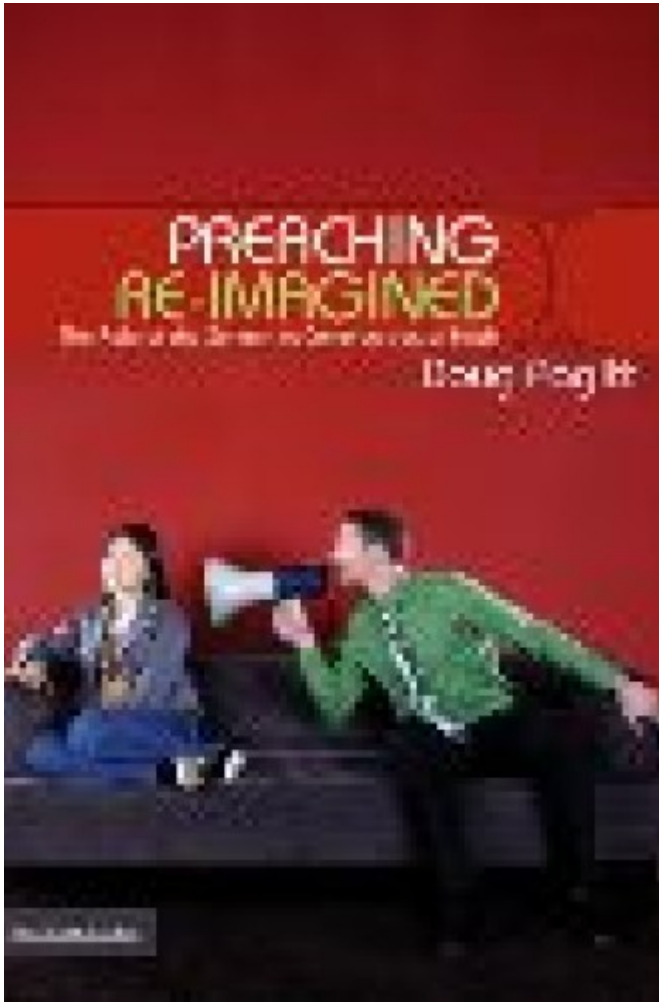


Preaching Re-Imagined

reviewed by [Robert Stephen Reid](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith

Doug Pagitt
Zondervan

Imagine what would happen if listeners became learners. Imagine a congregation where the purpose of a sermon might be to have parishioners engage in a conversation in response to an informed engagement with the biblical text. Imagine preaching that presents an unfinished story of faith that actively invites listeners to become participants in identifying ways to continue unfolding that faith story in the life of the community. The idea would make most preachers more than just nervous. Imagine the loss of control. Imagine how things could get out of hand. Imagine not having people hear those wonderfully crafted essays qua sermons. Isn't that the acid test of whether a pastor is doing her or his job?

Doug Pagitt asks what would happen if we gave up the metaphor of sermon as speech-ing and returned this talk to the kind of dialogue described as *homileo*-ing that occurred between Jesus, Cleopas and the unnamed traveler on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:27), that occurred in the dramatic turn from discussion to *homileo*-ing after Eutychus took his fateful plunge from the window (Acts 20:11). What might happen if the sermon once again became a kind of dynamic conversation? In Pagitt's version of this dialogue, the preacher has been in conversation with fellow learners throughout the process of shaping the sermon and then risks letting that conversation continue during the delivery.

Pagitt is pastor of Solomon's Porch, an innovative "experimental" congregation in Minneapolis that is at the forefront of the emergent church movement. His version of the Christian community is more demanding than the typical institutional model of the church that has dominated so much of the 20th century, and his model for preaching is equally demanding. This is not a proposal for preaching for friendly churches that welcome people hoping they will consider joining them for worship once a week. Pagitt wants to reconceive the purpose of the church and the way it accomplishes spiritual formation as a fundamental reorientation that moves people from being passive listeners to active learners. In *Preaching Re-Imagined* he extends this concern to what he sees as the last "unfunded mandate" of the Reformation—the final implementation of the priesthood of all believers as it affects preaching.

In his previous book, *Re-Imagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church*, Pagitt had already challenged what he saw as the Christendom church's dependence on a failed 19th-century education model of spiritual formation—one that turns parishioners into listeners rather than learners. In

Preaching Re-Imagined he takes up this same argument against the educational model of preaching-as-public-lecture because it leads to the same knowing-rather-than-doing dichotomy in spiritual formation. He wants people to be involved actively in the conversations that shape their faith.

The form of the book models Pagitt's concern. The initial essay lays out his basic challenge to preaching-as-speeching with numbered links to 40 subsequent sections of the book rather than to footnotes. These sections develop ideas from the initial essay at greater length. Respondents can then move their own conversation with the book to Pagitt's blog at the Solomon's Porch homepage. On the Web site these 40 ideas await further "progressional" engagement from readers. This model of writing caters to the hyperlink mode of thought made possible by the Web and represents a genuine effort to embody the argument of the book regarding the passive-active dichotomy of reading.

Pagitt's analysis of the education model at the heart of so much of contemporary congregational practice is perceptive but, sadly, undertheorized. It is perceptive because it offers an insightful postmodern challenge to one of the most sacred cornerstones of the Christendom church: that knowledge gained through a largely passive education process will somehow lead to active behavior change. What is missing is corroborating support from other critics. And the critics are there. The academy is no longer permitted to operate with this failed model. The American Association for Higher Education's Joint Task Force on Student Learning has clearly rejected the teacher-centered paradigm in favor of a learner-centered paradigm of education. There is a decided shift toward a skill-centered education focused on competencies and learning outcomes. And it is this skill-centered model of formation that is at the heart of the congregational learning that Pagitt wants to see in the church. Whether the task is spiritual formation or faith formation in preaching, Pagitt wants to turn listeners into learners.

Zondervan, the publisher for much of the emergent church literature, has wisely decided to reissue Pagitt's first book on spiritual formation (with a new title, *Church Re-Imagined: The Spiritual Formation of People in Communities of Faith*). Taken together the two books force those of us who think about theory and practice to ponder whether we have been interested only in tweaking an outdated, passive, listener-centered model of Sunday morning pulpit speech and faith formation. If that conversation continues, I suspect Pagitt will feel that he has fulfilled his pastoral function. Imagine that.