographical and cultural contexts. Although points of these sermons may certainly be relevant to their audiences, it will not likely be able to speak with the level of nuance and care imagined by the likes of Martin Luther. To this point, we might conclude with Robert Herrington that the most favorable expression of multi-site methodology is the localized or regional approach, which affords preachers the possibility of truly knowing and pastoring the people to whom they preach.[121]

Summary: Embodiment and Simulcast Preaching

It has been demonstrated that while many criticize simulcast preaching on the grounds that it promotes a disembodied, "dis-incarnate" theology of preaching, closer study reveals that the picture is much more complex. Embodiment is more than just "bodies in a room," and incarnation is more than just meeting "face-to-face." The idea that digital spaces remain embodied spaces, requiring actual bodies in order to be accessed, opens new pathways for understanding the nature of embodiment in simulcast preaching. Further, the complexity of presence reveals that the preacher's physical presence in the preaching event is less straight-forward and perhaps even less important than previously imagined. Even so, the ability of preachers to deliver relevant sermons to their congregations out of the daily experience of pastoral care and communal life with their congregants is an ideal in the Reformed tradition that is not likely to be carried out in simulcast preaching, particularly when multi-site churches extend beyond local or regional geographic areas.

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[120] "Find A Location," Elevation Church, accessed 22 March 2020.
[121] Herrington, "A Theological and Philosophical Evaluation of Simulcast Preaching," 210.

Transitioning now to the final section of this study, we end by drawing together several conclusions about the importance of embodiment for simulcast preaching and its implications for multi-site churches.

CONCLUSIONS

With millions of people now engaging in simulcast preaching every week through multi-site worship services, a critical evaluation of embodiment in the context of a robust theology of preaching is essential. The idea that technology is just a tool is not useful in explaining the integration of digital technologies and religion, nor are the notions of embodiment/disembodiment, presence/absence, and digital/physical as clear-cut as they are frequently made to appear in popular-level and pastoral writing on the subject. When used together, digital technology and religion create new network assemblages, what Han calls *spheres* and Heidi Campbell *third spaces*. Such is the case with simulcast, as preachers, sermons, congregations, and digital technologies come together in the creation of a sphere that is similar but distinct from traditional preaching.

Implications of Simulcast Preaching for Multi-Site Churches

Both Sigurdson and Han see ritual practices as the operative reality connecting individual and social bodies. Whereas Sigurdson uses a more traditional concept in the notion of *liturgy* or *ritual mediation* to describe the mediation of individual and social bodies, Han utilizes the concept of *atmosphere* to refer to the ways digital technologies activate new realities in multi-site churches. If this liturgical mediation or atmosphere not only mediates the relationship between the individual and the social, but actively *shapes* these bodies, then how might the practice of simulcast preaching be shaping multi-site congregations? Three of the most common responses are discussed below.

Does simulcast promote consumer spirituality?

The most common criticism of simulcast preaching is that it propagates a consumer spirituality.[122] Han argues this point, suggesting that Protestant Christianity has evolved into a "consumer spirituality" which closely resembles "consumer culture more broadly – 'self-

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[122] Herrington sustains discussion on this point, articulating both sides of the story. (Herrington, "A Theological and Philosophical Evaluation of Simulcast Preaching," 79-83).

realization, personal autonomy, and emotional expressivity.'"[123] The intentions in utilizing simulcast preaching may indeed be noble, shaped by a desire to see multitudes transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. However, the medium matters, shaping the preacher, the sermon, and the congregation along the way. Could it be that many well-intended simulcast preachers are delivering impassioned, biblically faithful sermons on the shape of the Christian life, while the technologized medium subverts the message by training the *habitus* of the people to *consume*?

Perhaps, but this criticism is not unique to simulcast—a consumer mindset may be enacted equally with worshipper preferences for different types of preaching or styles of worship. Worshippers have preferred certain types of liturgy since the New Testament period.[124] Even so, it could be that simulcast preaching is especially vulnerable to shaping congregants in the logic of consumerism based on the fact that at some point, a decision is made to platform one preaching voice over others. This does not necessarily indicate a consumer-driven mindset, but it is not hard to imagine that playing a significant part. Churches utilizing simulcast should think critically about ways to combat consumerism in their congregations during the preaching event.

Does simulcast create passive spectators?

Such criticisms run parallel with the idea that simulcast preaching turns the congregation into spectators—passive recipients of entertainment. Against this view, Han argues that "nonactivity is not necessarily passive," because "[w]atching-with gives the experience of feeling-with."[125] Rather than creating a room of passive and isolated individuals, Han argues that digital images actually produce and sustain a "dynamic co-presence and unicity."[126] The evidence from multi-site pastors seems to suggest that this is indeed the case.[127] The experience of liveness as explained above creates a connectivity between preacher and congregation that fosters engagement and interaction, even when the "performance" is asynchronous. In addition, such a critique would hold true for any church which featured the preacher on projection screens with voice amplification through loudspeakers—having the preacher's body in the room does not necessarily account for the difference.

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[123] Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 103.
[124] Berger, *@ Worship*, 103.
[125] Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 72.
[126] Ibid., 72.
[127] Herrington, "A Theological and Philosophical Evaluation of Simulcast Preaching," 79-85.

Does simulcast make the sacred mundane?

Finally, it may also be argued that simulcast preaching results in the sacred becoming mundane by utilizing a form of media that is frequently used in the broader culture for a multitude of other purposes. Han concludes that the use of technology in multi-site churches results in a view of the sacred that is "no longer able to transcend" and that has "given way to the mundane."[128] This argument is reasonable and is certainly worth consideration. However, such an argument could easily be made in reference to the Eucharist, baptism, and the Incarnation. Each of these take every day, mundane objects in order to communicate in varying degrees the real presence of God. God's action in bread, wine, water, and flesh does not result in his nature becoming mundane, but in the mundane becoming sacred. Could it be the case that simulcast preaching actually elevates technology as a space where his presence is revealed?

Pixelated Preachers and the Presence of God

This study has demonstrated that while embodiment is integral to the practice of simulcast preaching, it may not be as straight-forward as one might think. The bare fact of the preacher not being physically present in the delivery of the sermon does not constitute the preacher's *disembodiment*, nor does his or her pixelated presence constitute a presence that is *unreal* or *dis-incarnate*. Nor does the digitization of the sermon preclude the congregation from encountering God in the apocalyptic sense envisioned in Reformed theology. Indeed, while questions surrounding the nature of the preacher's ability to be present in pixels requires further investigation, the question of God's ability to be present in pixels must be met with unreserved confidence. When preachers preach the Word of God faithfully in the context of a gathered congregation, pixelated or not, the presence of God is sure to be there.

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[128] Han, *Technologies of Religion*, 113.

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