

Technology and the Future of Homiletics Education

Joseph M. Webb*

College of Communications at California State University in Fullerton

1.

There is another academy of homiletics besides this one—you probably know that. It is the Evangelical Homiletics Society, which held its annual meeting for three days this past October in New Orleans. Its theme this year was “Technology and Preaching;” its featured speaker was Quentin Schultze, that well-published and very smart Christian communications guru from Calvin College. From the looks of their academy papers (only the titles of which I have seen), they could have called their conference “Pedagogy and Preaching,” as we have done this year. What they have a clear sense of—which I am not sure that we do yet—is that the future of homiletics education is pretty well going to be tied up in countless ways with the ubiquitous new forms of internetted and webbed technologies.

We of the Baby Boomer Generation in this academy—those of us from about age 50 on up—are not sure that we want in on these new technologies that have only sprung fully to life over the past decade or two. We like our e-mail, but we are not sure that much beyond that has any particular relevance to our lives or how we do our work. We still tend to be startled at how much information is now available at our fingertips, but we are suspicious of the web sites—and we are quite sure that when it comes preaching and teaching homiletics, a considerable gulf is fixed between what preachers do in the pulpit and these new technological marvels.

The generation just behind us Boomers, though—which includes many of you reading this, dubbed Generation X—is a generation that, in its mainstream, sees the new technology very differently. It is the first generation to be raised with and on the computer, a device that in homes was originally connected to a television screen. The Xers are now in their late 20s through their late 30s; the 40ish folk are kind of in that gray area: they can tilt toward either Boomer or Xer mentality. Ironically, that early Xer generation produced the brilliant minds behind today’s hardware and software as well as the world wide web. How it all emerged over the past couple of decades is a stunning story of youth and creativity at its very best.⁶⁴⁰

• Dr. Webb’s latest book, to be published this spring by Chalice Press, is Greek for Preaching (with Robert Kysar); it is a handbook on using the Greek New Testament, designed for preachers and teachers who have never formally studied Greek. This past summer he received funding to launch The Southern California INSTITUTE ON PREACHING, an organization devoted entirely to research, experimentation, and implementation of web-based on-line homiletics instruction for both students and professional clergy. The institute’s web site is www.greatpreaching.net.

⁶⁴⁰ The computer’s ancestor was Charles Babbage’s mechanical calculator, which emerged, remarkably, in the middle years of the 19th Century. It was brought into the 20th Century by a man named Herman Hollerith, who developed it as a complex tabulating and sorting device for census use. The recently published book by Edwin Black, IBM and the Holocaust (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001),

In short, my generation is aloof from, and even somewhat disdainful of, the new technologies. The Xer generation is not. Xers are not only not afraid of the new technologies of internet, streaming audio/video, wireless, optics, digitalization and what is coming to be called media convergence; but they know very well that they are already living their lives fully within this remarkably reconfigured world.

Bruce Tulgan, himself a bright young Xer, has done research on and written about the relationship between Boomers and Xers in the corporate world-and the problem of Boomers “managing” Xers. Writing in 1995, he said:

Remember that Xers were the latchkey kids who baby-sat ourselves after school with computer games, television, and microwave dinners. The greatest continuity of our childhood was a continuous stream of multivalent signals from multiple information sources-television, radio, telephone, computer-driven libraries, bulletin boards and indexes, voice-mail, taxes, and video games We never had to integrate information technology into our work habits, so Xers do not experience discomfort with post-modern accoutrements. What is more, our high comfort level and skill with the computer keyboard and CD-ROM, new software, new hardware, fax machines, voice-mail, E-mail, on-line research, and the Internet are just the beginning of Xers’ value in the workplace.⁶⁴¹

2.

What is startling, however, is the realization that the generation after Generation X is today’s college and university population. Some are calling this-justifiably so- the I Generation. Not “I” as in ego, but “I” as in Information. Unlike many older Xers, this is the generation that knows nothing before the computer. Just as with Xers, for

should be required reading for everyone today; it is the stunning story of the role of Hollerith’s mechanical punch card “computer” in making possible Hitler’s identification and massacre of the Jews. Numerous post-World War II inventions made today’s high-speed computer possible, inventions such as the transistor in the late 40s and integrated circuitry in the 1960s; with such wizardry the size of the hardware shrank from a room-sized cabinet to the desktop. But it was not until the mid-1970s that several young geniuses figured out how to pull all of the pieces together to create a highly personalized but almost universal global system. In 1975, for example, Bill Gates and Paul Allen wrote the first computer language program for the new small PC. In 1976, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak put the computer hardware market into the mainstream with their Apple computer. Simultaneously with all this, the U.S. Defense Department, fearing strategic communication breakdown, began setting up alliances with various universities to create longdistance computer connections--the origins of networking. By the late 1980s, young people again, mostly graduate physics students, discovered that they could send messages to each other over these emerging connections; it rapidly became e-mail. Another graduate student at the University of Illinois invented something he called a browser, which meant that even a non-technician, using “windows,” pictures, and a mouse could find most anything on the growing set of interconnections. At the same time, in Europe other young researchers, led by Tim Berners-Lee, were figuring out how common computer languages could be used to put people and information from all over the globe in touch with each other, regardless of what computer equipment they had. Berners-Lee named it the World Wide Web. The history of it all has not even been fully told yet; when it is, it will be the story of origins for the 21st Century.

⁶⁴¹ Bruce Tulgan, Managing Generation X: How to Bring Out the Best in Young Talent (Santa Monica, CA: Merritt Publishing, 1995), 173, 174. Of all the material that I have read and collected over the past few years investigating the mind of the Xer, this book is far and away the best. It is based on 100 in-depth interviews with what Tulgan calls “star Xers,” up and coming professionals who are creating places of leadership for themselves in the corporate world.

whom television and video games were “always there,” so for the I Generation, the computer and its networking was “always there.” This is the generation that takes the computer, the internet, the web, media downloading and sharing, and all of the rest of the technological interacting for granted. This is the generation in which every single student who registers for college is immediately assigned an e-mail address and logged into an interactive classroom for every course taken—the counterpart to the “real” classroom. This is the generation that does not have to be “taught” how to learn via the internet—it just does it; and each college class that the “I” person takes only enhances the sophistication with which the new era’s learning takes place.

This-I-is the generation, in other words, that will move into the workplace in the next couple of years—the first wave of twentysomethings is already out there wondering how we Boomers (and even some Xers) ever learned anything without the web, the chat classrooms, the global resources available at a touch, and all of the other interactively available possibilities.

It is against this background, in my view, that we have to think about both the future of preaching—and the future of preacher education. And we shall miss this entirely if we are not willing to confront its generational dynamics. That is, Boomers have been teaching Boomers how to preach to Boomers. Moreover, Boomers have been teaching Xers how to preach to Boomers. And the result, sadly, has been that the Xers have all but disappeared from mainstream Protestant denominations; it has become a generation lost—a generation represented by my own Xer son’s having lost all interest in and contact with the church. Only the Boomers remain in the pews. And where will the I Generation be? It is painful, at best, to contemplate; but contemplate it we must.

3.

I want to try to say some hopeful things here, however. To do that requires that we press our discussion of the future of homiletical education in two related directions.

The first is clearly technological. We are faced with giving our best and most urgent efforts to comprehending the relationship between computer-based, internetted technologies and education itself. In our case, this means the relationship between the computer, the internet, and the web—and the arts of preaching, encompassing everything involved in both sermon preparation and sermon delivery.

Two things have to be said here, though. First, it is true that preaching and learning to preach via the internet seem far apart. Preaching is a “skill,” an “art,” a “craft,” a “performance,” whatever one wishes to call it; and such things seem always to require practice and interactive feedback .. Second, it is also true that nothing can fully replace the personally interactive nature that the activity of preaching requires. Having acknowledged those things, however, the next reality must be confronted. It is that, with the increasingly internetted experience of all education, the demand for homiletical study “at a distance” is going to grow dramatically in the next few years—just as the demand for all education, including seminary education, is.

Indeed, it is already apparent that, given both the stagnant enrollments and financial precariousness of most seminaries these days, finding new ways to recruit and teach students “off campus”—not only in small classes but even individually—is becoming a pressing concern among administrators (and denominations) concerned with the bottom line. This also means a coming end to the distinctions “between those classes that can be taken off campus” and those more practical courses that “require a student to be on-campus.” In addition, the days of sending a preaching professor to where a small group of students are, when the internet is readily available, seem numbered.

The point is that those who teach homiletics are going to have to learn to teach both the theory and the practice of preaching by long distance, via internet or web connections, whatever concessions or tradeoffs that ultimately calls for. But I have learned a good lesson over the past year and a half, having returned for now to teaching in a state university system. That lesson is that there is not a single area of the academic enterprise that is not having to completely remake itself for computer-based, internetted, learning. Not a single one. And in discipline after discipline, whether academic or applied, the task is being undertaken, even by Boomer professors, with surprising vigor, creativity, and effectiveness. I have no doubt that, over the next few years, even the most recalcitrant of homiletics profs will also make this transition. When one has no choice and the church’s loss of the Xer generation has all but removed the choice—it is amazing what one can come up with.

4.

There is even more to it than this. There is not a major corporation in the world, nor a profession associated with those corporations, that has not come to understand the new money-saving opportunities for career-long growth and development that the internet and web now make possible. Many companies and professions for a long time have required regular ongoing training and education for staff and employees; but it has been both expensive and disruptive, despite its overall benefits. Now, though, the new technologies are changing the very nature and accessibility of lifelong professional growth. And the processes are both less expensive and virtually non-disruptive. An article on e-commerce in the Wall Street Journal earlier this year discussed what the Motorola Corporation calls its “university:”

Motorola U has become one of the many converts to corporate e-learning, which simply means employee training delivered over the Internet. The approach has become a hot topic among business executives. Delivery through the Web makes training available whenever it’s needed, eliminating a lot of lost time, as well as travel and administrative costs. It can, distribute live training instantly for groups or “self-paced” learning for individuals. And some courses have interactive features that make them more engaging than everyday classwork.⁶⁴²

642 The Wall Street Journal, Monday, March 12, 2001, R33, “On the Job: Corporate e-learning makes training available anytime, anywhere.” This article was part of a special edition of the Journal which included two extensive sections on the education “revolution” being brought on by the new technologies.

This is the direction that the professional world is moving-slowly, even haltingly, but inexorably. Why should we imagine that the ministerial profession, one in which practitioners surely know that they need ongoing training and renewal, will be any different? Even more than in the seminary program itself, it may be that this emerging “continuing education” via the internet represents the most important future for homiletical service to the preaching professional.

5.

For the past year or more, this is where I have been devoting my homiletical time and effort. With help, a small organization has been formed to learn, experiment, and try to break some new ground with on-line homiletical education. It is, without question, an uphill activity all the way. A lot, both positive and negative, has been learned already - and we have only begun. The web is cluttered with bad religious-and even bad sermon sites. The idea is not to replicate any of those. In addition, one must keep in mind that one is working in an educational medium for X and I Generations, more than a Boomer one. Without that sense, discouragement is easy.

I decided not to hire a service to create a new web site-there are hundreds of such services, most of them fairly expensive. I wanted instead to learn as best I could the processes and pitfalls involved in creating, maintaining, and developing a site. What have I learned in the process?

I have learned that there is any number of ways to create a web site, though anyone with a modest amount of study drawn from the internet itself can devise a good working system. I have learned that, in developing a site, simplicity is best. The emphasis should be placed much more on straightforwardness and ease of operation than on bells, whistles, and graphic glitter; we are nearing the point, I think, where cleanness and content will do more to bring people back to a site than flashing lights and ornate buttons. I have also learned that anything can go wrong with the creation and maintenance of a web site. In my case, I chose an internet “host” to maintain the site who lived a short distance away from me, someone that I could go see in person if I had questions or problems. As it turned out, after my first month and a half in operation and as I was both exploring possibilities and directing some friends to an initial look at the site-the host company’s telephones were shut off, the doors were locked and my site went dead. My “host” disappeared, a casualty of e-business. I was faced with starting over, which I did, though it took considerable time and energy to do it.

I also learned was that there is a vast difference between just putting something on the web or on a web site-like one’s bio or some sermons-and crafting a site as a working educational place to which someone might want to return again and again. That, I discovered, is not easy to do. And even now, as I struggle with devising honest-to-God courses in homiletics for the web site, the challenge to creative thinking and original formulation is almost overwhelming. But, at this point, I have every intention that the web site will offer two on-line continuing education courses in homiletics come this spring. Getting them known and used by working clergy will be another problem entirely.

There is a second direction, though, that this focus on Xers and the technology of computer, internet and web points us, one that may, in the long run, be even more significant. What is different are the changes that have already taken place, and now being accelerated, in an entire generation's mental patterns and habits. Xers, that is, do not think like, or experience life in the way that Boomers have and do. That sounds like hyperbole, but it is not. It has to do with the complex habits of mind that have been cultivated within the adults of Generation X as a result of their unique life-experiences during the first computer age. Everything about Generation X is not a direct result of a technological revolution, to be sure; but virtually everything about their lives has been impacted by their growing up in the era of television, video games and the expansion of the computer.

For purposes of brevity, I only outline a few of those differences, drawing largely on the superb research of Bruce Tulgan and his Rainmaker Corporation to sketch some details. So--what are some of the characteristics of the Xer mind and sensibility - characteristics that are particularly difficult for Boomers to come to terms with?

First, the Xer mind has been shaped by what can only be described as unheard of amounts of "information," or "data"-we will struggle for the right word, but what we are talking about is not unclear. Since they were born and, from an easy age, left on their own, Xers have been willingly and happily bombarded with messages from every direction and every medium. The quintessential medium, both at home and in recreational settings, was the television-based video game. The game was everywhere as it still is--consuming enormous amounts of preteen and teen time and money. But the video game (which spawned MTV) was teaching all the while, largely as a result of its highly interactive nature. With this also came its demand for a rapid-fire series of decisions and responses from the player, and its participatory heroic, battle-based content.

Rapid-fire "messages" became, for the young Xer, the norm, the way that media worked. What resulted was a psyche which not only accepted that as "the way it was," but that became profoundly adept at dealing with it. In turn, this translated into a mental make-up that actually worked at its maximum when that kind of messaging was fully operational. In short, the Xer mind thrives on enormous amounts of rapid-fire information, which it is quite capable of processing in a variety of creative ways. It is a mental skill acquired, literally, from infancy.

In Xer adult life, this means at least three things. First, it means that Xers have little patience for slowness or for things that drag on; little patience, in a sense, for things that strike them as boring. They are used to everything being on the move. They do not want sounds to be slow and sustained; no "easy listening." Rather, sounds should pulse and shift and disconnect. They also have little patience with visuals that do not cut and bounce, intercut and jump. And if the sounds and pictures do not, of themselves, do those things, then Xers have clickers and controls to make them do that. It is the way Xers experience things, the way they "think." Their world is a multivalent one in which

images, sounds and all sorts of other sensory elements overlap and play off of each other. And Xers know very well not only how to cope with this kind of life, but they thrive on it. It is their life.

Tulgan says that one of the major criticisms that Boomers make of Xers is that they have very short attention spans. Tulgan says that is simply not true. "Xers do not have short attention spans, as so many managers seem to think. Rather," he says, "Xers are voracious learners who love to sort through and digest massive quantities of information at a very fast pace. Managers who want to understand Xers have to realize that Xers' style of interacting with information is a function of our immersion in the information revolution." He adds: "What looks to many managers like a short attention span is, in fact, a rapid-fire style of information consumption, which makes Xers uniquely suited to the workplace of the future."⁶⁴³

7.

A second habit of mind that characterizes Xers results from the fact that they are used to receiving information as an unending stream of "bits,"⁶⁴⁴ or messages. It is that Generation X wants its information, whatever it is, incomplete, not pre-digested. Xers do not want the dots connected for them in advance. They want to connect the dots, whatever they are; and they want the freedom to do so in as creative and unexpected a way as possible. Xers place high value on that creativity. Because they are adept at dealing with complex streams of rapid "information," Xers believe that creating those new connections is what they do best. And they are adamant about being allowed to solve problems, old or new, in their own original ways.

Tulgan: "Xers are natural problem solvers because we are used to confronting personal challenges as sole proprietors. Indeed, Xers' problem solving ability is key to our self-definition and pride-the primary focus of our entrepreneurship is generating regular proof to others and confirmation to ourselves that our creative abilities are growing in value."⁶⁴⁵

What this means, again in Tulgan's words, is that managers and others who are concerned about relating to the adult generation of Xers-"must realize that, because Xers are used to solving problems on their own, we are natural innovators. As such, we

643 Tulgan, 31. Tulgan adds that "managers who understand Xers' relationship with information are best able to support atmospheres of learning and growth; facilitating Xers' happiness, productivity, and innovation Because Xers are accustomed to technology which provides information in massive quantities, in diverse formats, and represents a wide range of different perspectives, we operate best in information environments which mirror that experience." 191

644 It is not coincidental that one of the most formative influences on the computer generation was Claude Shannon, a mathematician who devised what is called the binary code-a system of 1s and 0s that is the foundation for all of today's digital technology. The basis of the theory-which he labeled "information theory"-is the "bit," which is shorthand for "binary digit." It is not only an element of precision in electronic communication, but has become a metaphor for short, stand-alone fragments of a message.

645 Tulgan, 219.

hold tremendous potential value for any organization which understands how to foster Xers' innovation. If managers want to tap Xers' creative power, they need to honor Xers' independence instead of seeing that independence as a form of arrogance."⁶⁴⁶ Boomers like me who grew to adulthood in the 1960s thought we were independent-which, undoubtedly, we were (and are); and yet the Xer's sense of working independently, "for themselves" seems to be far keener than even we Boomers experienced.

8.

The reason for this is found largely in a third dimension of the Xer mind and sensibility-which is its deeply personalistic outlook. This reflects a fairly complex series of situations in which Xer's grew up through childhood and teen years in the late 60s and 1970s.

As Tulgan noted, the Xers were those latchkey kids. During the idealism of the 50s and even the 60s, one parent usually worked while the other tended things at home. Families were financially able to do that. Then came the 70s-and the good economic times quickly skidded to a halt. It turned into a time that virtually required both parents to hit the job market-and the kids, for all practical purposes, were abandoned to school and home. The 70s also brought other things on a scale that had never been seen before in the United States. It brought a skyrocketing divorce rate. For a thousand complex reasons, families broke up; and kids found themselves uprooted as never before. It also brought wholesale moving around. Families started wandering, often in search of better work. But the moving fever also reflected a kind of inchoate restlessness that was left over from the turmoil of the 60s. Still, the kids, again, were uprooted-not once, but over and over.

The outcome was a generation that lost all sense of permanence, of attachment to anything. We Boomers grew up in the late 40s and 50s for the most part with roots. But not the Xer generation. They learned only too well that nothing lasted. As a result, they developed a deep and unrelenting fear of anything that wanted long-term allegiances. They knew that everything was short-term-whether family, school, friends, or even church. Permanence is not what life is about-not for the Xer. Life is about change. And, since everything changes, the Xer philosophy is that you had better be wary of any attachment that might hurt when it is broken-which, of course, it will be.

There was, ironically, one thing that seemed to have a permanence about it for Xers; and that was the media in all of its various forms. It became as portable as the Xers themselves were. When one left one's friends behind to move to the next school, the television and the video games were the same at the next place as they were at the last.

What did all of this do to the Xers? It did two things, both of which are crucial. First, it turned them inward. They came to realize very early that there was no one, no place, no person, nothing, on which they could ultimately depend. They had only themselves. So they were pressed, by necessity, to develop their own survival instincts however they could; they had to learn to "take care of themselves"-not egotistically,

⁶⁴⁶ Tulgan, 54.

again, but for survival itself. They had only themselves to fall back on when everything else fell apart.

The second thing it taught Xers, though, was a profound skepticism of anything institutional, regardless of what it was. Not that institutions will necessarily fail you, but that no institutional relationship ever lasts. It always ends, often abruptly and painfully. Tulgan describes the Xer relationship with institutions like this: “Xers have minimal prospects of enjoying the same long-term institutional dividends as did prior generations—from global debt to global warming, from job security to social security, the evidence is clear. Xers will continue in the future to rely on little other than ourselves for our security.” Moreover, “most Xers were not raised with institutional loyalties” nor do they have any expectation that institutions have reciprocal loyalties to offer. The very idea of “job security” is laughable to the Xer. Nor is any job ever secure--ever. Which, again, is why the Xers have only themselves to fall back on. One can be hard at work today, and jobless tomorrow. That is the fact of Xer life.

What Xers do know a lot about, though, is change. As a result, for Xers one of the most important demands of life is learning to be adaptable. Whatever you learn, it better be portable, movable, usable elsewhere—whether it is about work, about recreation, or even about religion. One must be ready for anything, be ready to turn into something else on a dime. Facing that kind of world is not as traumatic for Xers as it is for us Boomers—not just because we are older, but because Xers have grown up with all of the survival skills that such adaptability requires.

What does this all mean? It means that Xers are very much into what Tulgan calls “self-building.” In fact, for Xers, who know to depend only on themselves, cultivating that “self” is a very high priority. But they are open to help with that “self-building” wherever they can find it—from empathetic teachers, from employers who understand them, even from religion and religious leaders, if they become savvy to the Xer world. Are Xers out only for themselves? In a sense, yes they are. But that habit of mind and life seems to be theirs out of necessity, born from the world in which they had little personalized help with identity development. So, “managers who want Xers to make personal investments in institutional relationships with our employers,” Tulgan writes, “need to participate in Xers’ self-building quest for security. That means cultivating Xers as individuals.”⁶⁴⁷ Churches that do that seem to have some Xer success.

Tulgan, the Xer, at one point engages in a certain bluntness about all of this that we Boomers, in particular, need to hear:

Managers who believe in this X Generation need to make a commitment to manage Xers differently. Don’t expect traditional dues paying from Xers. Don’t expect Xers to participate in teams the way our forerunners have. Don’t expect Xers to process information the way you do, to communicate the way you do, to learn the way you do, to use technology

647 Tulgan, 144.

the way you do, to utilize knowledge the way you do. Don't expect Xers to work in the same kind of space you do or the same kind of time or the same kind of culture. Don't assume Xers won't find better approaches more appropriate to the virtual economy and virtual workplace of the future. ⁶⁴⁸

9.

There are other characteristics of the Xer generation that are based in that generation's new technologies, ones every bit as important, but beyond the scope of what we can explore here. For example, Xers are into what, in media language, are "streaming" things-streaming audio, streaming video, streaming forms of conversation, learning and interactive experience. These things have to do with the need for a radical open-endedness in how the future emerges from moment to moment. Streaming media is the counterpart to the video game that has a thousand different outcomes-and one who is playing the game does not know how it will come out, since the player is always part of the interaction that will shape the game itself

The bottom line here, in my judgment, is that it is not only imperative that we learn how to teach homiletics and preaching via the computer and the internet. It is just as pressing that also come to terms with how the computer and internet, with all that that means, have shaped an entire generation that grew up with it. This is not a hardware or even a software issue; rather, it has to do with the very conceptualization of preaching and how it has been understood and done up to now.

The Boomer church, honestly, has failed Generation X; but we have not failed because we have not worked hard or been diligent. We have failed because we did not understand what was taking place. We Boomers thought the next generation would be like ours. Only now are beginning to see how wrong we were. So, when we ask the question--Are things changing pedagogically around us?-the question itself is not particularly apt. Things have already changed. The only question is whether various disciplines on the fringes of those changes will find ways to catch up. Needless to say, the area of homiletics instruction is one of those fringe areas.

648 Tulgan, 218.