

The Living Voice of God's Word in the Digital Era

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Abstract— *In the Protestantism tradition, proclaiming God's Word through preaching is an important element in worship. This can be seen in the setting of the pulpit which is usually located in the center of the church architecture, in the middle of the order of worship, higher than the pew. This God's Word has been proclaimed since the early Christianity even before it, until nowadays. As long as the church exists, the God's Word will still be proclaimed. This proclamation of God's Word is based on the Bible. It is biblical preaching.*

The proclaimed Bible was written and booked in some centuries ago, in the very far place from the people of God in the Moluccas hic et nunc (here and now). The reality is the congregations are living in the post modern era, as "the digitalized audiences". This context of the audiences cannot be denied or avoided by the preachers. To neglect this reality means to present an ineffective preaching. Vice versa, to make the preaching is more effective and transformative, then a preacher has to address this context of the digitalized audiences, the congregations. Addressing this context is not only about saying it in a sermon or during a preaching. This has to be started even in sermon preparation. In reality, many preachers do not refer to this context.

This article will present the characteristics of the digitalized audiences (congregations) that has to be concerned by a preacher in the preaching construction, deconstruction and reconstruction process, so the God's Word will still alive in the context of the digitalized congregations.

Keywords—*Preaching, Digital, Congregation*

I. "THE GOD'S WORD IS NOT ALIVE"

Some couple of years ago, I went to a town named Valkenburg in the Netherland. On my way, I saw an old great building. From a distance, I saw the tower up high in the sky. That gave me to me that I was seeing the church building. It was so interesting me. Then I walked to approach the church building. When I was standing right in the front of that building, I read a word in the board "EKLISIA". This name was really ensuring me that this building is a church building which was named as Eklisia. This name was close related to the Greek word ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia). But this assumption suddenly turned when I read the words just beneath the name Eklisia. The words were "GRIEKS SPECIALITEITEN RESTAURANT" (Greeks Specialization Restaurant). This meant that the church building I was standing in front was not the church building, it was restaurant. I came closer and asked the man standing there: "Why does this restaurant look like a church building?" He replied: "This was a church building. But now it changed to be the restaurant. You may find many restaurants, hotels buildings or another building like this."

Then I asked him: "Why did the church buildings become restaurants or hotels?" He responded: "No many people went inside and worshiped there anymore. And the taxes were really expensive so they were incapable of paying it. Then they sold the buildings to the businessman. You know, **the Word of God is not alive** anymore there." As a Christian who usually visited the church and worshiped inside, sang the hymns, listened to the preaching, I was a bit disconsolate in that situation. The pulpit where the God's Word proclaimed was no more there. Did it mean that the God's Word is not alive anymore? In that situation, I would say that the God's Word is not alive there. What I mean here is that the God's Word proclaimed through and in the preaching was not there. But it doesn't mean that the God's Word is not alive anymore. God's Word is still alive in church. This is actually what I want to argue in this writing.

I remember, one of the reformator, Martin Luther said "Preaching is *cor ecclesiae* (heart of the church)". This implies that the church cannot be separated from the God's Word namely preaching. Luther argued that the God's Word divided to three aspects in the church. They are Christ Himself as the Living Word, Bible as the Written Word, and Preaching or Sermon as the Proclaimed Word [1]. These aspects cannot be separated one from another. They are unity. Luther's opinion on preaching as a *cor ecclesiae* also implies that as long as the church exists, the God's Word is still there. But this cannot be contrarily said that when the church does not exist then the God's Word also disappears. Even though the church does not exist, the God's Word is still alive in the church. This sentence can be debated, of course, but I would like to explain this based on the trajectories of the preaching as following.

II. THE TRAJECTORY OF PREACHING (AT GLANCE)

Genesis 1:2-3 noted "when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of deep, then God said His Words "Let there be light." These verses show that in the very beginning of the Bible story, God has said His Words. This statement was reformulated by John the Apostle. John 1:1 noted: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." From this verse, we may assume that John also confess that God's Word was in the beginning of the world. These verses (from Genesis and John) can be referred to a conclusion that since the beginning of the World, God has given His words. This means before the church came to the world, God's Word was already there.

From John's confession, we can also withdraw a theological insight that Word of God exist not because of the

church. But God's Word existed and will be alive forever because of God Himself. He Himself is the Word. So, as long as God "exists" then His Word is alive. Even though the church does not exist longer, God's Word is still alive forever.

After creating the world, God still proclaimed His words. He talked to Adam, Noah, Abram, the prophets, the kings, and the rest of people whom He wanted to talk. He gave instructions, commandments, notifications, solaces, blessing, even curses through His Words. All of these Words can be found in the Old Testament. In this period, God spoke His Words either directly to the human being, to the persons or people He wanted, or by using the mediators. He proclaimed the words in Eden, in Egypt, in the wilderness, in the people's houses, in the House of God, etc. This period tells us that the God's word could be proclaimed every where He wanted to proclaim. And He might use everyone He wanted to use to proclaim His words. This period also was before the church existed.

In the New Testament, He still proclaimed His Words. It was done to the people He chose, to the disciples, to the people following Him, to the apostles. God's Word was also proclaimed everywhere: in the house, beside the sea, in the fields, in the synagogue, and so on. This point of preaching insight in the New Testament almost the same within the Old Testament: the God's word could be proclaimed every where He wanted to proclaim. And He might use everyone He wanted to use to proclaim His words. But what make the proclamation of God's Word in the New Testament was different from the Old Testament is *et Verbum caro Factum est* (the Word became flesh, John 1:14) and lived among the church, the community of His followers. The transcendent Word became the immanent Word, the concrete Word. So, God's Word was living in, among and together with the church. Another point we may arise according to the New Testament is the role of the Holy Spirit. After the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ, He did send the Holy Spirit to the church. The proclamation of God's Word should not ignore the role of the Holy Spirit. When God's Word was being proclaimed, Jesus Christ Himself is attending in the audiences, the congregation members through the work of Holy Spirit [2]. Thus, even though Jesus Christ, the Living Word was not living together within the church, the congregation, but His Word is still alive through the work of Holy Spirit. This can be traced also in the period of the early church.

In the early church period, church was facing the great challenges from the government and the wayward people. There were many sufferings and deaths. But God's Word was still proclaimed. Some Church Fathers can be mentioned here as the preachers who still delivering God's Word in the very difficult situations. They are Clemens, Ignatius from Antioch, Polycarp from Smyrna, Justine the Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertulian, Origenes, and so on. According to their writings, we may see that God's Word was still being proclaimed even in the tremendous critical situations [3]. God's Word had been spreading all over the world and it reached the period of reformation.

In the reformation time, the obstacles came from outside (the government) and inside the church [4]. But the God's Word was continually proclaimed. In the reformation understanding we recognize also the equipments of God's grace. They are preaching and sacraments [5]. Both are the way God introduced Himself to the human being. Both are the Word of God. They cannot and should not be divorced. But they can be recognized in different ways: preaching as *praedicamentum verbum* (proclaiming the God's Word) and the sacraments as *actus verbum* (doing the God's Word). However, in this writing, I would like to talk only about the one aspect of God's Word i.e. preaching. Preaching should be based on the Bible. Bible has authority in preaching. The reformators agreed that the Bible as the written Words of God has an important role in the church. It has to be the basic reference for preaching. The biblical preaching was emphasized. At least, Luther, Zwingli and Calvin were in the same tone of it [6]. Luther furthermore gave the emphasis on what the New Testament pointed on the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching. Luther said "Preaching is not a work of man, but pray that God will give you a mouth and to your audience ears [7]." The spirit of proclaiming God's Word in the reformation era has been inherited until now in the modern churches included the vision on the presence of the Holy Spirit in the preaching.

In the modern churches, the proclamation of God's Word is remaining important in the church. This can be observed in some liturgical setting, the setting of the pulpit which is usually located in the center of the church architecture, in the middle of the order of worship, higher than the pew, etc. One aspect that cannot be denied in the modern churches is the digital atmosphere. Wherever we go, whenever we are, however we are, digitalization is there also with us. Even in the church ministry, digitalizations are not absent as well. This means, to preach in the modern church, a preacher has to touch the digitalization world. It means he/she has to have the sense of digitalization though.

This glance trajectory of preaching has shown us that God's Word still alive even though it has to trace the very long 'journey' and very bothersome conditions. Until now, in the very modern world, the digitalization era, God's Word is still alive. Yes, on one hand, God's Word is alive and has to be preached also to the modern audiences, the digitalized congregations. But on the other hand, preachings are facing many critics.

III. PREACHINGS ARE IN THE EPICENTER OF CRITICS

In the Protestantism tradition, proclaiming God's Word through preaching is an important element in the worship, as said before. I believe that preaching still has an important function in the Christian ministry, in and through the congregation. The church would suffer severe harm if, in some other way, preaching should be devalued or neglected and if the church does not examine preaching profoundly. In fact, research has proven that preaching is basic and central to the edification of a congregation, and that edification is impossible without preaching [8]. Preaching is the heart of the church

(Luther: *cor ecclesiae*). This may overestimate the preaching. But the thing is preaching is still important in the church's existence.

Even though preaching is like a heart of the church, preaching still facing the critics. There are many critical arguments voiced against preaching today. Preaching is in an epicenter of critics. There are critics from the social sciences, critic from the communication sciences, critic from theological sciences, critic from the church pew, etc. From the social sciences, it is accepted universally that the radical shifts are taking place in societies in general. The postmodernism has become the style of this era. Postmodernism is disputable. Some scientists argue that it is an era after modernism. Some argue it is not an era but a variation of a way of thinking, an intellectual trend or model [9]. Kevin Hart mentioned some characteristics of the postmodernism: 1) postmodernism is a suspicion to the modernism included the things inherited as truth. 2) postmodernism is a 'counter-culture' that criticizes 'high culture' (elite academic culture) while taking the useful things from it and grants it to the popular culture. 3) postmodernism is not totally neglect the moderns. 4) postmodernism is a re-enchantment from the world, make a new way of thinking, the fresh path to approach God's mystery [10]. The turn-up of the postmodernism has great impacts on the life of people all over the world. The political, economy, education, culture, health, security system, information and communication technologies issues that bind the people's life, are also 'attacked' by postmodernism. From the viewpoint of the social sciences, the critical questions are: have the preachers taken these paradigm shifts into account, or is it "business" as usual on the pulpit? Do they explore new possibilities in sermonic content and methodology? Do they truly understand their audiences – the congregation members – in this third millennium? And some other related questions.

Together with the postmodern paradigm shift in society, there have been changes in patterns of communication and the sciences. A traditional sermon sticks out like a sore thumb in this communicational environment. The changes in the communication media and information technology has ousted the era of printing in favour of new communicational mode of images and imagination [11]. This indicates that a preacher has to realize that the conceptual language needs to be more concrete, more visible through the real images. Many preachers are keeping their oral and conceptual style of preaching which make the audiences more difficult to imagine and to understand what they exactly mean in the preaching. Now the congregations member are facing the digitalization era. The discovery of internet in October 1969 by Leonard Kleinrock made the tremendous change in communication style, included communication the Word's of God. Nowadays, many churchgoers attend the worships or services bringing their smart phone. During the service, they may use it. When the preaching is not clear enough, when the preacher is making boring to them, then they will look at the smart phones and focus on it instead of the God's Word. Some congregation members prefer to stay at home and listen to the radio or watching the television which broadcast the sermons or live

worship in the church, instead of going to the church and worshipping God and listen to His Word together with rest of congregation members.

Some theologians point out that the preaching is still being influenced by Karl Barth's so-called Word Theology. According to this critique, preachers therefore lose sight of human and communicative components of preaching, and devote to little attention to the real people with the real contexts facing them in the moment of preaching. Without a doubt, this is a legitimate concern: preaching that does not face these contexts squarely, cannot truly be called preaching. Others refer to the phenomenon of moralism that is still virulent in the preaching. Add to this the fact that traditional sermons are mostly introvert in essence, that in fact, traditional sermons are concerned mainly with the religious needs of individuals, or perhaps congregations, but did not necessarily address the daily wider ethical and social needs and issues [12].

Large numbers of congregants also suffer in silence or declare that preaching is, or has become, boring, irrelevant, and disappointing and many church members vote with their feet by leaving the church. People have become tired of many words and in this age of quick-fixes and instant communication, they also tend to want a quick-fix gospel, or something other than what the church is offering. Church members bemoan the fact that the church services have a little, if any, relevance to their daily realities; that there is little continuity from Sunday to Sunday; that ministers often completely underestimate their audiences and treat them like spiritual children, or overestimate them and exasperate them with illustrious but nonsensical religious words. These are the critiques from the church pew. What Cilliers explain here based on the context of congregants in the South Africa. But in my opinion, this is also happened in many churches around the world, moreover to the congregants who already influenced by the digital era. So, what can be done by the preachers to give a better service of God's Word in those situations? Willing or not, the preachers have to address the digital issues in their preaching.

IV. PREACHER FACING THE DIGITAL ERA: DIGITALIZATION AND DIGITIZATION

Digital era and style are absurd to be neglected by a church minister, counted preacher. So, willing or not, a preacher has to deal with this digital issues. In his book 'Ministry in the Digital World', Bagus Prabangkara presents the data on the developing of internet nowadays. The population of internet user under 15 years old reaches 30%. The population of internet user under 30 years old reaches 50%. Approximately, 71 million people use the smart phone in the year of 2015. The users of internet in Indonesia reach 83 million people which makes Indonesia is in the sixth position of the most internet users in the world. The users of Facebook in Indonesia reach 69 million people which put Indonesia on the third level of the users of Facebook around the world. People access the internet via desktop/laptop more or less than 5 hours 27 minutes in one day and via smart phone is 2 hours 30 minutes in one day [13].

The data he presented here are about the using of internet. It is not directly related to the using digital stuff. But using the internet is bound together with the digital stuff. So, those data at least give the pictures about how big is the internet using which also use the digital stuff. Even though he presented the data only about the using of internet, but he then argued that in doing ministry, a minister has to deal with digital stuffs. How can a minister or preacher deal with digital stuffs? What can be done by a preacher? How does a preacher face a digital era?

I would like to quote Karl Barth's saying as noted by Christopher J Coyne. Barth said "preaching with both hands. Bible in the one hand, and newspaper in other one [14]." Actually, what Barth said is not for the preachers in the digital era. He uttered that statement to the preachers in his era (1886-1968). At that time, he wanted to invite the preachers to prepare their sermon not only with the Biblical text but also the contemporary news. He noted "when preparing their sermons, preachers have to meditate on the texts both genuinely people of their day but also in such a way that the text can really become a Word to their contemporaries. We have to say on the one hand that when preparing a sermon, we cannot think enough about the people for it is meant. Each word that is proclaimed to the listeners must become a Word that is specifically and decisively addressed to our own present. But woe to preachers who do not see first how relevant the Word of the Bible is to the people of today! Woe even more to preachers who do see the contingency and relevance of the Biblical Word to the people of today but who are then fearful or unwilling to give offense and thus become deserters of the Word – the Word which seeks to seize and disturb and confront the people today, and in this way to lead them truly to the rest of God, but which is buried by the cowardice and disobedience of the preachers, and thus prevented from doing its proper work [15]." His statement is rough enough to the preachers who do not make the relevance to the contemporary hearers, the congregation members. But it was actually to give the emphasis to the preachers so they may put full attention or focus on this 're-contextualization' of the Biblical text to the recent hearers.

In order to help the preachers became more relevant in preaching, then Barth gave the solution: "preaching with both hands. Bible in the one hand, and newspaper in other one." Barth did not mean this literally. While delivering a sermon, a preacher may hold a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in other hand. It seems silly. What he meant, while preparing a sermon, a preacher had to think wisely about the biblical text as well as the real context of the audiences or congregants. Why did he suggest hold the newspaper? At that time, newspaper was a good printed mass media to communicate the recent news around the world where the people lived. So, a preacher might be helped when he/she read the newspaper to up-date his understanding on the recent hot issue happened in the world. But now, in the postmodern era, there are so many digital newspaper and another form of news. It is to say that not only newspaper that can be used in updating preachers' understanding of the recent situation of the hearers or congregants. So, what Barth said in his context "preaching

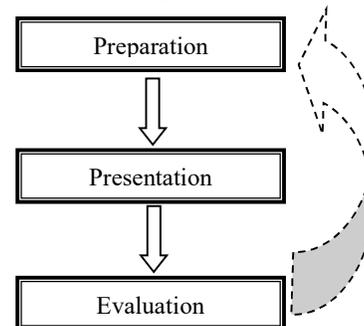
with both hands: Bible in the one hand and newspaper in other one" can be reformulated also in this digital era context "preaching with both hands: Bible in the one hand and digital stuff in other one." Once again, this statement may not be understood literally. This statement is a suggestion to the preachers to look carefully to the Biblical texts and put full attention to the context of the contemporary hearers who listen to their sermons. The preachers have to touch either biblical text or digital stuff and make it relevance to the contemporary hearers. To preach in the postmodern world, the digital world, the preachers need the faithfulness to the "ancient" Word of God and the sensitivity to the postmodern era where digital stuffs are presence.

In the context of digital era, the ministers have to be familiar with digital stuff and it must be either digitalization or digitization. What are the digitalization and digitization? What is the difference between them? Digitalization means the use of digital technologies and of data (digitize and natively digital) in order to create revenue, improve business, replace/transform business processes and create an environment for digital business, whereby digital information is at the core [16]. Albeit here is no definition related to the church ministry especially the preaching, but we may infer that it can be used also in the ministry or preaching. Digitalization can be redefine in preaching language as the use of digital technologies and of data (digitize and natively digital) in order to help the preachers understand the Biblical text entirely, making message more concrete or visualized, get the audiences or churchgoers attentions, saving time in explaining the sermon by making visualization, the audiences or churchgoers will be more easy to understand the message, etc.

While digitization means creating a digital (bits and bytes) version of analog/physical things. The ministers or preachers have the great opportunity not only to use the digital stuff for making the ministry more efficient and effective but also they have the possibilities to create their own imaginations and capabilities about the Biblical texts or the reality of the hearers' or audiences' contexts. This will be helpful for the preachers because they can make or compose the digital material that tightly related to the actual theme or text that will be preached. It will be very helpful in the sermon preparation, presentation and evaluation. How to use those digital stuffs in the preparation and presentation a sermon?

V. USING DIGITAL STUFFS IN PREACHING

There are at least three phases of preaching:



The first phase is preparation. This is the phase when the preacher prepares his/her sermon and writes it down (there are many preachers also do not write their sermons down. They, though, have also prepared the ‘materials’ for their sermons). In this phase, the preacher searches for the idea about the sermon: prays, read the Bible carefully, interpreting the text rightly, read the commentaries wisely, interpret the real situation of the people, making connection between biblical text and the hearers situation, find a good and precise illustrations, search the news, watch the movies, and so on. In this phase, a preacher can use the digital stuff as the smart phone, the computer, the internet tools, etc. to collect the data and apply it to the sermon.

The next or second phase (presentation) is the event when the preacher delivers his/her sermon in the context of the liturgy. The preacher preaches the sermon to the hearers, makes the sermon available to be heard and understood by the them. In helping the hearers to understand easily the content of the sermon, a preacher may use some digital stuffs such as television, radio, karaoke, or modern projector to show pictures, tables, data, video, or present music, songs, dances, etc, in order to visualize the images in the sermon and make it more easy imaginable by the hearers or audiences. In teaching-learning theory, it is well known that the audio-visual learning material will be more easy to be understood and rememorized by the students or the participants in a class. So, this theory can also be adapted to the presentation of preaching. A preacher may use the audio-visual-digital tools to help the hearers understand and rememorize the God’s Word in their own contexts. Not only the hearers that can be helped to rememorize the sermon, but also the preacher him/herself. The preacher can use the camera or recorder to record the presentation of the preaching so it can be used in the next step, the evaluation.

The third phase (evaluation), points to the mental action of the preachers to evaluate their preaching. The hearers may give their evaluations on the content as well the way the preacher has presented his or her sermon. This evaluation can be done also by using the digital stuffs. For example using the blog or special website belonged to the congregation or by using the SMS (short message service) or another available social media program. The evaluation will be very useful in constructing of preparing the next sermon. From evaluation, a preacher can know how the preaching he already presented understood by the congregation members or hearers. He or she will notify the strength and the weak of his or her previous sermon. If there are some weaknesses, he or she is able to make the correct. If there are strength or positive things, he or she can also establish or develop them.

Not all the preachers are familiar to use the digital stuffs. So in every step (preparation, presentation and evaluation), a preacher may ask another person to help him/her for collecting the data, for presenting the illustration or the content of

sermon, for making a video, for recording, and for making the digital evaluation form.

VI. THE ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF USING DIGITAL STUFFS IN PREACHING

There are some advantages of using digital stuffs in the preaching:

- God’s Word will still alive in the congregants life, the digitalized people. This can happen because there is a combination of using the digital stuffs – as explain above – with the God’s Word.
- Bringing the ‘individual’ people to the community. As mentioned before many churchgoers bring their own smart phones or digital stuffs when attending the services or worships. Sometimes they are passionate with their own stuffs (individually) and forget the preaching, moreover if the preachers fail to attract their attentions. So, by using the digital stuffs, their attention can be maintained to the preaching.
- Making the God’s Word more understandable and easy to be rememorized, moreover the preacher uses the audio-visual media.
- If the preaching can be recorded and broadcast, then the God’s Word may touch also the absence congregants.
- Etc.

Beside the advantages of using the digital stuffs in preaching, there are also some challenges of using them:

- The skill of the preacher. Not all the preacher can use the digital stuffs because of his or her limitations in mastering the digital stuffs.
- The data in the digital newspaper or media may not the right one or hoax. This will be very dangerous if preached by the preacher. The truth of God’s Word will be contaminated with untrue news.
- The data used also can be out of date. This make the preaching will not actual or up to date.
- Sometimes preacher is not honest enough to acknowledge the source of the data he or she uses in the preaching.
- Etc.

Finally, I would like to say that those are the simple things that can be done by the preachers to keep the God’s Words

still alive in the digital era. I still believe to the living voice of God's Word in the digital era.

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