

# What would Paul think of online sermons?

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At the time of writing, [at least twenty-seven LCA/NZ churches are streaming their weekly worship services online](#). This number is certainly not nearly the majority of LCA/NZ churches, but even if your home congregation hasn't been recording worship services, it's very likely that you have still benefited in some way from the technological efforts of another church or ministry during the Covid-19 restrictions. It is my hope that the churches who have been video-recording during the Covid-19 lockdown would not stop using this medium once their in-person gatherings return. This article seeks to glean insights from Paul's New Testament letters to help us discern a pastorally responsible understanding of the online sermon.

Although the world of the New Testament had no close parallel to today's online network, Paul, as well as other apostles, did use the communication network available to them to share the Word of God across a distance. Paul would either write a letter in his own hand (Gal 6:11) or use a scribe to put his ideas or words into writing (Rom 16:22). The letter would then be delivered to the intended church audience by a messenger. In this sense, today's online sermon recording is not the first time that God's Word has reached beyond its immediate time and space of composition.<sup>1</sup> As we're in the early days of developing a practical theology of the online sermon, I believe it's wise to begin by approaching the online sermon in a similar way to how the Apostle Paul viewed and used his epistles. Like a Pauline epistle, a videoed message can be understood as supplemental, relational, supportive, and preparatory.

## **The videoed message as supplemental**

For Paul, to communicate with a church from a distance was good, but not good enough. The letter to the Romans is a lengthy sixteen chapters long, a letter in which Paul powerfully expounds significant theological concepts, a letter which has gone on to bring gospel-freedom to many generations of Christians, including our beloved Martin Luther. Yet for all the letter's grandeur and teaching capacity, Paul viewed it as supplemental, written because he kept intending to visit the Romans but was prevented (Rom 1:13). He explains in his message, 'For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine' (Rom 1:11–12 ESV). But since speaking to them in person wasn't possible, Paul reverted to the next best method of communication—letter. In a like manner, I encourage our pastors to take on a similar attitude, that they admit that to be together in person would be much better, but where that isn't possible, we can revert to

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<sup>1</sup> I hardly need to reference the opportunities afforded by the printing press during the Reformation as a second example of the truth of God's Word being spread to a time and place different to its setting of composition.

the next best method of communication available—video. It would be a great shame if we as congregation members continue reading our pastor’s letter (watching our pastor’s sermon video) when actually he longs for us to gather together for the mutual encouragement of faith. Nevertheless, there is most certainly an important place for the recording of sermons. To make the sermon available to people who are holidaying or working away, or bound sick at home, is a loving pastoral thing to do. Or perhaps on the reverse, if a pastor is away from the congregation (e.g. for a convention), the pastor may record on their phone a brief message, reminding the congregation of the good news of Jesus. In either case, whether a member or a pastor is away from the gathering of the saints, we can learn from the Apostle Paul’s heart, and admit up front in the video, ‘I wish I could be with you, but this is the next best thing. I pray it still strengthens you.’

### **The videoed message as relational**

One might think that if a message is to be taken to a potentially large group of people in a different time and space, such a letter or video ought to be less personal and more generic in nature. But this was not the attitude of Paul. Many times, Paul wrote about his shared experience with his audience. ‘So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us’ (1 Thess 2:8 ESV). Even though he could have no certainty about who might overhear him, this pastor determined not to hold back the deep affection he felt for his churches. Most of his letters addressed concrete needs and, at times, specific people in the church. All in the one letter and without hesitation, he asked specific women to stop fighting (Phil 4:2) and also praised by name the efforts of another man (Phil 2:29). These letters—this Word of God from a distance—were not general expositions of the gospel, but careful pastoral applications of the gospel into the life of that specific church.<sup>2</sup> I hope that our pastors who make their sermons available online do not shy away from delivering personal, relational messages of the Gospel’s application to the specific church (or churches) he pastors.<sup>3</sup> The tension of course is that a videoed message made available online could potentially be viewed by any person. But such was the case for the Pauline epistles also. There was a low expectation for privacy amongst antique letters, for they would often be circulated and even published without the author’s request. Having said this, it appears that Paul did want his letters shared. ‘And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea’ (Col 4:16 ESV). In much the same way, our pastors can be encouraged to make their sermons personal to their intended congregation, while speaking in such a way that the ideas of the message still relate to any who might view the sermon online.<sup>4</sup>

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2 The exception here would be Paul’s letter to the Ephesians which appears deliberately general despite Paul having close relational ties with the church (Acts 20:17–38).

3 Albeit, perhaps without using full names of congregation members.

4 As a disclaimer, we should say that there are times for evangelistic online sermons which may not be intended for a specific audience but offer a general proclamation of the gospel. This paragraph is not about this kind of sermon. Instead, we’re saying that ‘Sunday morning sermons’ which are uploaded online should still personally and relationally apply the gospel to the life of the intended congregation even if it is viewed by others outside the congregation.

### **The videoed message as supportive**

Some of Paul's epistles were written to provide teaching and instruction to congregations who would otherwise be left in a vulnerable position. Paul understood his authority over the churches and leveraged his influence for the good of the churches. For example, the church of the Colossians was not established by Paul or any of the other apostles, but rather by a man named Epaphras.<sup>5</sup> This could have raised questions for the Colossians concerning the legitimacy of Epaphras and the teaching he brought. So Paul writes to the Colossians, endorsing Epaphras as a 'faithful minister of Christ', and affirming that the gospel they've heard is the same word of truth that is bearing fruit all over the world (Col 1:5–8). Here we have an example of a prominent church leader using the communication networks available to him to strengthen a local church and their trust in their pastor. A parallel today might be a district bishop recording a video for a church, assuring them of his confidence in the new graduate pastor they've recently received. Or it might be the pastor of a 'sending church' uploading a video affirming the growth of a faith community recently established by a church planter. In this letter, Paul goes on to confront a heresy that was threatening the Colossians' confidence in Christ. The parallel today might be the leaders of a congregation asking a prominent theologian to record a sermon for them, addressing a particularly difficult theological problem their church is facing. Opportunities like this abound for our churches and leaders to utilise the video format to strengthen specific congregations who might otherwise be in a vulnerable position.

### **The videoed message as preparatory**

Many of Paul's letters appear to be written to prepare them for an upcoming visit he plans to make to the congregation. To the Corinthians, he writes in hope that they will lovingly receive him this third time (2 Cor 12:14), explaining that he initially decided that it would be too painful to visit (2 Cor 2:1). Paul spends the majority of this second letter to the Corinthians arguing his legitimacy as an apostle and why he hopes they receive him kindly when he visits. Paul used the communication network of his day to prepare others for his visits, writing about his love for them, his fears and his requests. Today, many pastors take it upon themselves to support congregations in pastoral vacancies around their district. They take leave of their home congregation to visit and minister to congregations who haven't had a pastor for some time. I praise them for this work, but I hope to encourage them to consider how they might 'prepare' the congregation they're planning to visit. Of course this could be done through a letter, but as we have established, a videoed message would be an even better medium. Sending a short, simple video could be all that's needed to let that congregation know the pastor is eager for the visit. Perhaps he might like to inform them of the text and theme he'll preach on when he visits. Perhaps he might like to forewarn them of a cause he would like to collect money for (2 Cor 9:1–5). Or the pastor might even video a whole sermon in advance, the sequel of which he'll preach to the congregation in person. Congregations in pastoral vacancy may certainly benefit from sermons uploaded by any pastor around the nation or overseas. But receiving a personalised video message, or better yet, a number of videoed messages, from a pastor who you expect to have visit soon would be far more edifying for that community

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 14.

of Christians. We can be encouraged by Paul's epistles, that just as he desired his letters to complement his visits in-person, we too can use the video medium to helpfully prepare congregations, especially those in vacancy, for in-person visits. By doing so, these congregations are welcomed into an ongoing relationship with the pastor and his home church, a loving picture of the body of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Although we are in the early days of developing a practical theology of the online sermon, this is not the first time that God's Word has reached beyond its immediate time and space of composition. I have encouraged that we look to the Apostle Paul's use of letters to inform our understanding of the video medium as a tool to share God's Word. In this way, we can conceive that videoed messages given by pastors can be thought of as supplemental, relational, supportive and preparatory.

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