

Preaching for Success:

The Results a Preacher can Realistically Expect
Through the Faithful Preaching of God's Word

A Thesis

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my listeners,
those who with me drink from the well of living water.

Abstract

The pulpit stands center stage in most evangelical churches. This observation from church architecture underscores the importance that the church places on preaching. For most ministers, preaching takes priority in their weekly calendar. They invest an immense amount of time and energy into sermon preparation and delivery. Most preachers desire to be successful in their pulpit ministry yet many question whether or not it is. This purpose of this thesis is to define successful preaching and list the results a preacher can realistically expect through the faithful preaching of God's Word.

The basis of this thesis is the nature and authority of the Word of God. The author will posit that the Bible, the sixty-six books of the Christian canon, is the authoritative Word of God and, therefore, is powerfully effective to bring about change and growth in the lives of people. Further, the faithful preaching of the Biblical message is also the Word of God and, therefore, powerfully effective to bring about change and growth in the lives of the listeners. The effective power of God's Word is, however, affected by three variables: the sovereignty of God, listener response, and the message preached. While the preacher cannot control either the sovereignty of God nor listener response, he is able to remove the obstacles to the faithful and effective preaching of God's Word.

This thesis begins by laying the theological foundation for building a case for success in preaching: the nature and authority of both God's Word written and God's Word preached. Next, the vast field of homiletical literature will be explored in order to define the criteria that can be used to measure and maximize successful preaching. One chapter will describe the purpose and process of a preaching group that was formed to encourage successful preaching. This thesis ends with the author's findings, conclusions, and recommendations for maximizing the results a preacher can realistically expect from the faithful preaching of God's Word.

1 Introduction

*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?
And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?
And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?
And how can they preach unless they are sent?
As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"
... Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message,
and the message is heard through the word of Christ.
Romans 10:14-15,17*

In the vast majority of evangelical churches the pulpit takes center stage. The stage upon which the pulpit rests might be large or small. It might be spacious enough to accommodate the sacramental furniture, a communion table and baptistry, along with ample room for a piano, organ, set of drums, and other musical instruments. Or the platform is so modest that the preacher and pulpit are squeezed into an area so tight there is no room to manoeuver. The pulpit might be formed out of plexiglass, crafted out of walnut, or simply be a portable musical stand. A congregation might gather for worship on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning. The songs of praise might be contemporary choruses or Genevan psalms. But whatever else might take place in worship, in the forefront of the church, center stage, there stands the pulpit.

This observation from church architecture underscores the importance the evangelical Christian church has historically placed upon the preaching of God's Word. Most ministers of the gospel will concur that preaching is important. Sermon preparation and delivery take weekly priority. Preachers would agree with the early apostles that "it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of

the word of God.”¹ F. Dean Lueking writes, “The act of preaching is ... both the main course and dessert of the ministry. . . . Think of it: a congregation of believers calls one into their midst to say aloud what God intends all to have in his Word!”²

If the pulpit takes center stage and if preaching is a pastoral priority, then it stands to reason that preachers would desire to be successful in preaching. Henry Ward Beecher(1813-1887), once described as “the greatest preacher Protestantism has ever produced,” wrestled with the lack of results early on in his ministry. “There was no response, no growth, no sign of awakening. The indifferent remained indifferent. The lost remained unreached. One day a thought grabbed him and shook him awake. ‘There was a reason why when the apostles preached they succeeded, and I will find out what it is if it is to be found out.’”³ This is also what I will attempt to find out through this thesis-project. What is preaching for success? What are the results a preacher can realistically expect through the faithful preaching of God’s Word?

The importance of preaching is central to the teaching of the New Testament. Haddon W. Robinson gives this assessment of preaching: “In spite of the ‘bad-mouthing’ of preaching and preachers, no one who takes the Bible

¹Acts 6:2.

²*Preaching, The Art of Connecting God and People*, Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985, page 45.

³Frank Pollard, “Preparing the Preacher,” *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1992, page 138.

seriously should count preaching out. To the New Testament writers, preaching stands as the event through which God works.”⁴ For example, the apostle Paul writes, “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”⁵ But how does a person hear the message that comes through the word of Christ? They hear it, says the apostle Paul, through someone preaching to them.⁶ Preaching is a means by which faith comes to people. Through the preaching of God’s Word people come to believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. They make a confession of faith and are saved.⁷

If preaching is the event through which God works and the means by which faith comes to people, then the conclusion follows: preaching brings results. F. Dean Lueking asserts, “Individuals change and grow as the Word does its work. . . . The aim of preaching is to proclaim the redeeming work of God through his Son to the end that growth in Christlikeness takes place – in individuals and in the community of the faithful. Preacher and congregation do well to heed the key role of preaching in that process — not only in the formal act of preaching in the worship assembly, but also the preaching that takes place as the whole community of believers speaks in faith and acts together in love within

⁴Biblical Preaching, *The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, Second Edition*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001, page 19.

⁵Romans 10:17.

⁶Cf. verses 14-15.

⁷Cf. verses 8-10.

its own fellowship and toward the world.”⁸

Many preachers, as did Beecher early on in his ministry, feel far from being successful in their preaching task. They believe that their pulpit ministry is fruitless. Immense investment of time and energy is made into sermon preparation and delivery. Preachers question whether this investment is worth the effort. People do not seem to change and grow. Often the sermon takes a back seat to the other elements of worship. A ministers begins his sermon and people check their watches and wonder, “Is it over yet?” The spoken message seems to fall on deaf ears. Churches, like congregants, also do not seem to change and grow. Therefore, many faithful preachers struggle with significance. They wonder what the successful preacher looks like. Faced with these feelings of failure, many pastors choose to believe that success is not a righteous pursuit; God only requires faithful obedience.

This thesis-project is in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Doctor of Ministry program taught at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. In the second chapter I will set the theological foundation on which I will build a case for success in preaching. There are a number of key Biblical themes that will be investigated. What is the nature and authority of the Bible? Are the sixty-six books of the Christian canon God’s Word? Is God’s Word found in the Bible or is it the Word of God? What is the relationship between the written words found in Scripture and the spoken word that is proclaimed from Christian pulpits? Is every sermon

⁸Lueking, *Preaching: The Art of Connecting God and People*, page 101.

the Word of God? If not, what constitutes a sermon being the Word of God?

Is there a theology of preaching? Does the Bible have anything to say about preaching? Will preaching automatically result in change and growth in the lives of the listener? Does faithful preaching contribute to the growth and health of a local congregation? How does God's sovereignty relate to faithful Biblical preaching? If God is sovereign, does it really matter what is being proclaimed from pulpits?

In the third chapter I will review pertinent books, articles and other literature, both from a historical as well as a contemporary perspective. Much has been written in the areas of homiletics. The main questions we will look at in this chapter are these: What constitutes effective preaching? What obstacles can preachers avoid in order to maximize the kind of results one would expect from the faithful preacher of God's Word. What criteria can be used to measure the successful preaching in the local church? Are there resources and tools that pastors can use to gauge their success in preaching?

The theological foundations of chapter 2 and the theoretical framework of chapter 3 will be communicated to a preaching group that I have initiated. This group consists of a cross-section of pastors who are eager to be successful preachers. In the book of Hebrews we are instructed: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one

another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”⁹ One of the great benefits of meeting together as a peer group of preachers is that we can encourage one another to be faithful and spur one another to excellence in preaching. The purpose and process of this preaching group will be detailed in chapter four.

The final chapter will give my findings, conclusions, and recommendations based on the theological foundations of chapter 2 and the theoretical framework of chapter 3. My main objective in this chapter is to define what is successful preaching. We will look at the biblical understanding of success and apply it to the task of preaching? Is the drive to be successful as a preacher a virtue to pursue or a vice to avoid? Readers will be able to define success in preaching and list the results a preacher can realistically expect through the faithful preaching of God’s Word.

There are discouraged ministers who need to be encouraged. There are faithful pastors who need to be prodded to even deeper faithfulness. There are churches who need to discover the relevance of preaching. Through this thesis-project I hope to make a significant contribution to seeing preaching take center stage, not only in the lives of preachers, but also in churches.

⁹10:24-25.

2 Theological Foundations

*“For the word of God is living and active.
Sharper than any double-edged sword,
it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit,
joints and marrow;
It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”
Hebrews 4:12*

The task of preaching could be summed up in the charge given by the apostle Paul to his young protege, Timothy: “Preach the Word!”¹ What word is Paul referring to? Preachers within the denomination that holds my ordination, the Christian Reformed Church, are given the title: “Minister of the Word.” What word am I a minister of? The perennial question people have is the one King Zedekiah privately asked the prophet Jeremiah, “Is there any word from the LORD?”² Paul mandates Timothy to give the churches a word from the Lord. I am a minister of *the* Word of God. Whatever else might happen within a Christian worship service on any given Sunday, people gather to hear God say something, to receive a word from the Lord.

Jeremiah was able to give a word from the LORD to King Zedekiah because throughout Zedekiah’s reign the word of the LORD first came to Jeremiah.³ Unlike the prophet Jeremiah, Timothy did not have to wait for the

¹2 Timothy 4:2.

²Jeremiah 37:17.

³Cf. Jeremiah 27:1; 30:1; 32:1; 33:1; 34:2, 8; The phrase “this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD” (27:1), and others similar to it are a common way of introducing the various prophetic oracles. Most of the prophetic books begin with the phrase: “The word of the LORD came” (Jeremiah 1:2; Ezekiel 1:3; Jonah

word of the LORD to come to him before he had a word to give to the churches. Timothy already had the Word of God. Paul reminds him: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”⁴ Timothy had known the Old Testament Scriptures since he was a small child. This was the Word that Paul charges Timothy to preach: the holy Scriptures.

Likewise, Christian ministers today do not have to wait for a word from the Lord before they can preach. They already have the Word of God. They have the holy Scriptures, the Bible. This is the word they are called to preach: the message of the Old and New Testaments of God. “The calling of a minister of the Word is to proclaim, explain, and apply Holy Scripture in order to gather in and build up the members of the church of Jesus Christ.”⁵

The call to preach Holy Scripture might seem strange to the modern mind. William Willimon, dean of the chapel at Duke University, asked a group of Duke students this question about Sunday chapel worship: “What is the strangest thing we do on Sunday morning?” One student replied: “It’s when the choir files in,

1:1; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1; Cf. Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1).

⁴2 Timothy 3:14-15.

⁵Church Order Article 11, *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government, 2001 Revision*, edited by David H. Engelhard and Leonard J. Hofman, Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 2001, page 93.

and they bring in that great big book.” “Do you mean the Bible?” “Yeah, that. And then a person in the procession opens it, puts it on the lectern, and looks toward the clergy, like he or she is saying, ‘Here, work from this.’” Reflecting on this, Willimon writes:

*“He’s right, that is weird. It is very strange that a group of twenty-first century North Americans would gather and sit silently while someone reads from a great big ancient book, produced in a culture other than our own, in a language quite different from ours. It is strange because we are modern people. We like to think that we live at the summit of human development and stand in sovereign judgement of everybody who got here before we did. That we should gather around and be attentive to any source of wisdom other than that which is contemporary and self-derived is weird.”*⁶

Jeremiah had a contemporary word from the LORD for the people to whom he prophesied. When people asked for a word from God, he had one. Timothy had come to know the holy Scriptures, the words of the Old Testament, along with the truths of the faith taught to him by Paul.⁷ He had a Word from the Lord to preach. Today, almost two millennia since the days of Paul and Timothy, Christian ministers are still called to “preach the Word!” In what ways does God speak to us today? What is the nature and authority of the sixty-six books that make up the Bible? How does the Bible differ from Homer’s *Iliad* or Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? Can an individual listen to a contemporary sermon and conclude, “I have heard a Word from the LORD”? It is to these and related questions that our study now turns.

⁶Tony Campolo and William Willimon, *The Survival Guide for Christians on Campus*, West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard Publishing Co., 2002, page 37-38.

⁷2 Timothy 3:10; Cf. 1 Timothy 4:6.

The Self-Revelation of God

John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by saying that “nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”¹ Calvin goes on to point out that these two parts of wisdom are intricately interwoven, in fact, “man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.”² The starting point of understanding God and humanity is the knowledge of God. One needs to see the “face of God.” But “no one has seen God.”³ In fact, God himself said to Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”⁴ Our knowledge of God is a mystery to us. “God is hidden from us. A mysterious, indirect light may shine through the earthly phenomenal world, but the face of God does not become visible in it.”⁵ If God is ever to be known by humanity, he must make himself known. “God can only be known by God.”⁶

¹I.i.1, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, page 35.

²Ibid., page 37.

³John 1:18.

⁴Exodus 33:20.

⁵Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith, An Introduction of the Study of the Faith*, translated by Sierd Woudstra, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979, page 53.

⁶Ibid.

This is the starting point, the prolegomena of theology. “Theology would be utterly impossible without a self-revelation of God.”⁷ This does not mean that people have no knowledge of God; this simply means that our knowledge of God is limited to what God chooses to reveal about himself. The initiative of this self-disclosure remains with God. Louis Berkhof points out that Abraham Kuyper “. . . calls attention to the fact that theology as the knowledge of God differs in an important point from all other knowledge. In the study of all other sciences man places himself *above* the object of his investigation and *actively* elicits from it his knowledge by whatever method may seem most appropriate, but in theology he does not stand above but rather *under* the object of his knowledge. In other words, man can know God only in so far as the latter actively makes Himself known.”⁸

The message of the Bible is that God has made himself known. What is hidden is revealed. The mysterious is disclosed. Daniel sings this hymn in praise of God: “He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deeps and hidden things.”⁹ In speaking about his message, the apostle Paul writes: “We speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been

⁷*Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949, page 34.

⁸*Ibid.*; Cf. Psalm 147:19: “He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws.”

⁹Daniel 2:21f.

hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.”¹⁰ This wisdom was not understood by the rulers of that age but “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”¹¹ Our knowledge of God “. . . is thought of then not as the end product of diligent human search, but as a manifestation of God’s grace and of his will to be known. . . . Theology is not a study of ‘God-in-himself’ but of ‘God-as-he-has-revealed-himself’. The theologian, it has been held, must always do his work on the basis of what has been revealed.”¹²

God’s self-revelation has traditionally been understood in two ways: general and special revelation. The Belgic Confession¹³ confesses that we know God by two means:

First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave

¹⁰1 Corinthians 2:7.

¹¹1 Corinthians 2:10.

¹²Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976, pages 10,11; Hendrikus Berkhof makes an important observation: “When God in his revelation emerges from his hiddenness, he does not by that act cease to be the hidden God; rather, that hiddenness is now fully disclosed. What we could before at best only surmise, now becomes a clear certainty: how immensely exalted and hidden God is, how unspeakably and surprisingly marvelous his gracious condescension, how unimaginably glorious the future he discloses to us in it. Revelation initiates us into a great mystery. This does not make the initiate feel proud; rather, each step makes him smaller and humbler. God would not be God if it were otherwise”(*Christian Faith*, page 53f).

¹³One of the doctrinal standards of the Reformed Churches, written in 1561 by Guido de Bres, a preacher of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands.

them without excuse. Second, he makes himself know to us more openly by this holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own.¹⁴

Creation bears witness to its Creator. This is God's general self-revelation. God has made himself known generally, to all people, through the things he has made. The Psalmist sings of God's self-revelation in nature:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth,
Their words to the ends of the world.¹⁵

The "silent" heavens speak of the glory of God, their Maker. The apostle Paul's comment in Romans 1:20, appealed to in the Belgic Confession article just quoted, is similar: "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." Anyone with eyes to see or ears to hear can learn something about God from creation. "A reverent contemplation of the physical universe with its order and design and beauty tells us not only that God is but also that God is a certain kind of God. God has left his imprint on his creation so that his universe reveals something about him to men."¹⁶

¹⁴Belgic Confession, Article 2.

¹⁵Psalm 19:1-4.

¹⁶Morris, *I Believe in Revelation*, page 33; Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.1-10.

Special revelation refers to God's other "book," his self-revelation in the Bible. The Belgic Confession, quoted earlier, speaks of God making "himself known to us *more openly* by his holy and divine Word."¹⁷ General revelation has its limits. Calvin speaks about the necessity for special revelation:

"That brightness which is borne in upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men's ingratitude – just as God, to involve the human race in the same guilt, sets forth to all without exception his presence portrayed in his creatures. Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe. It was not in vain, then, that he added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation."¹⁸

The Bible is God's better book. "General revelation is rooted in creation, is addressed to man as man Special revelation is rooted in the redemptive plan of God, is addressed to man as sinner."¹⁹ While God's self-revelation in creation leaves no one with an excuse, God's self-revelation in Holy Scriptures leads people to a knowledge of salvation. God has revealed himself. What is hidden has been disclosed. God has made himself known through the canvas of creation and more openly and better through the printed pages of the Bible. Preachers are called to preach the message of this book, God's self-revelation, the Bible. What is the nature and authority of the sixty-six books that make up the Bible? This is the subject to which we now turn our attention.

¹⁷Article 2, emphasis mine.

¹⁸*Institutes*, I.vi.1, page 69f.

¹⁹Louis Berkhof, page 37; Cf. Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, Grand Rapids:1971, page 144: Special revelation is "the knowledge of God adjusted for, and given for, sinners."

The Word of God Written

J.I. Packer states that “two facts about the Triune Jehovah are assumed, if not actually stated, in every single biblical passage. The first is that He is *king* – absolute monarch of the universe, ordering all its affairs, working out His will in all that happens within it. The second fact is that he *speaks* – uttering words that express His will in order to cause it to be done.”¹ This is the Biblical claim: God has spoken.

From the very beginning of time God has spoken. By his word God created the heavens and the earth. For example, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”² This pattern is repeated seven more times.³ God merely spoke and all of creation sprang into being. The Psalmist sings: “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. . . . For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”⁴

The apostle John begins his gospel by echoing the initial words of Genesis: “In the beginning. . . .” In this prologue to his gospel, John writes about the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word who became flesh: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without

¹*Knowing God*, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973, page 98.

²Genesis 1:3.

³Verses 6,9,11,14,20,24,26.

⁴Psalm 33:6,9; Cf. 148:5; Hebrews 11:3.

him nothing was made that has been made.”⁵ The Word was from the beginning. The Word was the author of everything that exists. But God did not simply give his Word to create the world and cause everything to come into existence; he also spoke to make himself known to the world. John put it like this: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”⁶ The Incarnate Word has allowed the world to see the “face” of God.

God intentionally makes himself known through his Word. The author of the book of Hebrews underscores God’s self-revelation through his Word:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.⁷

In the past, throughout the Old Testament period of history, God spoke through the prophets. In the last days, the period of New Testament history up to the present, God has spoken through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The intent of God speaking is all the same: to make himself known to the world.

People come to know God through his Word. This knowledge is not

⁵John 1:1-3.

⁶John 1:14,18.

⁷Hebrews 1:1-3.

simply for information's sake. Rather, God spoke in order to enter into relationship with the creatures he made in his image: humanity. J.I. Packer writes:

For, though God is a great king, it is not His wish to live at a distance from His subjects. Rather the reverse: He made us with the intention that He and we might walk together for ever in a love-relationship. But such a relationship can only exist when the parties involved know something of each other. God, our Maker, knows all about us before we say anything(Ps. 139:1-4); but we can know nothing about Him unless He tells us: not only to move us to do what He wants, but to enable us to know Him so that we may love Him. Therefore God sends His word to us in the character of both information and invitation. It comes to woo us as well as to instruct us; it not merely puts us in the picture of what God has done and is doing, but also calls us into personal communion with the loving Lord Himself.⁸

The Nature and Authority of the Bible

The Word did not only become flesh; the Word of the LORD was also written down. Jesus, the incarnate Word, who came to make God the Father known to us, often referred to the Old Testament scriptures by saying: "It is written."⁹ Jesus not only quoted Old Testament Scriptures but also came with and as a word from the Lord himself. He said that the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled through his ministry: "The Spirit of Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."¹⁰ Jesus' ministry was one of

⁸*Knowing God*, page 99.

⁹Cf. Matthew 4:4,7,10, etc.; Jesus used the word *ἔγραψεν*, which means "to write, compose, or record." The phrase "it is written" appears 25 times in the gospels.

¹⁰Luke 4:18; Cf. vv. 14-21; Isaiah 61:1,2.

teaching and “preaching the good news of the kingdom.”¹¹ And before Jesus ascended into heaven, he commanded his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”¹² This is exactly what the disciples of Jesus did. Beginning in Jerusalem, then throughout Judea and Samaria, and out to the ends of the earth, they took the message they received from Christ and preached the gospel, the good news of the kingdom of God.¹³

The message the apostles taught and preached was not to be ignored. They spoke with the authority of the Word of God. Peter makes it clear that the apostolic message was not man’s word, but God’s Word. He writes in his second letter:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven we were with him on the sacred mountain.¹⁴

Peter emphasizes that the good news the apostles taught and preached was not a bunch of myths or imaginations of their minds. They did not invent these

¹¹Matthew 4:23; Cf. 9:35; Mark 1:39; Luke 4:44; 9:6; 20:1.

¹²Matthew 28:19,20; Cf. Mark 16:16: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”

¹³Cf. Acts 1:8; 2:14-41; 8:25,35,40; 16:6; 17:13,18; 18:5; 20:25.

¹⁴2 Peter 1:16-18.

stories like the message of the false prophets did in the church of that day.¹⁵

They were eyewitnesses of the events of Jesus' life. They only spoke of what they saw and heard.¹⁶

Not only did the apostles' message rest on the foundation of being eyewitnesses of the Lord Jesus; they also had the testimony of Scripture. Peter continues in his second letter by saying:

And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Both the apostles' message and the testimony of Scripture were not the product of human imaginings; they came from God. John Calvin writes:

Peter says that Scripture came not from man, or through the suggestions of man. For thou wilt never come well prepared to read it, except thou bringest reverence, obedience, and docility; but a just reverence then only exists, when we are convinced that God speaks to us, and not mortal men. Then Peter especially bids us to believe the prophecies as the indubitable oracles of God, because they have not emanated from men's own private suggestions. . . . They did not of themselves, or according to their own will, foolishly deliver their own inventions. . . . they dared not to announce anything of their own, and obediently followed the Spirit as their guide, who ruled in their mouth as in his own sanctuary.¹⁸

¹⁵Cf. 2 Peter 2:3.

¹⁶Cf. Acts 4:20.

¹⁷2 Peter 2:19-21.

¹⁸*Commentaries on The Catholic Epistles*, translated by Rev. John Owen, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XXII*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979, page 390-391; Cf. Charles Hodge: "Prophecy, i.e., what a prophet said, was not human, but divine. It was not the prophet's own interpretation of

“The characteristic and distinguishing thing about the Bible is not the genuine human discoveries it records, but the fact that again and again it records its ‘Thus saith the Lord’. Whether we accept it or reject it we should at least take the Bible for what it claims to be and not try to make it into something else which we like better.”¹⁹ The inherent claim of the Bible is that it is the Word of God. “All Scripture speaks with the authority of ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ Recognition of this divine authority of Scripture was the basis for Jesus’ appeal to ‘It is written.’ What Scripture says, God says.”²⁰ The author of the message of the Bible, both the testimony of the apostles and the Old Testament Scriptures, is God. All the writers of the New Testament “— as is true of Jesus Himself also, according to His reported words, — consistently look upon the written words of Scripture as the express utterances of God, owing their origin to His direct spiration and their character to this their divine origin.”²¹

The divine character and origin of Scripture is also what Paul writes to the

the mind and will of God” (*Systematic Theology, Volume One*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979, page 159).

¹⁹Morris, *I Believe in Revelation*, page 45.

²⁰“*Report 44, The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority*,” *Acts of Synod 1972*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, page 506.

²¹Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, edited by Samuel G. Craig, New Jersey: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979, page 289; Cf. Belgic Confession Article 3: “We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of men, but that holy men of God spoke, being moved by the Holy Spirit, as Peter says.”

young preacher Timothy.²² Paul’s mandate to Timothy to “preach the Word” was not a call to share some human musings, but the holy Scriptures. He reminds Timothy that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”²³ The Word Timothy was to preach had usefulness because of its God-breathed character. “Scripture comes from God; because it comes from God, it is useful in preparing Timothy for ministry. . . . utility of Scripture flows out of inspiration. The entirety of Scripture comes from the mouth of God. To read it is to hear him speak.”²⁴

Many English translations of 2 Timothy 3:16 interpret the word $\epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\iota\acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\acute{\omega}\nu$ as “inspired.”²⁵ Therefore the church has traditionally spoken about the “inspiration of the Bible.” G. C. Berkhouwer correctly points out, however:

. . . one may not simply presuppose that *theopneustos* and ‘inspiration’ are completely identical and can serve equally to denote the mystery of Holy Scripture. It is noteworthy first of all that *theopneustos* entails a positive description and relates Scripture directly to God. In the second place, it ought to be remembered that a number of ideas are associated with the concept of inspiration that color it in a certain way, for example,

²²Cf. 2 Timothy 3:10-4:8.

²³2 Timothy 3:16-17.

²⁴William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 46*, Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000, pages 568, 570.

²⁵i.e., GNT: $\delta\theta\acute{o}\acute{\alpha}\ \acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\acute{\omega}\nu\ \epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\iota\acute{\alpha}\nu\theta\acute{\omega}\nu$; KJV: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God”; RSV and ASV: “All scripture is inspired by God”; GWT: “Every Scripture passage is inspired by God.”

being inspired aesthetically, which is not included in the notion 'God-breathed.' In this respect inspiration does not quite agree with *theopneustos*. The term 'God-breathed' does more justice to the unique work of the Holy Spirit than does the word 'inspiration.'²⁶

B.B. Warfield makes a similar point: "It would seem that the simple rendering 'God-breathed' would commend itself powerfully to us . . . since the preposition 'in' is wholly lacking in the term [inspiration] and is not demanded for the sense in any of its applications."²⁷ Simply to speak of the inspiration of the Bible does not make the most of the nuance of the word *theopneustos*. The Biblical writers were not simply animated to write after some ecstatic experience.²⁸ They wrote the words of Scripture having been moved by the Holy Spirit. The ultimate author of God's Word is God himself. "To Peter as truly as to Paul, and to the Paul of the earlier epistles as truly as to the Paul of II Timothy . . . the Scriptures are the product of the Divine Spirit, and would be most appropriately described by the epithet of 'God-breathed,' i.e., produced by the breath, the inspiration, of God."²⁹

The God-breathed character of the Bible does not rule out the human input of the Biblical writers. Berkhouwer writes:

²⁶*Studies in Dogmatics, Holy Scripture*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975, page 139.

²⁷*Inspiration and Authority*, page 284.

²⁸Charles Hodge makes a distinction between inspiration and illumination: "Inspiration . . . is not to be confounded with spiritual illumination. . . . The subjects of inspiration are a few selected persons; the subjects of spiritual illumination are all true believers" (*Systematic Theology*, page 154).

²⁹*Ibid.*, page 290.

It is generally agreed that in God-breathed Scriptures we are not involved with passive or unconscious holy writers. One generally calls attention to various kinds of activity of the authors as 'organs' of God-breathed Scripture. . . . The word 'organ' always indicates a definite relationship in which an event occurs; it was therefore often used to indicate the human functionality in the God-breathed Scripture. So we meet this relationship in the distinction between God as principal author of Scripture and the Bible writers as 'instrumental writers.'³⁰

The Biblical writers were not treated as some dictation machine through which God mechanically transmitted his divine Word onto a printed page.³¹ Those who hold this view speak of a mechanical or dictation view of the inspiration of Scripture. It is better to speak of an organic view of inspiration.³² "The sacred writers were *organs* of God, so that what they taught, God taught. It is to be remembered, however, that when God uses any of his creatures as his instruments, He uses them according to their nature. . . . The sacred writers were not made unconscious or irrational."³³ "Inspiration did not suppress the

³⁰Warfield, *Inspiration and Authority*, page 153.

³¹"The sacred writers were not machines" (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, page 157).

³²Louis Berkhof makes a distinction between the "dynamical" and "organic" view of inspiration. These two terms are often used interchangeably. The term "dynamical view" is used to "designate the theory of inspiration that owes its inception to the teaching of Schleiermacher. . . . This view is entirely subjective, makes the Bible a purely human product, and allows for the possibility to errors in the Word of God. Inspiration so conceived was a permanent characteristic of the writers, and in so far naturally also influenced their writings, but was by no means a supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit, which served to qualify the writers for the specific task of committing the divine revelation to writing" (*Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1932, page 152).

³³Hodge, page 156, emphasis mine.

personality of the author. God used men to write his Word. But this means also that the eternal Word of God is communicated through a time and culture conditioned vehicle, viz. human language. The biblical authors used the language they spoke: Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek. Their inspired writings reflect the time and circumstances in which they lived. Yet the Scriptures written by these men is the authoritative Word of God.”³⁴

The organic view of the inspiration of Scripture provides a balanced vantage point from which to understand the Biblical message. Leon Morris calls for this balanced approach:

“On the one hand we have writers who insist that all we need bear in mind is inspiration. This guarantees the literal truth of every word of sacred writ. On the other we have writers who treat these documents as though there was no such thing as inspiration. What is very much needed in days when the message of the Bible is so often muted is that a right balance be struck. We should not take the books of the Bible out of the realm of literature generally and put them in a glass case where no awkward questions may be asked and where we take no notice of genre, individual peculiarities and the like. But we should not forget either that God has spoken through these writings. We do them less justice if we treat them as though we were atheists or agnostics. A balanced position requires that both the human characteristics and the divine inspiration be given due emphasis.”³⁵

³⁴*Report 44*, page 511; Cf. *Acts of Reformed Ecumenical Synod, 1958*: “... the Holy Spirit did not suppress their personalities, but rather that he sovereignly prepared, controlled and directed them in such a way that he utilized their endowments and experience, their research and reflection, their language and style. This human aspect of Scripture does not, however, allow for the inference that Scripture may be regarded as a fallible human witness to divine revelation, for such an explanation constitutes an attack upon the glorious sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in inspiration”(quoted in *Report 44*, page 498); cf. also Hodge, pages 156-7; Berkhof, *Introductory Volume*, page 153.

³⁵*I Believe in Revelation*, page 100.

The God-breathed character of Scripture is not just reserved for the books of the Old Testament. It is true that the two passages just discussed, 2 Peter 1:20-21 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17, refer essentially to the Old Testament since some of the New Testament was not yet written. Yet when you read New Testament writers such as the apostle Paul, you discover that the apostles considered that their writings were clothed with authority. “By the way he begins his letters Paul clearly reminds his readers that he writes as the specially called apostle of Jesus Christ and therefore demands obedience. He consistently claims to write in the name and on the authority of the Lord.”³⁶ In 1 Corinthians 14:37 he writes, “If anybody is spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command.” Although in the writings of the apostles we encounter real human words, they are the Word of God. “The connection between God’s speaking and the human word is very close and real. One can describe this relationship without exaggeration as *identity*.”³⁷ As Norval Geldenhuys concludes, “All available evidence shows that the early Church not only acknowledged wholeheartedly the unique authority of the writings but also treasured these documents written by the apostles or their most intimate and

³⁶J. Norval Geldenhuys, “Authority and the Bible,” *Revelation and the Bible*, edited by Carl F. H. Henry, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1958, page 385; cf. also the other apostles’ claims: 1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 1:1-5; Revelation 1:11, 19; 2:14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5; 22:18-19.

³⁷Berkhouwer, *Holy Scripture*, page 145; Berkhouwer refers to the confession of the church: “*Sacra Scriptura est Verbum Dei* (Holy Scripture is the Word of God . . . when God speaks, human voices ring in our ears”(Ibid.).

faithful followers.”³⁸

The voice of God echoes through the Biblical writers. These writings have been compiled into the sixty-six books that form the Christian canon. Literary criticism has raised many issues for biblical interpretation that call into the question the shape of the canon. Critical methodologies were introduced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the whole area of Biblical criticism.³⁹ The problem with some of these methods of Biblical interpretation is that they “hinder the biblical texts from speaking relevantly.”⁴⁰ This is especially obvious in the whole “quest for the historical Jesus.”⁴¹ Much of the New Testament is reduced to products of early Christianity. The sayings and teachings of Jesus are whittled down to a few core sayings.⁴² In the end God’s voice is silent and we are left with Jesus, “‘the smartest and the best,’ . . . the most original master .

³⁸“Authority and the Bible,” page 385.

³⁹i.e., Source Criticism (Julius Wellhausen), Form Criticism (Herman Gunkel et. al.), Redaction Criticism (Rudolph Bultman et. al.); For a full discussion and overview see Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text, Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988, pages 48-79.

⁴⁰Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, page 49.

⁴¹This school of biblical criticism is best represented by scholars such as Robert Funk, Rudolph Bultman, Norman Perrin, John Dominic Crossan; i.e., Norman Perrin’s book, *Rediscovering The Teaching of Jesus*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976.

⁴²Cf. James Breech, *The Silence of Jesus, The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983; Breech argues that there are only eight core sayings and twelve parables that are authentic to Jesus.

. . . the most loving and least sentimental man one could imagine.”⁴³ The fact that “these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name”⁴⁴ is dismissed by the time the quest for the historical Jesus is completed.

These methods of Biblical criticism have “crippling limitations.” Leon Morris writes: “Any method which has nothing to say about the central affirmations of the New Testament is clearly of limited value. I am not saying that the method is valueless. All serious students are indebted to it. But I am saying that we must not be hypnotised by it. There is more to Jesus than ‘the Jesus of history’ . . . and more to the Bible than an historical source book.”⁴⁵

A much better method of literary interpretation is what Brevard S. Childs calls the “canonical approach.”⁴⁶ This approach “strongly resists the assumption that every biblical text has first to be filtered through a set of historical critical

⁴³Ibid., page 222.

⁴⁴John 20:31.

⁴⁵*I Believe in Revelation*, page 98.

⁴⁶Cf. Greidanus, *The Preacher and the Ancient Text*, pages 73-77; Childs is not the only voice for a canonical approach to interpreting Scripture, yet he is the contemporary voice calling for this approach. Berkhouwer writes: “Not . . . to spite science, but rather because of its totally different nature and of the secret of Scripture — the secret of the gospel — we will have to continue on the basis of the ‘is its own interpreter’ and thus continue to honor Scripture as canon” (*Holy Scripture*, page 134). See also Cornelius Van Til: “Only in a return to the Bible as infallibly inspired in its autography is there hope for science, for philosophy and for theology. Without returning to this Bible science and philosophy may flourish with borrowed capital as the prodigal flourished for a while with his father’s substance. But the prodigal had no self-sustaining principle” (Cf. “Introduction,” Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*,” page 68).

mesh before one can even start the task of interpretation. . . . its positive role seeks to challenge the interpreter to look closely at the biblical text in its received form and then critically to discern its function for a community of faith. . . . the canon established a platform from which exegesis is launched rather than a barrier by which creative activity is restrained.”⁴⁷

The questions raised by the schools of Biblical criticism also raise the issue of whether the Bible *is* the Word of God or *contains* the Word of God. Leon Morris, referring to James D. Smart, warns against the danger of picking and choosing in the Bible. If one accepts the view that the Bible *contains* the Word of God, one may be “in the happy position of being able to reject anything in Scripture that he does not particularly like. . . . We must reject any idea of a canon within the canon. It is too easy a way of avoiding the challenge posed by the essential message of the Bible.”⁴⁸

The history of the canon is beyond the scope of this study. Much has been written on how the sixty-six books of the Christian canon were compiled.⁴⁹ The Belgic Confession simply confesses that “our God — because of the special care he has for us and our salvation — commanded his servants, the prophets

⁴⁷Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, page 83.

⁴⁸Morris, *I Believe in Revelation*, page 48; Cf. James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970, page 98.

⁴⁹See for example, Edward J. Young, “*The Canon of the Old Testament*,” and Herman Ridderbos, “*The Canon of the New Testament*,” in *Revelation and the Bible* (Baker, 1958).

and apostles, to commit this revealed Word to writing. . . . Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.”⁵⁰ God, the author and origin of the Word of God, saw to it that the teachings of the Biblical writers “be crystalized in written form, and that his Church recognize, acknowledge and preserve these writings for all time.”⁵¹ Geldenhuys adds:

It was accordingly not the Church that made the New Testament books authoritative. On the contrary, the Church humbly confessed these books to be clothed with the authority of the Lord, and therefore they require the unconditional obedience of all believers. It was not the Church that clothed the New Testament with authority but it is the Word of God, first proclaimed directly by the authoritative delegates of the Lord and subsequently in written form, that established and built the Church. The living Lord, who through his Spirit enabled the apostles to proclaim the gospel in unadulterated form, also illumined his Church through the Holy Spirit that she should recognize the New Testament books as authoritative.⁵²

In the final analysis, acceptance of the Christian canon is a matter of faith.

In the words of the confession, “We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical We believe without a doubt all things contained in them not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also

⁵⁰Article 3.

⁵¹Norval Geldenhuys, *Authority and the Bible*, page 385.

⁵²Ibid.; Edward J. Young writes: “In his good providence God brought it about that his people should recognize and receive his Word. How he planted this conviction in their hearts with respect to the identity of his Word we may not be able fully to understand or explain” (*The Canon of the Old Testament*,” page 168).

because they prove themselves to be from God.”⁵³ Here the Belgic Confession relies heavily on the teachings of John Calvin:

“The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.”⁵⁴

The Bible must speak for itself. “The divine authority of the Word of God is actually recognized only when one has submitted himself to the one of whom the Scripture speaks.”⁵⁵ The Bible is the Word of God. This confession is of “decisive significance for the continuance of the church and the totality of the Christian life, which can only be truly Christian if it rests in the Word of God.”⁵⁶

God has revealed himself in creation and through his Word. God used men as his instruments to put his Word into writing so that his voice would be clearly heard throughout all generations. The Bible speaks with the divine authority of its author, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Many have attempted to silence the Word but God still speaks to those who are ready to listen. And if one does listen, does the Word of God make any difference?

⁵³Belgic Confession, Article 5.

⁵⁴*The Institutes*, page 79; Cf. Book I, chapter vii.

⁵⁵*Report 44*, page 509.

⁵⁶Berkhouwer, *Holy Scripture*, page 151; cf. Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation*: “A point I am very much concerned to make is that the Bible claims to give us a message from God and that this claim should be taken far more seriously than it is by many modern Christians” (pages 104f).

What effect does the Bible claim to have on those who hear the Word of God?
These questions will be answered in what follows.

The Effective Power of the Word of God

The Bible begins, as we noted earlier, with God speaking. “God said,” and the heavens and the earth came into existence. The utter nothingness of the created realm changed when God spoke. This was a special word from God. “Though it is of course taken for granted throughout the OT that God speaks, rma “to say” is used here in a more pregnant sense than usual. It is a divine word of command that brings into existence what it expresses. Throughout Scripture the word of God is characteristically both creative and effective: it is the prophetic word that declares the future and helps it come into being. But in this creation narrative these qualities of the divine word are even more apparent.”⁵⁷ Wisdom is personified in the book of Proverbs as “the craftsman at [the LORD’s] side” as the world was created.⁵⁸

This creative “word” of God is powerfully effective. God simply commanded and the world came into being. In the words of the Psalmist: “Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were

⁵⁷Wenham, Gordon J., *Genesis 1-15, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 1*, Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987, pages 17-18; Cf. G. Ch. Aalders: “In His speaking, God’s effective will comes into expression” (*Genesis, Volume 1, Bible Students Commentary*, translated by William Heynen, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, page 56.

⁵⁸Proverbs 8:30; Cf. verses 22-31.

created.”⁵⁹ God’s word is different from human words. Humans cannot create something out of nothing simply by moving their vocal cords. Yet God simply spoke, and all that exists was created. “This creative word . . . is not “empty” . . . , but powerful and of the highest creative potency.”⁶⁰

David sings about the power of the voice of the LORD(hwhy lwk) in Psalm 29: “The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic.”⁶¹ As God’s voice thunders in his creation things begin to happen. The mighty voice of the LORD not only creates; it also causes things to “break” and “shake.”⁶² “The voice of the LORD is the active agent that produces every effect described in the proclamation; it is heard, seen, and felt. The psalm uses the notion as a medium of the person and power of the LORD.”⁶³ God’s word is sent to earth with a mission to accomplish. This mission is not impossible, for the word of God “runs swiftly” and does what it is meant to

⁵⁹Psalm 148:5; See also Psalm 33:6,9.

⁶⁰Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis, Revised Edition, The Old Testament Library*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972, page 52.

⁶¹Verses 3,4; Cf. vv. 5-9.

⁶²Cf. verses 5,8; The word “powerful” (jK) is the same Hebrew word used to describe the physical strength of Samson(Judges 16:15) or the procreative strength of humanity(Jacob’s word to his son Reuben; Cf. Genesis 49:3).

⁶³James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994, page 136.

do.⁶⁴

The idea of God's word being sent on a mission is also found in the book of Isaiah:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.⁶⁵

God's word will result in success. It will execute the plan of God. "God's *word* (the announcement of his plan and the appointment of Darius) is as sure of fulfillment as are *the rain and the snow that water the land* and make cultivation possible. . . . Glorious results will follow."⁶⁶ The rain and God's Word have "one thing in common: with both something is effected and achieves its purpose God's word is a word that does things. When God speaks, something comes about. . . . This view of the word . . . is the basic view of the Old and New Testament alike."⁶⁷

The effective power of the word of God is also evident in the number of metaphors ascribed to it. The true word of God, as the prophet Jeremiah describes it, is like grain, fire and a hammer: ". . . let the one who has my word

⁶⁴Cf. Psalm 147:15-18.

⁶⁵Isaiah 55:10-11.

⁶⁶John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 25*, Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987, page 247.

⁶⁷Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969, page 289.

speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?’ declares the LORD. ‘Is not my word like fire,’ declares the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces.’⁶⁸ Grain, unlike straw, nourishes. God’s word is intended to be consumed and provide sustenance for life: “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”⁶⁹ The word of God nourishes both young and old, new and seasoned believers: “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.”⁷⁰ The fire of God’s word tests and refines “the quality of each man’s work.”⁷¹ Like a hammer, God’s Word can break into pieces people hardened by sin and rebellion.⁷² “Yahweh’s word does refine, it burns away the straw, it shatters and removes the common rock while leaving the ore, it cuts and shapes the stone into a useful architectural unit.”⁷³

God’s word is also like a lamp: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light

⁶⁸Jeremiah 23:28-29.

⁶⁹Deuteronomy 8:3; cf. Matthew 4:4; Psalm 119:103; Isaiah 55:10.

⁷⁰1 Peter 2:2; cf. 1:23,25; Hebrews 5:11-14.

⁷¹See Jeremiah 6:29: “The bellows blow fiercely to burn away the lead with fire, but the refining goes on in vain; the wicked are not purged out.” Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:13; Malachi 3:1-4.

⁷²See Jeremiah 5:2-3: “O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth? You struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but they refused correction. They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent.” Cf. Jeremiah 6:28.

⁷³Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., Jeremiah 1-25, *Word Bible Commentary, Volume 26*, Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991, page 350.

for my path.”⁷⁴ “In this verse the Psalmist testifies that the Divine Law was his schoolmaster and guide in leading a holy life . . . unless the word of God enlighten men’s path, the whole of life is enveloped in darkness and obscurity, so that they cannot do anything else than miserably wander from the right way.”⁷⁵ The incarnate Word of God is the “light of men. The light shines in darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”⁷⁶ Just as the pillar of fire guided the people of Israel from the place of bondage and death to the place of freedom and life, so too the Word of God lights the way for all.⁷⁷

God’s word is like a sword: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered”⁷⁸ The apostle Paul also calls the word of God the “sword of the Spirit.”⁷⁹ “As the instrument of God’s mighty acts [God’s word] is more powerful and

⁷⁴Psalm 119:105; Cf. Proverbs 20:27.

⁷⁵John Calvin, *Psalms 93-105, Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume VI*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979, page 479

⁷⁶John 1:4,5; cf. v. 9; 8:12; 1 John 1:5.

⁷⁷See Exodus 13:21; Nehemiah 9:12.

⁷⁸Hebrews 4:12-13.

⁷⁹Ephesians 6:17.

penetrating than the keenest instrument devised by man.”⁸⁰ The author of Hebrews portrays the word of God as a living power able to penetrate the dark, deep recesses of a person’s life. “The word is ‘active’ in the sense that it speeds to fulfil the purpose for which it has been uttered.”⁸¹ “Nothing could be more inaccessible and intangible, humanly speaking, than the notions and motives concealed in the furthest depths of man’s mind. No scalpel can dissect them, no electronic detector can discover them. Only God’s word can pierce through to this intangible realm, and it does so in a manner that is both dynamic and critical.”⁸² The word of God in some sense has the omniscient character of God. Nothing in all of creation is hidden from God; the word of God uncovers everything. “Exposure to the word of Scripture entails exposure to God himself.”⁸³

God’s word is like a seed. The apostle Peter writes: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and

⁸⁰Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977, page 164.

⁸¹F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, The New International Commentary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964, page 80; cf. Isaiah 55:11; Jeremiah 23:29; See also Dale Shepardson: “The Word of God is ‘no dead letter of the past,’ but a living thing, energetic, and powerful” (*Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1903, page 197).

⁸²Hughes, page 166.

⁸³William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 47a*, Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991, page 103.

enduring word of God.”⁸⁴ This metaphor of the seed is best illustrated in the Parable of the Sower.⁸⁵ According to this parable that Jesus taught, a farmer goes out to sow his seed. Some seed fell along the path where it is trampled and eaten by the birds of the air. Some fell on rock, but because of shallow roots and lack of moisture, the tender sprouts withered and died. Some fell among the thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil and yielded a bountiful harvest.

This parable is explained by Jesus as follows:

The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among the thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.⁸⁶

It is interesting to note from Jesus’ explanation why not all the seed sown produced a plentiful crop. In this story the same sower sows the seed and he uses the same seed. The difference in the harvest results from the kind of reception the word of God received from the listener. The word of God is of little benefit to those who only hear the word and do not allow it to take root in their

⁸⁴1 Peter 1:23; Cf. James 1:18; Luke 8:11.

⁸⁵Luke 8:4-15; Matthew 13:2-23; Mark 4:1-20.

⁸⁶Luke 8:11-15.

heart. What was sown is quickly lost. The word of God also has little effect on those whose thoughts and lives are drained by “life’s worries, riches and pleasures.” “Though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.”⁸⁷ Only those who hear the word, and follow up with retention and persevering, produce a hundred fold return. Only those who had ears to hear, who wanted to listen to what God had to say, actually produced fruit. The word of God was powerfully effective in the lives of the disciples because they truly wanted to appropriate the message Jesus taught. They were given the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God.⁸⁸

The parable of the sower qualifies the effective power of the word of God. While the word of God has the power to effectively accomplish the purpose which God intended for it, the listener’s response will affect the outcome. The word has power to change but it requires people to respond to it by retaining it and conforming to it. The word of God as a sword is a living power penetrating to the hidden depths of human hearts. But as John Calvin comments: “The word of God is not equally efficacious in all. . . . [the reprobate] either carelessly disregard God speaking to them, thus mock him, or clamour against his truth and obstinately resist it. In short, as the word of God is a hammer, so they have heart like an anvil, so that its hardness repels its strokes, however powerful they may be. The word of God, then, is far from being so efficacious towards them as

⁸⁷Luke 8:10; Cf. Isaiah 6:9.

⁸⁸See Luke 8:8-10

to penetrate into them to *the dividing of the soul and spirit*.⁸⁹ The word of God might have the power of fire able to refine, but as the prophet Jeremiah realized, “The bellows blow fiercely to burn away the lead with fire, but the refining goes on in vain; the wicked are not purged out.”⁹⁰ The word of God might have the strength of a hammer able to crush, but as Jeremiah laments: “O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth? You struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but they refused correction. They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent.”⁹¹

Throughout the Bible we discover that unless the word of God falls on receptive ears and hearts, it will not bear fruit. The prophet Zechariah describes the preexilic Israelite community as people who “refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets.”⁹² In Matthew’s rendition of the Parable of the Sower the unfruitful results of the seed of God’s word sown is because “the people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.”⁹³ Paul tells the

⁸⁹ *Hebrews*, pages 100-101.

⁹⁰ Jeremiah 6:29; Cf. vv. 27-30; 5:23.

⁹¹ Jeremiah 5:2-3.

⁹² Zechariah 7:11-12; Cf. Psalm 58:4; Isaiah 6:10; 29:9; 42:18; 43:8.

⁹³ Matthew 13:15; Cf. Isaiah 6:9,10.

Ephesian church that the reason why unbelievers are “darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God” is “because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.”⁹⁴ It is no wonder then that the call of Scripture is: “Do not harden your hearts!”⁹⁵ Hardened hearts hinder the effective power of God’s word to bring about results. The blessedness that results from the hearing of God’s word requires open ears and receptive hearts: “Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.”⁹⁶ That is why Jesus continually encouraged his listeners to receive his message as little children. Many people, including prophets and kings, had hoped to see and hear what Jesus’ disciples saw and heard from him, but did not. Jesus’ message was hidden from the wise and learned, but those of his listeners who became like little children, possessing total dependence, trusting receptivity, and complete sincerity, they not only heard the message but also entered the blessedness of the kingdom of God.⁹⁷

The importance of open ears and receptive hearts was punctuated by the LORD to Joshua just prior to the conquest of the promised land:

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may

⁹⁴Ephesians 4:8.

⁹⁵Psalms 95:8; Cf. Hebrews 3:8,15; 4:7.

⁹⁶Proverbs 28:14; See also Exodus 7:13, 8:15; 1 Samuel 6:6; Daniel 5:20; Matthew 19:8; Mark 6:52; 8:17; Romans 11:7.

⁹⁷Luke 10:21; Cf. 18:16-17; Matthew 18:3; 19:14; Mark 10:15; 1 Peter 2:2.

be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.⁹⁸

The success and prosperity of the people of Israel depended on how they received and responded to the word of God. “Daily meditation on the Book, and a strict observance of its gracious provisions for a life in covenant fellowship with the Lord, will mean a happy achievement of life’s goal and prosperity.”⁹⁹ The successful life “means that someone seeks God and lets himself and his thought be guided by God.”¹⁰⁰

God’s instruction to Joshua is echoed in the opening Psalm of the Psalter:

⁹⁸Joshua 1:7-8.

⁹⁹Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981, page 63; quoting J. Pederson Woudstra notes that prosperity(Hebrew: jlx) refers to “the power, the ability to live . . . It designates the efficiency as an inner power to work in accordance with its nature, and at the same time success, prosperity and the carrying out of that for which one is disposed”(Ibid.).

¹⁰⁰Ibid., footnote 44; Jesus said: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”(Matthew 7:7). “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”(11:28). James put it like this: “Come near to God and he will come near to you”(4:8). Oswald Chambers, writing on this passage, says: “Refusing to act leaves a person paralyzed, exactly where he was previously. But once he acts, he is never the same. When a truth of God is brought home to your soul, never allow it to pass without acting on it internally in your will, not necessarily externally in your physical life. Record it with ink and with blood—work it into your life. The weakest saint who transacts business with Jesus Christ is liberated the second he acts and God’s almighty power is available on his behalf”(My Utmost for His Highest, Westwood, New Jersey: Barbour and Company, 1963, page 229).

Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither.
Whatever he does prospers.
Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.¹⁰¹

This opening beatitude of the Psalter contrasts the life of the righteous and the wicked. The righteous read and absorb the word of God and as a result bear fruit and experience prosperity.¹⁰² This theme will be repeated throughout the Psalter.¹⁰³ There is a danger, however, to take this beatitude to mean that the believer cannot fail to be successful simply by delighting and meditating on the word of God. Success does not automatically always follow from hearing and doing what God says. “The true meaning and value of life is to be found not in success as such but in that joyous and unshakable trust in God which cannot

¹⁰¹Psalm 1.

¹⁰²The word “prospers” is the same Hebrew word(jlx) as found in Joshua 1:8.

¹⁰³Psalm 52:8; 92:12; 128:3; see also 94:12; 112:1; 119:1-2; 128:1.

be broken, and the only way which leads to that goal is precisely the obedience rendered by faith.”¹⁰⁴ The life of blessing is not reserved for those who simply hear the word of God; “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”¹⁰⁵ Hearing and knowing the word of God is of little benefit unless it is followed by action: “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”¹⁰⁶

The benefits from discovering and responding to the word of God are many. The primary evidence of the effective power of God’s Word is salvation: “Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”¹⁰⁷ The gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”¹⁰⁸ Salvation comes through faith in Christ Jesus. Scripture is “able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰⁹ It is through the “pure spiritual milk” of God’s word that people grow up in their salvation.¹¹⁰

Salvation is not the only result from listening and responding to the word

¹⁰⁴Artur Wieser, *The Psalms, The Old Testament Library*, translated by Hebert Hartwell, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962, page 106; See also Marten Woudstra: “The OT, more than the NT, places a direct connection between law observance and prosperity. But the book of Job and Psalm 73 show that this must not be seen as an automatic connection” (*Joshua*, page 63).

¹⁰⁵Luke 11:28; See also Proverbs 8:32; Luke 6:47; 8:21; John 14:21.

¹⁰⁶James 1:17; Cf. verses 14-26.

¹⁰⁷James 1:21.

¹⁰⁸Romans 1:16; Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-21.

¹⁰⁹2 Timothy 3:15.

¹¹⁰1 Peter 2:2.

of God. Yes, holy Scriptures make one wise for salvation, but as Paul writes to Timothy: “All Scripture is . . . useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”¹¹¹ The four prepositional phrases (teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness)¹¹² “may form two groups, the first dealing with doctrine (“orthodoxy”) and the second with behavior (“orthopraxy”). They are also chiasmic in structure: (a) Scripture instructs positively in doctrine and (b) convicts heresy; likewise Scripture (b’) corrects improper behavior and (a’) educates positively in righteous behavior.”¹¹³ The word of God is useful to teach people what the godly pathway of life is all about, how they have strayed away from the truth, how they can get back on the right track again, and how they can remain on the path that leads to life abundant and eternal. The word of God is the light that will guide people in the path of righteousness.¹¹⁴ God’s word is not only beneficial for justification, coming to faith in Jesus Christ, but also for sanctification, becoming like Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself prayed, “Sanctify [my followers] by the truth; your word is truth. . . . For them I sanctify myself, that

¹¹¹2 Timothy 3:16.

¹¹²**Greek:** ὁ λόγος τοῦ βιβλίου, ὁ λόγος τοῦ διδασκαλίου, ὁ λόγος τοῦ ἐλέγχου καὶ τῆς παιδείας ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ.
 ὁ λόγος τοῦ βιβλίου
 ὁ λόγος τοῦ διδασκαλίου.

¹¹³Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, page 570; Cf. Hebrews 4:12-13 where the word of God is described as judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

¹¹⁴Cf. Psalm 119:105-106.

they too may be truly sanctified.”¹¹⁵

We see the sanctifying power of the word of God in the days of post-exilic Israel. When Ezra came to Jerusalem he “devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.”¹¹⁶ When the people realized that their sinful practice of intermarriage, they “trembled at the words of God.” Ezra and the people not only confessed their sins to God, but over a period of three months put an end to all these pagan marriages.¹¹⁷ In these days of Ezra the people not only discovered the word of God, but also were shown how they had strayed away, how they could remedy their sinful condition, and how to remain faithful to their covenant God. The post-exilic community was sanctified by the truth of God’s word.

Besides salvation and sanctification, hearing and responding to God’s word results in the believer bearing fruit. Jesus told his disciples that the internalizing of the word of God results not only in the sanctified life; believers will also bear abundant fruit. Jesus said:

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. . . . If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. . . . You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed

¹¹⁵John 17:17,19.

¹¹⁶Ezra 7:10.

¹¹⁷9:4; Cf. chapters 9-10.

you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.¹¹⁸

In this context Jesus uses the image of the vine and the branches.¹¹⁹ The gardener prunes the vine to make it more fruitful.

Jesus reminds his followers that this pruning is done by the word of God. A gardener prunes a vine in order to get rid of old dead branches and force new fruit-bearing growth. This is the effect God's word has on the life of the believer.¹²⁰ Yet pruning alone does not produce fruit. The branch needs to remain in the vine. So too believers must remain in Christ. To remain in Christ is to remain in his word(s). "Jesus and his revelation are virtually interchangeable, for he is incarnate revelation (the Word)."¹²¹ A branch on a vine needs to remain in the vine in order for the sap to flow. So too believers need to remain in Christ for his word to flow into their lives. The net result is Christ enabling the believer to bear abundant fruit.

The image of believers bearing fruit is a common theme in the Bible.¹²² Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard"(5:1-7) pictures God as a farmer who planted an vineyard on a fertile hill, the "garden of his delight." But the vines did not

¹¹⁸John 15:3-4,7-8,16; The word "clean" is the Greek word *καθαρός* which means "pure, clean, innocent".

¹¹⁹See John 15:1-17.

¹²⁰Cf. NIV text note: "The Greek for *prunes* also means *cleans*."

¹²¹Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970, page 662.

¹²²Cf. Psalm 80:8-9; Isaiah 5:1-7; 27:2; Jeremiah 2:21.

produce “good grapes,” only “bad fruit.” In contrast, believers who remain in Christ and in his word, will bear good fruit. The same Spirit who breathed God’s word into the Biblical authors would guide Jesus’ followers in the truth of everything he taught.¹²³ As a believer remains in Christ and his word, Christ and his Spirit would remain in the believer. The believer would be tapped into the source of abundant life, the indwelling Holy Spirit.¹²⁴ Such believers do not follow the desires of the sinful nature, but “live by the Spirit,” are “led by the Spirit,” and “keep in step with the Spirit.”¹²⁵ The result is bearing good fruit, the “fruit of righteousness.” The Holy Spirit produces Christian virtues in the life of the believer: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”¹²⁶

This Spirit-producing “fruit” does not only refer to the “fruit of righteousness”; it also represents unbelievers coming to the faith. Paul writes to the Colossians that “all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing.”¹²⁷ The effective power of the word of God resulted in gathering many to Christ. The church grew in number. Christ Jesus said: “I . . . appointed you to go and

¹²³John 14:26.

¹²⁴Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as “streams of living water”(7:38,39).

¹²⁵Galatians 5:16, 18, 25.

¹²⁶Galatians 5:22,23; See also Psalm 1:1-3; Matthew 3:8; 7:16-20; 21:33-43(and parallels); Romans 7:4-5; Ephesians 5:9, Philippians 1:11; Colossians 1:10; James 3:6; Jude 1:12; For other lists of Christian virtues see 2 Corinthians 6:6; Ephesians 4:2; 5:9; Colossians 3:12-15.

¹²⁷Colossians 1:6.

bear fruit — fruit that will last.”¹²⁸ The apostle Paul speaks about himself being “appointed” to be a herald and apostle of the gospel of Jesus.¹²⁹ Jesus commissioned his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”¹³⁰ The word proclaimed and responded to results in much “fruit” for the Kingdom as unbelievers come to faith and repentance.

The apostle John also mentions that this bearing fruit is coupled with answered prayer: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. . . . Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”¹³¹ Answered prayer results from abiding in Christ and bearing fruit. “We usually desire a strong prayer life in order that we may be fruitful, but here it is the other way around. Jesus enables us to bear fruit, and then the Father will hear our prayers.”¹³² And as Leon Morris points out: “When the believer abides in Christ and Christ’s words abide in him then he lives as close to Christ as well may be. Then his prayers will be prayers that are

¹²⁸John 15:16.

¹²⁹2 Timothy 1:11; Cf. 1 Timothy 2:7; Paul uses the same Greek word as appears in John 15:16 (ὁβέçìé).

¹³⁰Matthew 28:19-20.

¹³¹John 15:7-8,16.

¹³²*The NIV Study Bible*, page 1627.

in accord with God's will and they will be fully answered."¹³³

God has spoken in the past. In these last days he has spoken to us through the Word incarnate, His Son Jesus Christ. The Triune God continues to speak through the pages of Scriptures. This Word is powerfully effective. As people listen to and respond to it, the Word results in changed lives. People come to believe and receive salvation. People discover life abundant and eternal. People are ever more being shaped into the image of God and His Son Jesus Christ. People bear the good fruit of righteousness. The Word continues to bear the fruit of new believers who come to faith and receive salvation. In addition, believers' prayers are answered.

The Word of God is powerfully effective. It brings results. But can this also be said about *preaching*? What is the relationship between the revealed Word of God and preaching the Word of God? When a minister expounds Scripture, is God speaking? Can we say, as Berkhouwer says about Scriptures, that the connection between God's speaking in the Bible and the human word in preaching is very close and real? Can we describe this relationship without exaggeration as *identity*? To this and related questions we now turn our attention.

¹³³*The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, F.F. Bruce, general editor, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971

The Word of God Preached

What are you doing, young man, with the word of God upon *your* lips? Upon what grounds do you assume the role of mediator between heaven and earth? Who has authorized you to take your place there and to generate religious feeling? And, to crown all, to do so with results, with success? Did one ever hear of such overweening presumption, . . . such brazenness! . . . Who dares, who can preach, knowing what preaching is?¹

Reflecting on this challenge of Karl Barth, J. Daniel Baumann writes:

It reminds us of the audacity and unmitigated gall that allows a man to think he has a right to speak the Word of truth. To think that a man will stand and declare that he is a herald of God or a servant of Christ does seem highly presumptuous. Some may even be tempted to ask if anyone has the right to consider himself a preacher. Who is really equal to the task?²

This challenge of Barth and the comment by Baumann suggest that preaching is

¹Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, translated by Douglas Horton, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957, page 126.

²*An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990, page 33.

much more than simply a human being standing up and offering an informative lecture or an interesting speech. What is preaching, and what, if any, is the effective power in preaching?

The Nature and Authority of Preaching

Karl Barth attempts to answer the question of the relationship between the Word of God and the human word by offering his own twofold definition of preaching:

1. Preaching is the Word of God which he himself speaks, claiming for the purpose the exposition of a biblical text in free human words that are relevant to contemporaries by those who are called to do this in the church that is obedient to its commission.
2. Preaching is the attempt enjoined upon the church to serve God's own Word, through one who is called thereto, by expounding a biblical text in human words and making it relevant to contemporaries in intimation of what they have to hear from God himself.³

Barth's definitions seek to look at preaching from both referents – from God's point of view and from a human standpoint. The first is from the top down and the second from the bottom up. The first definition suggests that preaching is in fact the Word of God; the second definition suggests that human words eventually become the Word of God.⁴ Barth contends that a synthesis of the

³Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Daniel E. Daniels, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991, page 44.

⁴This is also Karl Barth's view of Scripture. To the question, "Is the Bible the Word of God?" Barth comments: "A more precise statement of the truth would be to say that the Bible *becomes* God's Word, and when it becomes this for us, then it is so" (*The Preaching of the Gospel*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963, page 46).

two definitions is not possible: “Two things call for emphasis. First, God is the one who works, and second, we humans must try to point to what is said in scripture.”⁵ Is Barth correct in positing that a synthesis of these two definitions is impossible? Is preaching the Word of God or does it become the Word of God? Further, what does our definition of preaching imply as to the efficacy of the preaching of the Word of God?

Preaching and sermon delivery are not Christian inventions. Preaching finds its genesis in the Old Testament prophetic office.⁶ In the covenant renewal ceremony recorded in Deuteronomy 29 Moses reminds Israel about the importance of God’s revelation: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”⁷ Unless God would reveal things about himself and his dealings with the world, humanity would remain ignorant. God has not revealed everything; some things remain a secret to God. But God has revealed a lot, and through this revelation we come to know God and about God.

⁵*Homiletics*, page 45; See also Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, Exeter, Great Britain: The Paternoster Press, 1983; Referring to Barth’s understanding of relationship between the Word of God and preaching, Runia writes: “. . . we may not speak of direct identity with the Word of God, but only of an *indirect identity*. Both Scripture and preaching, by themselves, are no more than fallible human witnesses to the Word of God in Jesus Christ. Yet, *where and when it pleases God*, they may *become* the Word of God and at that very moment they *are* the Word of God for the reader and listener”(page 35).

⁶Cf. Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*: “. . . preaching . . . has its roots in the *Old Testament*. It may safely be said that the religion of Israel was a *prophetic religion*, or, if you wish, a *religion of the word*(page 22).

⁷Deuteronomy 29:29.

The prophets were given the special task of being spokes-persons for God. God would provide prophets from among the people of Israel. They would become the voice of God: “The LORD said . . . : ‘I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him. . . . But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.’”⁸ Clearly the true prophet is one who speaks the word which God has given. God would speak and the prophet would be the means by which God’s voice would be heard. For example, Balaam could not just say anything: “I must speak only what God puts in my mouth.”⁹

This is also what the LORD God had said to Moses when he complained about his lack of ability as a speaker. His brother Aaron would become Moses’ prophet. He would speak the words Moses would give him: “I will help you speak and will teach you what to say. . . . You shall speak to [Aaron] and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.”¹⁰ Moses would become God’s mouth to Aaron; Aaron

⁸Deuteronomy 18:17-20; The prophet is designated with the word *nabhi*(ayb!n) meaning “spokesman, speaker, prophet” (see Brown, Driver and Briggs: *A Hebrew And English Lexicon Of the Old Testament*, 1980, page 611).

⁹Numbers 22:38; cf. 24:12f.

¹⁰Exodus 4:12, 15-16; cf. 7:1.

would become Moses' mouth to the people. The people would hear the voice of God when the prophets would speak. "For God to speak with His mouth and to speak through His prophets is the same thing. . . . to consult the mouth of God is equivalent to consulting the prophets of God."¹¹

The words of the prophets were the words of God. "The wondrous message which came forth from the lips of the prophets was not of human origination. It came from God. The prophets were, as they claimed to be, men upon whom the power of God did come and who received the very words which He revealed unto them and then when forth in boldness to proclaim, Thus saith the Lord."¹² This is the staggering claim of the prophets: their words were the

¹¹Edward J. Young, *My Servants The Prophets*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952, page 59; See also Ronald E. Osborn, *Folly of God, The Rise of Christian Preaching, A History of Christian Preaching – Volume 1*, St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999: "Prophecy had begun with theophanies and visions; the prophet 'saw' or 'heard' a manifestation of Yahweh, imparting a command or oracle to be delivered to a ruler or to a people. The narrators depicted Moses . . . as a prophet, proclaiming to Pharaoh and the Hebrew captives Yahweh's word of deliverance from slavery and declaring the law received directly from God. In the ninth century Elijah and Elisha championed the cause of Israel's God against the deities of the surrounding polytheistic nations, and in the face of impending national crisis the eighth-century prophets(Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah) spoke the divine word of judgement and hope" (page 90).

¹²Young, *My Servants the Prophets*, page 190; see also pages 171-175 where Young lists the many references in the book of Isaiah where "the prophet labored under the conviction that the words which he was uttering were actually indicted of God"(page 175); Cf. 2 Peter 1:20f; Cf. Numbers 16:28 where Moses makes the claim that his pronouncement of judgement on Korah, Dathan, and Abiram "was not my idea" (literally, "not out of my own mind"); Cf. also Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets, Volume II*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962: "That the prophets themselves were convinced of the divine origin of their pronouncements is beyond dispute"(page 209).

words of God.

Ronald Osborn, in his history of Christian preaching, *Folly of God*, makes this appraisal of the prophetic ministry: “In the preaching of Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and other prophets the *sermon* had arrived – a public address applying to a contemporary situation the preacher’s reflection on a divine word or on a sacred tradition. . . . Then prophecy ceased. . . . Yet the living word of Yahweh continued to be spoken.”¹³ The prophets, even as they reflected on a divine word or tradition applying it to a contemporary situation, were being God’s mouthpiece and spoke with the authority of “Thus saith the Lord.”

A good example of the *sermon* having arrived is the ministry of Ezra the priest among the post-exilic Israelites. Ezra takes the *Book of the Law of Moses* and reads it aloud from a “pulpit”¹⁴ he had built for the occasion. The people stood for five or six hours listening to Ezra read and expound Scriptures. The Word of God was not only read; it was explained: “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”¹⁵ Ezra publically addressed the people taking a divine word and applying it to a contemporary situation. A direct result of Ezra’s preaching is the people’s confession of sin and the termination of

¹³Page 90.

¹⁴The Hebrew word is *gōm* meaning “tower . . . elevated stage, pulpit of wood” (Brown, Driver and Briggs: *A Hebrew And English Lexicon Of the Old Testament*, pages 153f).

¹⁵Nehemiah 8:8; see 8:1-18.

intermarriage with the heathen nations around them.¹⁶ By the time we reach the New Testament era, “in the first century B.C.E., when the Romans took over Palestine, Judaism was heir to a long and vigorous tradition of exegesis, commentary, and preaching.”¹⁷

It shouldn't surprise, then, that when John the Baptist and Jesus came on the New Testament scene, according to Mark's gospel, they came preaching: “So John came . . . preaching. . . . After John . . . Jesus came . . . preaching the good news of God.”¹⁸ Mark portrays Jesus' understanding of his mission on earth as that of preaching: “Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”¹⁹ As Richard Lischer comments: “When the Word of God broke into the silence of the world, it came as a word of preaching. . . . Jesus wrote nothing — except a few words in the dust. He was a voice, not a penman; a herald, not a scribe; whose key signature to all he taught and proclaimed was, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’”²⁰

¹⁶See Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 9:32-27; 13:1-3.

¹⁷Osborn, *Folly of God*, page 107.

¹⁸Mark 1:4,14 (my translation); Mark uses the normal Greek word for “preaching,” *kerusso* (ἐκϋέροο).

¹⁹1:38; Cf. Paul J. Achtemeier, *Proclamation Commentaries, The New Testament Witness for Preaching*, Edited by Gerhard Krodel, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1975: “Jesus' total itinerant mission is to be understood as his ‘preaching’”(page 53; cf. pages 51-59); see also Luke 4:18, 43 although Luke uses the word ἀγγέλλειν meaning “bring the good news or preach the good news.”

²⁰*A Theology of Preaching, The Dynamics of the Gospel*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1981, page 70.

Jesus' preaching ministry followed in line with the Old Testament prophets. He did not speak on his own accord; he spoke as the mouthpiece of God. The eternal Word of God became flesh and made his dwelling in the midst of humanity. While God's revelation came initially through Moses and the other prophets, "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."²¹ Jesus preached, and through his preaching he revealed the truth of God. This was not his word, but God's Word: "I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. . . . So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say."²² As Aaron was Moses' prophet, Jesus was the Father's prophet.²³ When people heard Jesus preach, they heard the voice of God: "These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me."²⁴ As Jesus came preaching he revealed the secrets of the kingdom of God to those who heard the message.²⁵

The word that Jesus preached was powerfully effective. These words

²¹John 1:17-18.

²²12:49,50.

²³Jesus took the words that the prophet Isaiah first used as a self-reference and applied them to his own ministry of preaching: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"(Luke 4:21; cf. vv. 18-19; Isaiah 61:1,2.

²⁴John 14:24; cf. 8:28; 14:7; 14:9: "The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather it is the Father, living in me, who is doing the work."; 15:15; 16:15,25.

²⁵see Luke 10:21-22; Matthew 11:25-27; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Matthew 18:3-4; Deuteronomy 29:29.

were not just wishful thoughts or idle jargon, but life giving words: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”²⁶ In Luke 4:18ff Jesus announced that the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2 was fulfilled in his life and ministry. Jesus proclaimed the year of the Lord, the coming of the Messianic age. Commenting on this passage, Gerhard Friedrich writes:

When heralds proclaimed the year of jubilee throughout the land with the sound of the trumpet, the year began, the prison doors were opened and debts were remitted. The preaching of Jesus is such a blast of the trumpet. Its result is that the Word proclaimed becomes a reality. For the divine Word is a creative force. It gives what it declares.²⁷

Jesus’ preaching would produce life: “I know that [the Father’s] command leads to eternal life.”²⁸ Further, often when Jesus preached signs and wonders followed. These happened so frequently that Jesus could no longer freely move about preaching in their towns. People often had to come to him.²⁹ “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of

²⁶John 5:24; cf. 20:30-31.

²⁷Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Volume III, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965, pages 706-707.

²⁸12:50; Cf. Deuteronomy 32:46,47: “Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you — they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.”

²⁹See Mark 1:39, 45.

the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”³⁰

These signs and wonders were evidence that Jesus was a true prophet.³¹

Jesus also describes “preaching” as the mission of his followers: “The gospel must first be preached to all nations.”³² When Jesus sent out his twelve disciples, “they went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”³³

Jesus also sent out seventy-two others with the message: “The kingdom of God is near you.” Those who would reject the message of these “preachers” would be rejecting the message of Christ. The seventy-two return with joy because demonic forces were driven out as a result of their ministry.³⁴

Jesus’ final commission to the church is: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”³⁵ The ongoing mission of the church is preaching the good news of salvation. The assumption is that the preaching of the good news will bring results. People will come to the faith. These signs will accompany the believers’ witness to Christ: they will speak in new tongues, drive

³⁰Matthew 4:23; Cf. Luke 4:14-44.

³¹John 6:14.

³²Mark 13:10; Cf. 14:9

³³6:12,13; See also Luke 9:6: “They set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.”; Cf. Matthew 10:9-15; Luke 9:1-6.

³⁴Luke 10:9,16,17-20; Cf. vv. 1-24.

³⁵Mark 16:15; Cf. John 14:26-27; Matthew 28:18-20.

out demons, heal the sick, and experience protection from evil. Foremost of all, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.”³⁶

This is exactly what happened: “The disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”³⁷ The Christians took up their office, the priesthood of all believers, and became the mouthpiece of God.³⁸ Like the Old Testament prophets they were “carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Filled with the “Spirit of truth” they were reminded of everything that Jesus said to them.³⁹ As the Father revealed his Word through Christ, now Christ would reveal his Word through the Church. As they preached the good news of Christ, they proclaimed the Word of God. “In Acts we . . . see how immediately after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost the new Christian church becomes a preaching church. . . . The entire early church was a preaching church. . . . It is no exaggeration if one says of the whole Christian movement: ‘In the beginning was the Sermon.’”⁴⁰

³⁶16:16; Cf. vv. 15-18.

³⁷Verse 20.

³⁸Peter refers to God’s elect as “a holy priesthood” and “a royal priesthood.” See 1 Peter 2:4-12. The Heidelberg Catechism talks about sharing in the anointing of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. Believers “are anointed to confess his name, to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks, to strive with a good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for all eternity”(Lord’s Day 12). Cf. Revelation 1:5,6.

³⁹Cf. John 14:26; 15:26,27; 2 Peter 1:21.

⁴⁰Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, page 21.

The early apostles saw a close identity between the message they preached and God's Word. A key instance is when the apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "We thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, *the word of God*, which is at work in you who believe."⁴¹ Reflecting on this passage Berkhouwer suggests that "we may perhaps speak of an identification" between the written Word and the Word preached. "The Thessalonians recognized and accepted the real nature of the message brought to them, and Paul's gratitude in turn shows that this was the very intent of *his* word. This reference to the recognition of *God's* Word in human preaching is of primary and ultimate importance for the reflection on all preaching."⁴²

Klaas Runia underscores the importance of this passage by submitting:

It could not be more emphatically stated that the apostolic preaching is not of man's devising, but has its origin in God and, therefore, is in very truth God's own Word. It is not partly human and partly divine, whereby it is left to the Thessalonians to determine which parts are human and which divine (the liberal view); not is it a human word that, where and when it pleases God, may *become* the Word of God (the Barthian view). No, its real essence is that God himself speaks in and through the words of his servants.⁴³

⁴¹ 1 Thessalonians 2:13, emphasis mine.

⁴² *Holy Scripture*, page 335; See also Haddon W. Robinson's comments: "Preaching in Paul's mind did not consist of someone discussing religion. Instead, God Himself spoke *through* the personality and message of the preacher to confront men and women and bring them to Himself" (emphasis mine; *Biblical Preaching, The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, Second Edition*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001, pages 19-20).

⁴³ *The Sermon Under Attack*, page 28.

Paul's words of gratitude to the Thessalonians is not the only instance where we see a close identification between God speaking and the human sermon. Paul tells the Corinthians, "this is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."⁴⁴ Paul writes to the Romans: "'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming."⁴⁵ Paul makes it clear that his ambition to "preach the gospel" was in fact proclaiming the "gospel of Christ."⁴⁶ Peter declares to the Christians in Asia Minor, "You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. . . . this is the word that was preached to you."⁴⁷ Luke notes that the apostles devoted themselves to preaching, to the ministry of the word of God. This "word of God continued to increase and spread" widely and grow in power.⁴⁸

These Biblical references suggest that we can describe without exaggeration the relationship between God's Word and the Word preached as one of *identity*. The oft quoted words of the Second Helvetic Confession are appropriate: "*Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*" or "The preaching of the

⁴⁴1 Corinthians 2:13.

⁴⁵Romans 10:8.

⁴⁶Cf. 15:17-20.

⁴⁷1 Peter 1:23,25.

⁴⁸Acts 12:24; Cf. 6:2,4,7; 19:20.

Word of God is the Word of God.”

This is how John Calvin understood the preaching of God’s Word: “The word *goeth out of the mouth* of God in such a manner that it likewise ‘goeth out of the mouth’ of men; for God does not speak openly from heaven, but employs men as his instruments, that by their agency he may make known his will.”⁴⁹

Reflecting on the description of the five-fold ministry in Ephesians 4:10-13, Calvin comments: “[God] also provides for our weakness in that he prefers to address us in human fashion through interpreters in order to draw us to himself rather than thunder at us and drive us away. . . . it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them.”⁵⁰ In another place Calvin posits: “the word of the gospel, whatever man may preach it, is the very sentence of God, published at the supreme judgment seat, written in the Book of Life, ratified, firm and fixed in heaven.”⁵¹ Calvin even goes so far as to say that “when the Gospel is preached, [Christ’s] sacred blood distils together with the voice,” that is, the voice of the preacher.⁵²

⁴⁹*Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, translated by William Pringle, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979, page 172.

⁵⁰*Institutes*, IV.1.5., page 1018; Cf. Calvin’s *Homilies on I Samuel xlii*, where the prophets and pastors of the Christian church are said to be ‘the very mouth of God’”(Ibid., footnote 11).

⁵¹Ibid., IV.11.1., page 1213.

⁵²Calvin makes this point as he comments on Hebrews 9:21; See *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, translated by John Owen, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1979, page 212.

This identification of the preaching of the Word of God with the Word of God is shared by many. Klaas Runia calls this “the deepest secret of all true preaching.” Summing up his theology of preaching, Runia writes:

. . . Christian preaching is more than just recounting the story *about* the Word of God spoken in Jesus Christ. In Christian preaching *this Word itself* comes to the listeners. Indeed, we must go even further and say that Christian preaching *is* the Word of God coming to men. As G. Friedrich says: ‘The Word proclaimed is a divine Word, and as such it is an effective force which creates what it proclaims. Hence preaching is no mere impartation of facts. It is an event. What is proclaimed takes place.’⁵³

Referring to several New Testament passages, Runia writes: “All these passages reveal the same basic idea: that of identification. The word preached by the apostles and the Word of God cannot be separated.”⁵⁴

R. Albert Mohler views preaching as “an inescapably theological act, for the preaching dares to speak of God and, in a very real sense, *for* God.”⁵⁵ He goes on to point out that “in preaching, finite, frail, and fault-ridden human beings bear bold witness to the infinite, all-powerful, and perfect Lord. Such an endeavor would smack of unmitigated arrogance and over-reaching were it not for the fact that God Himself has set us to the task. In this light, preaching is not

⁵³*The Sermon Under Attack*, page 26; cf. page 34; referring to the relevant words of the Helvetic Confession quoted above, Runia writes: “The copula ‘is’(est) clearly indicates identity”(Ibid., page 33); See also Berkhouwer, *Holy Scripture*, page 335.

⁵⁴Ibid., page 29; Cf. Hebrews 4:12; Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:18.

⁵⁵“A Theology of Preaching,” *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, edited by Michael Duduit, Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992, page 14.

an act of arrogance, but of humility.”⁵⁶ Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones states: “Any true definition of preaching must say that man is there to deliver the message of God, . . . he is standing there as *the mouthpiece of God* to address these people”⁵⁷ One might not dare to preach knowing that as a preacher one has been chosen to be God’s mouthpiece. It is no wonder then, as David Buttrick concludes, “year in, year out, preaching is terror and gladness.”⁵⁸

Preaching is a means of grace! The sacraments and prayer are not the only conduits through which God’s grace is funneled to people. The churches of the Reformation regard the Word of God, not only as a means of grace, but a means superior to the sacraments. Louis Berkhof writes: “It is . . . the most important means of grace. Strictly speaking, it is the Word *as it is preached* in the name of God and in virtue of a divine commission, that is considered as a means of grace in the technical sense of the word, alongside of the sacraments which are administered in the name of God.”⁵⁹ Through preaching, God is brought home to the listener: “. . . sermons do render God actual to listeners. I

⁵⁶Ibid., page 15.

⁵⁷*Preaching and Preachers*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1971, page 53(emphasis mine); Cf. Walter Burghardt, quoted by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, “The Calling of the Preacher,” *Best Advice for Preaching*, edited by John S. McClure, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998: “The prophet, the preacher, speaks God’s word to God’s people, and is, in a sense, God’s mouthpiece” (page 2).

⁵⁸*Homiletic, Moves and Structures*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, page 459.

⁵⁹*Systematic Theology*, page 610.

mean that in healthy preaching God's grace and power come home to people."⁶⁰ As Myron R. Chartier writes, "In Christian preaching, the preacher is the medium for the message of God's Word. It is through the preacher that the written Word becomes the living Word."⁶¹

In summary, again with the Helvetic Confession we say: "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." This might seem strange, if not odd, but as Buttrick notes, "Christ transfers preaching to us, and gives grace to our speaking, so that, odd as it might seem, our sermons are Word of God to human communities."⁶² In fact, this identification between the preaching of God's Word and God's Word is a mystery. "We speak as we live in the mysteries of grace. There is a kind of secret astonishment to preaching: We work hard, we study, we explore the Mystery of God-love and, then — with the naivete of a trusting child, or the desperation of broken people who have to speak of wholeness, or both —

⁶⁰Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Seeking God Through Preaching," *Reading and Hearing the Word, From Text to Sermon, Essays in Honor of John H. Stek*, edited by Arie C. Leder, Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 1998, page 222; Cf. David Buttrick: "Though we are quite aware of our humanness, nevertheless, by faith we preach as if we were means of grace, which we are!"(*Homiletic*, page 457).

⁶¹*Preaching as Communication, An Interpersonal Perspective*, Abingdon Preacher's Library, edited by William D. Thompson, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1981.

⁶²*Homiletic*, page 457; see also Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*: "To claim for our flatulent pronouncements the status 'Word of God' may be a bit much to swallow; to fail to make that claim, however, is to forget that, as long as our frailty represents frailty *before God*, it is never absolute, for he is able to make of it what he wills. It is impossible to divide sermons into Word of God and word of man . . . it is the Word of God we preach, as surely as Peter and Paul preached the Word of God"(page 78).

we cast ourselves on grace alone. What else? We have been *chosen* to speak God's own Word."⁶³

Having made this huge claim about the nature of preaching, a word of caution is in order. This real and close connection between the preaching of the Word of God and the Word of God might breed arrogance among preachers as they equate "their voices with the voice of God."⁶⁴ As Ronald J. Allen writes:

Ministers sometimes speak simplistically of the sermon as 'God's Word.' . . . However, I have reservations about the casual use of that phrase to describe the sermon. In sermons, pastors can pawn their own idiosyncrasies and idols as God. Pastors can even use the sermon to abuse. In short, there is no guarantee that every word of every sermon is altogether God's Word.⁶⁵

Worse yet, some preachers might fall into the trap of thinking they can "domesticate God."⁶⁶ "To say that preaching helps to make God real to us does not mean that it helps to make him obvious. Nor, certainly, does the preached God somehow become our possession to be shaped and used as we see fit. Any attempt to possess God or the Word of God in this way would be raw

⁶³Buttrick, *Homiletic*, page 459; Cf. Lowell O. Erdahl, *Preaching For the People*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1976: "I need preaching which proclaims three words, and each not just a word from the preacher but a Word from the Lord. These are God's *yes!* God's *no!* And God's *go!*" (page 21).

⁶⁴Ibid., page 456.

⁶⁵*Interpreting the Gospel, An Introduction to Preaching*, St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1998, page 13.

⁶⁶Plantinga: "'Bringing God home' to believers gives nobody a license to domesticate God"(page 223).

idolatry.”⁶⁷

These pitfalls among preachers are the reasons why Barth did not think it possible to forge a synthesis between his two definitions of preaching. Robert W. Duke asserts that we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Barth. He writes:

Barth attacked what he called religion, meaning the church’s tendency to be preoccupied with itself, to be self-righteous, to make an idol of itself. He believed that the first commandment had been broken and that God’s sovereignty and freedom had been severely circumscribed. In short, he feared that theology had become another expression of anthropology. He stood against the stream; he denied all human attempts to encompass God or to use God. . . . In the last analysis, it is he who directs us again and again to remember the unique possibility in preaching: that God will speak to us of life in Jesus Christ. It is God who takes the initiative.⁶⁸

Barth’s caution is well taken. Preachers cannot possess God nor his Word. God’s sovereignty remains inviolate. God is the one who takes the initiative with his Word. Even Klaas Runia, who speaks most emphatically of an identification between the preaching of the Word of God and the Word of God, adds:

Of course, we should bear in mind that such statements are not meant as definitions, based on a careful, empirical analysis of a great number of sermons. The Reformers never meant by such statements that every sermon is *de facto* the Word of God. Such statements are *confessions of faith!* They issue from the firm belief, based on Scripture itself, that wherever the gospel is faithfully preached, God himself is involved and present with his saving grace.⁶⁹

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Robert W. Duke, *The Sermon as God’s Word, Theologies for Preaching*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1980, page 27.

⁶⁹*The Sermon Under Attack*, page 33.

Having said all this, there is a synthesis possible between Barth's two definitions of preaching. This synthesis is based on the testimony of Scripture itself and the ministry of the early apostles. When a preacher stands up to faithfully proclaim the Word of God, he is the mouthpiece of God. God's Word in the preached Word is more than a possibility; it is a mysterious reality. Preaching *is* the Word of God which he himself speaks through human words in so far as a preacher faithfully expounds a biblical text making it relevant to a contemporary audience.⁷⁰ In the words of Leonara Tubbs Tisdale: "Preaching is born of a mysterious meeting between heaven and earth in which the divine and the human, the ordinary and the extra-ordinary become so intertwined as to be almost indistinguishable."⁷¹ Sidney Greidanus points out, "The sermon is the Word of God! This is not a careless use of pregnant words, but it emphasizes once again that God enters the horizontal plane of history and uses men to accomplish his goal."⁷² Or as John Calvin emphasized: "The task of preaching must therefore be undertaken, and the word of the preacher should be heard, in the expectancy that Christ the Mediator will come and give His presence where

⁷⁰Cf. Haddon W. Robinson's definition of expository preaching: "*Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers*"(emphasis mine; *Biblical Preaching*, page 21).

⁷¹"The Calling of the Preacher," pages 1-2.

⁷²*Sola Scriptura, Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts*, Toronto, Canada: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1970, page 155.

the Gospel is preached, and cause men to hear His voice through the voice of the minister.”⁷³

The Effective Power of Preaching

The identification of the preaching of the Word of God with the Word of God is further established by the effective power ascribed to preaching. The results attributed to hearing and applying the Word of God are similar to the hearing and applying the Word of God preached. When the Word of God is preached, “something happens.”⁷⁴ Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote: “My whole contention is that [preaching] works, that it pays, and that it is honoured, and must be, because it is God’s own method.”⁷⁵ Ronald J. Allen points out: “God’s word has the power to affect that which it speaks.”⁷⁶ John Calvin also has this high view of the importance of preaching, as Ronald S. Wallace writes: Calvin “regards the Word of God always mighty in power to effect what God promises or commands, even though that Word may be uttered through the frail human words of the preacher. God’s Word cannot be divorced from His action. . . . the Word effects what it declares.”⁷⁷

The apostle Paul writes about the effective power of preaching in the book

⁷³Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957, page 83.

⁷⁴Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, page 30.

⁷⁵*Preaching and Preachers*, page 51.

⁷⁶*Interpreting the Gospel*, page 14.

⁷⁷*Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, page 88.

of Romans: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”⁷⁸ The gospel (ἀσάσᾶῖῖῖ) is the good news, the message of Jesus Christ that Paul preached.⁷⁹ The word translated “power” is the Greek word ἀγίαίῖῖ from which we get the English word dynamite. Paul uses the same phrases in 1 Corinthians 1:17-18.⁸⁰ Paul “knows that this apparently weak and foolish message is really, in spite of all appearances, power, and not just one power over against others, but the supreme power, the almighty power of God Himself directed toward the salvation of men, God’s almighty saving power.”⁸¹ The word of God that Paul preached was not based on human wisdom (ὀίῖῖῖ), but the gospel, the message of the cross. Human wisdom would empty the cross of its power.⁸² There is a wisdom of the world and a godly wisdom. Paul “simply states that he has not preached the gospel with such wisdom as they desire, lest the cross of Christ should *be made void*.”⁸³ In essence Paul is saying, “God’s word will not return

⁷⁸Romans 1:16.

⁷⁹Romans 1:9,15; Cf. 10:8-17.

⁸⁰“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel (ἀσάσᾶῖῖῖ) — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power (ἀγίαίῖῖ) of God.”

⁸¹C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, Ltd., 1975, page 87.

⁸²Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:17-18.

⁸³F.W. Grosheide, *Commentary of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953, page

empty. It has effective power to accomplish the purpose for which God sent it. The message of the cross, is effective toward salvation! The gospel preached saves!”

The apostle Paul goes on in the book of Romans to point out that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”⁸⁴ A supernatural event takes place when people really listen to the word of God. “Paul was well aware of how critical that transaction was between speaker and hearer — when, mysteriously, not merely words are conveyed, but an understanding , a conviction, a life-changing commitment.”⁸⁵ Merrill R. Abbey writes: “Preaching is word-event which brings faith to birth . . . Faith is the Word becoming effective in us.”⁸⁶ As Paul also writes to the church in Ephesus: “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the

41.

⁸⁴Romans 10:17; “ἡ ἀκήρυξις τοῦ κηρύγματος” – “the word of Christ”; Paul uses the word “*rhema*” not “*logos*.” The reference here is not so much the word of God, i.e., Scriptures, but the “message of Christ,” the word preached; Cf. John 3:34; 14:10; Acts 11:14.

⁸⁵James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 38b*, Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1988, page 628; see also William R. Newell: “If you hear, with a willing heart, the good news, that Christ died for you; that He was buried; that He was raised from the dead: — by truly ‘hearing,’ faith will ‘come’ to you. You do not have to do a thing but hear! So there is God’s part – He gave, by the Spirit, the written Word. And Christ’s part, – He speaks, quickening the Word. And your part: ‘He that hath ears, hear.’”(*Romans, Verse By Verse*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1938, page 405).

⁸⁶*The Word Interprets Us*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1967, page 71.

promised Holy Spirit.”⁸⁷ All of this underscores the importance of preaching for the resultant faith in the hearers. “Preaching is as necessary for the Christian faith as breathing is for the life of man. Without the preaching of the gospel there is no faith.”⁸⁸

The life-changing saving effect of the Word preached is evident in the book of Acts as unbelievers hear God’s word, come to faith, and make a radical change in their lives. Jesus promised his disciples: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁸⁹ Filled with the dynamite power of God they would preach a dynamite message.⁹⁰ No wonder then that when Peter preached at Pentecost an evangelism explosion took place. The people were “cut to the heart” by the sword of the Spirit and about three thousand came to faith that day as they accepted the message.⁹¹ As people heard the teachings of God’s Word, “the Lord added to their number daily those who being saved.”⁹² This pattern is repeated throughout the book of Acts. The early apostles devoted themselves to the “ministry of the word of God.” As a

⁸⁷Ephesians 1:13.

⁸⁸Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, page 24.

⁸⁹Acts 1:8.

⁹⁰The word for “power” in Acts 1:8 is the Greek word δύνάμις from where we get the English word “dynamite.”

⁹¹2:41; Cf. vv. 14-41.

⁹²Acts 2:47.

result people came to faith and were added to the number of those saved.⁹³

The effective power of the preached Word was not due primarily to the great oratorical ability of the preachers themselves. Paul was an effective communicator.⁹⁴ Yet at times Paul did not use eloquence to communicate the good news of Christ, as he even admits to the Corinthians:

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power (ἀδύναμις καὶ φόβος).⁹⁵

Paul must not have impressed too many Corinthians with his speaking ability because the word got around that "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."⁹⁶ Paul did not depend on eloquence to persuade his listeners. He trusted the power of the Word itself. "When Paul preached a divine power gripped his hearers and constrained them to penitence and faith."⁹⁷ God can take the sermon delivered

⁹³Acts 6:1-7; See also 5:14; 8:12, 26-38; 9:31; 10:44-46; 11:14, 19-26; 13:48-49; 16:31-32; 28:28-31.

⁹⁴See Acts 14:1; Cf. Acts 13-14.

⁹⁵1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

⁹⁶2 Corinthians 10:10; Cf. verse 1.

⁹⁷C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, page 66; "Preaching that depended for its effectiveness on the logical and rhetorical power of the preacher could engender only a faith that rested upon the same supports, and such a faith would be at the mercy of any superior show of logic and oratory, and thus completely insecure"(Ibid.).

in weakness and make it explode with dynamic impact. “Because it is God who speaks, and the Holy Spirit who attends the Word, those who preach . . . do so with the assurance that the Word’s effective power is not diminished. . . . God not only imparts the truth, but he also touches the prophet’s mouth . . . to empower the delivery of the truth.”⁹⁸ Paul recognized that the priceless treasure of God’s Word is placed in common clay pots, in ordinary and often weak preachers like himself, “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God.”⁹⁹ The power of God’s Word is not hindered by the weakness of the preacher.

The effective power of the preached Word also was not even due to the correct motives of those who preached. Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi:

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.¹⁰⁰

In these verses Paul is not referring to heretical preachers who were preaching a false doctrine like those he warned Timothy about.¹⁰¹ These preachers were preaching the gospel. “Their message is true, even though their motives are not pure. The gospel has its objectivity and validity apart from those who proclaim it;

⁹⁸Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, page 71.

⁹⁹See 2 Corinthians 4:1-12.

¹⁰⁰Philippians 1:15-18.

¹⁰¹Cf. 1 Timothy 4:1,2: “The Spirit clearly says that in the later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences are seared as with a hot iron.”

the message is more than the medium.”¹⁰² The effective power of the preached Word was inherent in the Word preached, not the preacher.

Preaching works! Preachers are co-workers with God.¹⁰³ The word of God preached is not only received by the hearer but continues to work inside the believer.¹⁰⁴ Lischer writes: “The Word of God’s truth, which exposes and illumines a given situation, also has within it the power to transform that situation. This is the assurance we preachers must have, or long ago we would have accepted the conventional advice to give up on preaching Even when the Word seems only to rebounding and echoing off the sanctuary walls, we trust that the Word of God arrives at the Spirit’s destination at the Spirit’s appointed time.”¹⁰⁵ Or as Buttrick emphasizes:

Christian preaching . . . continues the work of Christ by calling, liberating, and forming a new humanity. The functions of preaching, then, continue the work of Christ who gathered a people to himself and, by death and resurrection, set them free for new life in the world. . . . words are not merely tokens of exchange but . . . they mediate reality, they bring reality into being. Christ, the mediator, brought to us God’s astonishing love, and created a community for God-love. Likewise, our preaching words continue Christ’s own work of revelation and redemption in the world.¹⁰⁶

The effective power of the spoken word is well attested to in the Bible, as

¹⁰²*The NIV Study Bible, New International Version*, edited by Kenneth Barker, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985, page 1804.

¹⁰³See 1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1.

¹⁰⁴See 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

¹⁰⁵*A Theology of Preaching*, page 81.

¹⁰⁶*Homiletic*, pages 451-52.

we discussed earlier.¹⁰⁷ The apostle James warns about the dangers of human words. He cautions Christians about presuming to be teachers.¹⁰⁸ Why? Teachers and preachers can easily lead people astray by that small part of the body called the tongue. A small bit in the mouth of a horse or a small rudder on a ship can easily change the entire direction the horse or ship will go. It all depends who holds the reins, who the pilot is. A small spark can set a entire forest on fire. The tongue in the mouth of a faithful preacher of God's Word can steer an entire community in the right direction; there would be a sense of warmth and security. The opposite is also true. The power of a preacher's words can lead a church on a path of destruction; the great gathering of God's people could be corrupted by the fires of hell. Our words can create or destroy life. Words are powerfully effective.

When we speak of the effective power of the Word preached, this power is not simply inherent in the words themselves. As writes Berkhouwer:

Clearly, this view of the power of God's Word . . . has nothing to do with a rhetorical and overpowering word magic that brings life under its spell through words. Isolated words are not the subject of discussion. Paul both knew and rejected the temptation to consider human words in themselves as filled with power, even though they might be words of human wisdom(1 Cor. 2:1,4). He reminds his readers emphatically that the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power(1 Cor. 4:20).¹⁰⁹

The effective power of the Word preached stems from the fact that the Word

¹⁰⁷See above, pages 31-33.

¹⁰⁸See James 3:1-12; The tongue is also spoken of as a sword; See Revelation 1:16; 2:16; Proverbs 12:18; Cf. Revelation 19:15,21.

¹⁰⁹*Holy Scripture*, page 331.

preached is the Word of God. “The efficacy is wholly due to him whose Word it is. . . . God is the real Speaker.”¹¹⁰ Thirty-seven times in the New Testament the Word is called “the Word of God.” Paul speaks about the “Word of Christ.”¹¹¹ The Word preached is referred to as the “gospel of God,” “gospel of Christ,” “gospel of the Lord Jesus.”¹¹² As Klaas Runia writes, “The secret lies in the genitive: it is the Word of *God*.”¹¹³ The Word preached has effective power because the dynamic power of its divine Author comes through human words. It is no wonder then that Paul qualifies the Word preached as “the power of God,” the *dunamis* of God. Preachers have nothing to be ashamed of.¹¹⁴

The dynamic power of the Word preached is emphasized in Lord’s Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism.¹¹⁵ In this Lord’s Day the Catechism confesses that

¹¹⁰Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, page 29; See also Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 24: “... the authority behind expository preaching resides not in the preacher but in the biblical text.”

¹¹¹See Romans 10:17; Colossians 3:16.

¹¹²See Acts 20:24; Romans 1:1,9; 15:16,19; 1 Corinthians 9:12; 2 Corinthians 2:12; 9:13; 10:14; 11:7; Galatians 1:7; Philippians 1:27; 1 Thessalonians 2:8,9; 3:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Timothy 1:11; 1 Peter 4:17.

¹¹³*The Sermon Under Attack*, page 29; “This is not a genitive of object (= it is a word *about* God), but of subject: God is the real Speaker”(Ibid.); cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1 where the NIV translates “ὁ ἰσχυρὸς μαρτυρῆς τοῦ θεοῦ” as an objective genitive(the testimony about God). One could also read this as a subjective genitive as does the RSV: “the testimony of God.”

¹¹⁴Romans 1:16.

¹¹⁵The Heidelberg Catechism was commissioned by Elector Frederick III and composed in Heidelberg by Zacharius Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus in 1563. It is the most widely used and most warmly praised catechism of the Reformation period.

the kingdom of heaven is opened and closed through the preaching of the gospel.¹¹⁶ In fact, “God’s judgement, both in this life and in the life to come, is based on this gospel testimony.”¹¹⁷ This confession is rooted in the words Jesus says to Peter in Matthew 16:19 , “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” The Reformers understood this binding and loosing happening through preaching. For example, John Calvin wrote:

When it is a question of the keys, we must always beware lest we dream up some power separate from the preaching of the gospel. . . . any right of binding and loosing which Christ conferred upon his church is bound to the Word. This is especially true in the ministry of the keys, whose entire power rests in the fact that, through those whom the Lord had ordained, the grace of the gospel is publically and privately sealed in the hearts of the believers. This can come about only through preaching.¹¹⁸

Preachers “have the Word of God with which to condemn the perverse; they have the Word with which to receive the repentant into grace.”¹¹⁹ The power of the keys rest not in preachers, but in the Word of God they preach.¹²⁰ Through the Word preached the door of salvation is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers. Again, by way of a word of caution, “It must always be remembered

¹¹⁶Heidelberg Catechism, Question 83.

¹¹⁷Ibid., Question 84.

¹¹⁸*Institutes*, III.iv.14, page 639.

¹¹⁹Ibid., IV.xi.2, page 1214.

¹²⁰Cf. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “A Theology of Preaching,” *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*: “The power of the sermon does not lie in the domain of the preacher, but in the providence of God. Preaching does not demonstrate the power of the human instrument, but of the biblical message of God’s words and deeds” (page 17).

that strong statements like those in Lord's Day 31 find their exclusive legitimacy only in conformity to the apostolic witness."¹²¹ The power of the keys come through healthy, faithful preaching of the Word of God. "A sermon is the word of God only to the extent that it faithfully proclaims the word of God in the Bible."¹²²

Jesus came preaching and in the beginning of the church was the sermon. The Messiah's ministry of preaching continues through his followers. The power of the incarnate Word continues through the Word preached. Jesus' followers will not only do the things that Jesus did, but as Jesus reminded us "He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father."¹²³ The dynamic power of the Holy Spirit empowers the Word preached with saving and life-transforming results. The effective power of the Word preached is evidenced as hearers come to faith in Christ Jesus and are saved. Those who hear and respond to the message preached experience new life in Christ and the realities of the kingdom of God. "Preaching is deadly business. As Spurgeon confirmed, 'Life, death, hell, and worlds unknown may hang on the preaching and hearing of a sermon'."¹²⁴ It is no wonder then that Scripture itself tells us that "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword,

¹²¹Berkhouwer, *Holy Scripture*, page 337; "It is possible that a sermon buries itself in the text, moves through it phrase by phrase, and never comes up for air may prove to be 'unbiblical' in the sense that it fails to achieve what the text achieves"(Craddock, *Preaching*, page 28).

¹²²Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, page 123.

¹²³See John 14:12.

¹²⁴R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "A Theology of Preaching," *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, page 19.

it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”¹²⁵ The effective power of the preaching of the Word of God is the effective power of the Word of God. It is “the most powerful weapon in the whole universe.”¹²⁶

The results from preaching the Word of God are not automatic. There are two key variables that make a significant impact on the kind of results a preacher can expect from the faithful exposition of Scriptures. The one variable is the receptivity of the listener. Berkhouwer writes,

The Word of God does not switch off human reactions; it rather confronts the hearers with a choice and the necessity of a decision. Its authority does not have the features of an external authority, which in fact does not allow an encounter with any insight, understanding, or response. Scripture’s authority does not demand blind obedience, because it is not blind itself. . . . Never does it have the features of a dark dictatorship that enforces its will in a despotic manner, with no concern for man’s way of life under this dictatorship.¹²⁷

We see this lived out in the preaching ministry of Jesus. The apostle John tells us that many of Jesus’ followers found it difficult to accept what Jesus taught. They “said, ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’ . . . From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”¹²⁸ The author of the book of Hebrews talks about those Christians who were deserting and

¹²⁵Hebrews 4:12.

¹²⁶Hughes, *Hebrews*, page 166; Cf. Romans 1:16: “I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”

¹²⁷*Holy Scripture*, page 350.

¹²⁸John 6:60,66.

abandoning the faith. He warns: “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks.”¹²⁹ The apostle Paul tells Timothy about Demas, who “because he loved this world, has deserted me”¹³⁰ Paul preached before King Agrippa and encouraged him to respond favorably to the message. It was Paul’s desire that the entire audience to the Word preached would become believers in Christ. Yet Agrippa replied: “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”¹³¹ This is the reality preachers face. “Because preachers preach, they may become targets for a refusal of the gospel.”¹³²

What is true for the Word of God is also true for the Word preached. Hardened hearts hinder the effective power of God’s Word to bring results.¹³³ This is clearly taught in the Parable of the Sower. The seed of the Word of God produces all kinds of different results depending on the receptivity of the listener.¹³⁴ “No matter how winsome in style or generous in promise, preaching can be met with fierce opposition.”¹³⁵ This is not only due to self-righteousness or hardness of heart on the part of the listener. It might also be as Paul

¹²⁹Hebrews 12:25; Cf. 10:19-39.

¹³⁰2 Timothy 4:10; “The fact that Paul attributes his desertion to the love of this present age suggests that he apostatized from the faith”(William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, page 589).

¹³¹Acts 26:29; Cf. 25:23-26:32.

¹³²Buttrick, *Homiletic*, page 455.

¹³³See above, pages 43-50.

¹³⁴Cf. Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15; 10:23,24.

¹³⁵Buttrick, *Homiletic*, page 454.

experienced in his own preaching ministry: “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.”¹³⁶ This is particularly true in our contemporary North American society. As writes Buttrick, “Preaching in America . . . may be difficult indeed. America is powerful, affluent, and as a nation is obviously trying to hold onto itself in the world. Thus, a gospel of God’s new order will scarcely be well received People . . . may well reject the gospel which does announce an end to ‘this present age.’”¹³⁷ The gods of our modern world have blinded many, hindering them from seeing the light of God shine through the Word preached.

The receptivity of the listener is one variable that affects the effectiveness of preaching; the other key variable is the sovereignty of God. By God’s sovereignty we mean that God “is clothed with absolute authority over the hosts of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth. He upholds all things with His almighty power, and determines the ends which they are destined to serve.”¹³⁸ Referring to Millard Erickson, Samuel D. Rima writes: “God’s sovereignty means that he has complete independence, as well as absolute and ultimate authority and power in the exercise of his care and direction over all his creation. . . . There is nothing that happens in all of his creation that he did not either cause,

¹³⁶2 Corinthians 4:4.

¹³⁷Buttrick, *Homiletic*, page 455.

¹³⁸Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, page 76; Cf. Psalm 139:1-6, 16-17; Proverbs 19:21; 21:30; Ephesians 2:10; Colossians 1:15-17; James 4:13-16.

allow, endorse, or decree.”¹³⁹ Jesus, as Lord over all, has supreme authority in heaven and on earth.¹⁴⁰

God’s determination and absolute authority affects human responses to the hearing of the Word preached. Jesus told Nicodemus: “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”¹⁴¹ There must be a spiritual rebirth that takes place in the heart of a person prior to them being able to “see” the truth of the One Jesus came to make known. Jesus came as the light in order to make the “blind see.”¹⁴² But not all people are made to “see.” Jesus must choose to make God known: “No one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. . . . Blessed are the eyes that see what you see.”¹⁴³ The Spirit of God must work in the life of a person to enable them to understand the Word preached. The Lord must give people “a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.”¹⁴⁴ As the apostle Paul also writes, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot

¹³⁹*Rethinking the Successful Church, Finding Serenity in God’s Sovereignty*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2002, page 127.

¹⁴⁰See Matthew 28:18; cf. Luke 10:22; John 3:35; 13:13; 17:2; 1 Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1:20-22; Philippians 2:9,10.

¹⁴¹John 3:3; Cf. alternate translation: “born from above.”

¹⁴²John 9:39; Cf. 12:44-50.

¹⁴³Luke 10:22,23.

¹⁴⁴See Deuteronomy 29:4.

understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”¹⁴⁵ Commenting on Hebrews 4:12 John Calvin remarks: “It indeed appears evident that the word of God is not equally efficacious in all. For in the elect it exerts its own power, when humbled by a true knowledge of themselves, they flee to the grace of Christ; . . . And further, though this effect of the word may not appear immediately as it were on the first day, yet it will be found at length by the event, that it has not been preached to any one in vain.”¹⁴⁶ The Triune God is the Sovereign Lord who comes with power.¹⁴⁷ In his sovereign grace he allows the effective power of his Word to come through a message preached.

We see the sovereignty of God played out in the life and preaching ministry of the early apostles. The apostle Paul had his “blindness” taken off while in Damascus. The Holy Spirit enabled him to see.¹⁴⁸ In Acts 13 Paul and Barnabas boldly preached the gospel in Antioch. Luke tells us that “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; *and all those who were appointed for eternal life believed.*”¹⁴⁹ The reception of eternal life involved a human response and a divine appointment. In Acts 16 we read how Lydia listened to Paul preach and came to faith in Jesus Christ. Luke states

¹⁴⁵1 Corinthians 2:14

¹⁴⁶*Hebrews*, pages 100-01.

¹⁴⁷Cf. Isaiah 40:10.

¹⁴⁸Acts 9:17,18; Cf. verses 1-19

¹⁴⁹13:48, emphasis mine.

that “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.”¹⁵⁰ In all of this we see the sovereignty of God. For people to respond positively to the preaching of the Word of God, God must take the initiative through the inner working of the Holy Spirit. “. . . the word of the preacher can only become the Word of God through a sovereign and free act of the Holy Spirit, by whose power preaching can be effective.”¹⁵¹

Heeding Karl Barth’s caution, as preachers we cannot circumscribe the power of God through the preaching of the Word of God. Preachers cannot possess God nor his Word. God’s sovereignty remains inviolate.¹⁵² This simply means that preachers need to know their part and God’s part. “Our central concern in life and ministry should be attentiveness to the working of God’s Spirit, so that we are able to discern when he is opening or closing doors for us God sovereignly works in the lives of people to direct them to the course he has planned for them.”¹⁵³ The preacher might be the instrument, the mouthpiece of God, but it is God who does the opening of the door.

God has revealed himself. The secret things of God are revealed through the Word written and the Word preached. God’s Word has effective power to accomplish the purposes which he intends. God does his part through the inner

¹⁵⁰16:14; Cf. verses 13-15.

¹⁵¹Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, page 89.

¹⁵²See above pages 65-68.

¹⁵³Samuel D. Rima, *Rethinking the Successful Church, Finding Serenity in God’s Sovereignty*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2002, page 136.

workings of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who read or hear his Word. As co-workers with God, preachers must also do their part. As Craddock points out, “The preacher cannot *make* [listeners] hear [the word of God], but he or she can at least remove some obstacles.”¹⁵⁴ As preachers we cannot manipulate God’s Word to do whatever we want it to do. But preachers can erect roadblocks that will hinder the power of God’s Word to effect life transforming results in the lives of the listeners. Having laid the theological foundation for the effective power of the Word preached, we will now concern ourselves with the framework that will enable preachers to remove the obstacles for successful preaching. This is the subject of the chapter that follows.

¹⁵⁴*Preaching*, page 64.

3 Removing Obstacles

*Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season;
correct, rebuke and encourage —
with great patience and careful instruction. . . .
keep your head in all situations. . . .
2 Timothy 4:2,5*

Paul's charge to Timothy, "Preach the Word," is followed by a word of exhortation: "Be prepared in season and out of season."¹ Paul knew that there would be difficult times ahead for Timothy when he will wake up not wanting to go and preach the Word. In verse 3 he points out that a time will come when "men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."² Timothy needs to be prepared, to "keep his head in all situations."³ There will be times when preaching comes easy and falls upon receptive listeners; other times will feel like preaching to a brick wall. The key to effective preaching is preparedness to preach the Word in any and every situation. The preparedness required for effective preaching involves removing any and all roadblocks that hinder the power of God's Word to come through a sermon preached.

During the winter season in south-western Ontario, heavy westerly winds

¹2 Timothy 4:2; Greek: "dōβóôçèé ášéáβñùò Pêáβñùò".

2. ²The word "time" is the same Greek word (êáéñ' ò) translated as "season" in v.

³Verse 5.

mixed with fallen snow make for whiteout conditions. Anyone venturing down one of the major highways puts himself and others at grave risk. Roadblocks are often set up by the police to hinder anyone from traveling these roads. These roadblocks are intended to save lives. Anyone venturing to drive on these roads would get stuck anyways. In any event, harsh winter driving conditions prevent drivers reaching their destinations. It doesn't matter what kind of vehicle you might own, or what your best intentions might be, these conditions hinder you from going from point A to point B.

The same is true for preaching! There are certain roadblocks, various obstacles, that prevent the effective power of God's Word in a sermon to bring about the intended results in the listener. The sermon does not move the listener from point A to point B. The preacher might have all the best intentions in the world but these roadblocks hinder the power of God's Word to connect with the hearer and to bring about the expected change. As one preacher realized, "The congregation no longer considered his preaching to be practical or relevant. [His] sermons rarely echoed in his listeners' souls. His impotent, creaky pronouncements never penetrated to the depths of people's hearts, and his ideas seemed to stop at the edge of the pulpit."⁴

One might conclude that these roadblocks to effective preaching do not exist in evangelical churches. These churches, for the most part, have a right

⁴See Harry Farra, *The Sermon Doctor, Prescriptions for Successful Preaching*, San Jose: Authors Choice Press, 2000, page 12; in this book Farra records a series of fictional meetings between the Sermon Doctor and three discouraged preachers in search of a better understanding of effective preaching.

view and a high view of God's Word. Their preachers hold to the inspiration of Scripture and the authority of the Word of God. They not only publically read the Bible but purpose to preach from the Bible. But as Klaas Runia points out, "a high view of Scripture does not automatically result in the right use of Scripture! . . . What about conservative and evangelical Christians? Do they really understand the *biblical message*? When I read collections of sermons published within the evangelical community, I have serious doubts. Of course, there are many sound evangelical and biblical insights and statements in these sermons. Yet on the whole they are disappointing."⁵

This chapter will not only identify the various roadblocks to successful preaching, but more importantly, indicate how preachers can dismantle these obstacles that hinder the kind of results one would expect through the preaching of God's Word. Successful preaching requires preparedness for preaching.⁶

⁵*The Sermon Under Attack*, page 51.

⁶Cf. Harry Farra, *The Sermon Doctor*, page 21: "Readiness is our goal."

Careful Listening to God's Word

The effective power of God's Word preached is in direct correlation to the sermon being authentic to God's Word written. If a preacher does not faithfully preach the bona fide message of the written text then a roadblock is set up hindering the effective power of God's Word to connect with the listener. The sermon might be brilliant, it might be engaging, it might be entertaining, but if the preacher does not faithfully preach the substance of Scripture, it is not the Word of God.

Every preacher will have occasions when they leave the pulpit and realize that they could have better communicated the truth of God's Word. Preaching is much like archery. In my youth, during summer camping trips with the boy's club from church, we would learn the fine art of archery. We would take the arrow and set it in the bow. We would pull back the string, aim at the target, and hope the arrow would hit as close as possible to the bull's eye. Only on rare occasions did an arrow ever hit the bull's eye. Sometimes when a preacher delivers a message it hits right on target: bull's eye. The truth of the text is effectively and faithfully communicated. Most often, however, the sermon misses the bull's eye, but it is still on target. The goal of faithful preaching of God's Word is to get as close as possible to the authentic truth of God's Word written.

Hitting the bull's eye has to do with the valid interpretation of God's Word written. The importance of faithfully interpreting God's Word cannot be

underestimated. David Buttrick writes,

If the question of valid interpretation does not trouble us, it may be because we have confused pragmatics with truth. For many pastors, truth may tend to be defined as “whatever is therapeutically helpful” or more crassly, as “whatever works in my parish,” with the word “works” left wide open. But when we interpret revelation, we are supposedly speaking the truth about God in the presence of God, and such truth should not be weighed by “efficacy.” . . . “Truth” and “efficacy” are two different kinds of judgements. In speaking of God, the question we must ask of interpretation is “Is it true?” and not “Is it helpful?” Though grace may triumph efficaciously through all kinds of error (thank God!), we should not presume on grace. So, responsible preachers do worry about being true to a text.¹

Faithfully interpreting Scriptures requires that ministers honor “the freedom of the texts to speak on their own terms.”² This requires the in-depth study of God’s Word. When I moved to my current church I noticed the sign on my office door: “PASTOR STUDY.” Since the majority of our congregants are immigrants, I realize that they do not understand proper punctuation. Should not the sign read: “PASTOR’S STUDY”? But could it be that the people want me to be daily reminded about the most important aspect of the preacher’s work? “PASTOR: STUDY!” As writes Fred Craddock: “Time spent in study is never *getting away* from daily work but *getting into* daily work. The hours of study bear directly and immediately on who the minister is and the minister’s influence by word and action.”³ The preacher must saturate herself in the study of the Bible. “The minister . . . is not called first of all to be creative; he or she is

¹*Homiletic*, page 270.

²*Ibid.*, page 280.

³*Preaching*, page 70

called to be a faithful listener so that others can hear the Word of God. Listening patiently and attentively to a Bible text, using available tools and skills, the pioneer listener can cut through the crust of familiarity and taste the bread of life afresh before breaking it for others.”⁴ *There must be a careful listening to God’s Word.* This is a prerequisite for getting at the truth of Scriptures.

The careful listening to God’s Word involves both hermeneutics and exegesis. Hermeneutics refers to the science of interpretation. The word “hermeneutics” is “derived from the Greek *Hermes*, the messenger of the gods and the interpreter of *Jupiter*. Every *Hermeneus* was, therefore, an interpreter, as he was supposed to inherit some of the mystic qualities of this god of philology, this patron of eloquence.”⁵ The main concern of hermeneutics is to ask the right questions. So writes Sidney Greidanus: “Asking the right questions is of crucial importance, for asking the wrong questions will undoubtedly result in receiving wrong answers. One of the weighty issues in hermeneutics is, therefore, how to ask the right questions.”⁶

Hermeneutics differs from exegesis in that “while hermeneutics will seek to describe the general and special principles and rules which are useful in approaching the Biblical text, exegesis will seek to identify the single truth-

⁴Roger E. Van Harn, *Pew Rights, For People Who Listen to Sermons*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992, page 22.

⁵D.R. Dungan, *Hermeneutics, A Text-Book*, Delight, Arkansas: Gospel Light Publishing Company, page 1.

⁶*The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, page 17.

intention of individual phrases, clauses, and sentences as they make up the thought of paragraphs, sections, and ultimately, entire books. Accordingly, hermeneutics may be regarded as the *theory* that guides exegesis; exegesis may be understood . . . to be the *practice* of and the set of *procedures* for discovering the author's intended meaning."⁷

Key Hermeneutical Principles

One fundamental hermeneutical principle that is key to faithfully interpreting the Bible is the Reformed emphasis "that there is only *one sense* or meaning to be gleaned from every passage if the interpreter is true to his mission. The sole object of the expositor is to explain as clearly as possible what the writer meant when he wrote the text under examination. It is the interpreter's job to *represent the text*, not the prejudices, feelings, judgements, or concerns of the exegete. To indulge in the latter is to engage in *eisegesis*, 'a reading *into*' a text what the reader wants it to say."⁸ The goal of studying the Bible is to discover the *authorial intent* of the given Biblical writer. As Haddon Robinson points out: "the preacher must labor to understand the writers of the Bible. . . . We try to pull up our chairs to where the biblical authors sat. We attempt to work

⁷Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology, Biblical Exegesis For Preaching and Teaching*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981, page 47.

⁸*Ibid.*, page 45; see also Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, page 107: ". . . a fundamental question for biblical hermeneutics is whether the authors shall be allowed to present *their* meaning or whether the readers shall bring their own meanings to the text. To ask the question is to answer it, for rank subjectivism is the death of biblical interpretation."

our way back into the world of the Scriptures to understand the original message.”⁹

Preachers are especially given to disregard this hermeneutical principle. James Daane writes: “The primary concern with which preachers often approach a text is a concern to ‘what it means for the hearer today.’ Eager to discover relevance, the minister never takes time to hear what the text really says. The desire to apply it takes precedence over hearing what it declares. Application dominates interpretation.”¹⁰ Daane correctly insists that “as long as the preacher preaches, listening to Scripture is obligatory. In approaching a text preachers must allow the Scriptures to challenge and question their understanding of it.”¹¹

A second key hermeneutical principle is that the Biblical authors “always had a *certain community of believers in view* and wanted to offer a *response to concrete occasions* in the life of this community.”¹² Expositors of the Bible owe a debt to the school of historical criticism for this enriched understanding of the

⁹*Biblical Preaching*, page 25.

¹⁰*Preaching with Confidence: A Theological Essay on the Power of the Pulpit*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980, page 61.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, page 45; David Buttrick makes a similar point with his initial hermeneutical principle: “*Biblical texts are addressed to communal consciousness.*” He explains: “Virtually everything in scripture is written to a faith-community, usually in the style of communal address. Therefore, biblical texts must be set in communal consciousness to be understood”(*Homiletic*, pages 276f).

Biblical message. Klaas Runia points out:

Even when [the author] used existent material, either in written or oral form, he rarely contented himself with simply copying this material, but he usually selected, ordered, reshaped and interpreted it in order to meet the needs of the community. The Gospels, for example, are not simply collections of existent traditions about Jesus, but each evangelist used the material in such a way that it met the needs of the community for which he wrote. The Pauline Epistles, without a single exception (not even the Epistle to the Romans!) are all occasional letters, i.e., letters occasioned by certain conditions, sometimes even crises, in the churches. The historical books of the Old Testament, too, show the same feature. They are not simply historical records of past events in the life of Israel, but each author used, ordered, reshaped the existent material in such a way that it contained a clear message for the believing community of his own day. At later stages the books often went through several redactions, which usually meant an actualizing or even re-actualizing of older materials for the sake of the believers of the new period. It will be evident again that it will greatly enrich our preaching, when we can discover how and for what purpose the final redactor shaped the material in his particular way.¹³

Discovering the reason why the original author wrote his message will assist later in determining the purpose of the sermon that will be preached on that text. So writes Haddon Robinson: “. . . you determine the purpose of your sermon . . . by discovering the purpose behind the passage you are preaching. As part of your exegesis, you should ask, ‘Why did the author write this? What effect did he expect it to have on his readers?’ No biblical writer took up his pen to jot down ‘a few appropriate remarks’ on a religious subject. Each one wrote to affect lives.”¹⁴

¹³*The Sermon Under Attack*, page 45.

¹⁴*Biblical Preaching*, page 108; Henry A. Virkler suggests three questions to assist the exegete to determine the purpose of the original author: (1) Who was the writer? What was his spiritual background and experience? (2) To whom was he writing(e.g., believers, unbelievers, apostates, believers who were in

A third hermeneutical principle that should guide the exegetical process is the understanding of the history of salvation that runs from the creation of the world to the new creation on the last day when all of creation will be made new.¹⁵ Runia speaks about this in terms of *salvation history* or *redemptive history* (Heilsgeschichte); Greidanus refers to *Kingdom History*. The referent is the same. “The Bible is the witness of prophets and apostles to the self-revelation of the God of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ. In it we read how the God in whom Israel believed and whom Jesus Christ called his Father, revealed himself as the Saviour and Judge in the history of the covenant people of old and in particular in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ “The Bible as a whole teaches one, all-encompassing history of the kingdom of God. . . . one universal kingdom history that encompasses all of created reality: past, present, and future.”¹⁷

Greidanus summarizes “kingdom history” as follows:

Thus kingdom history, as presented in the Bible, runs from creation to consummation. Genesis relates that God, in the beginning, created a kingdom (realm) and peopled it with creatures who were able to acknowledge him as King. It also relates, however, that these people rebelled against God the King and allied themselves with Satan, later

danger of becoming apostates)? (3) What was the writer’s purpose (intention) in writing this particular book? (*Hermeneutics, Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981, page 81); See also D.R. Dungan, *Hermeneutic*, pages 178-79.

¹⁵See Romans 8:21; Revelation 21-2.

¹⁶Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, page 52.

¹⁷Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, pages 96, 95.

known as “the ruler of the world.” But God determined to reestablish his kingdom on earth; he broke the alliance between Satan and his people (Gen 3:15) and bound his people to himself in a covenant in which he promised redemption and required his people to obey the covenant stipulations or laws of the kingdom. Hence all subsequent Old Testament history can be seen as the history of the coming kingdom of God. In the fullness of time Christ came proclaiming the kingdom of God, demonstrating its presence in his healing of sick and demon-possessed people, and revealing, by his resurrection, its complete victory over death and Satan. Christ the King then ascended to his heavenly throne, but he promised to come again, on the last day, to inaugurate on earth God’s perfect kingdom. Hence New Testament history also can be seen as part of God’s coming kingdom. In other words, in both Testaments, the biblical vision of kingdom history is the vision of the *coming* kingdom of God.¹⁸

This understanding of “redemption history” or “kingdom history” has an immense implication for both Biblical interpretation and application. “The biblical view of history is that every biblical passage must be understood in the context of this grand sweep of kingdom history. . . . Sermons should bring out very clearly that texts are being understood in the context of the scope of this universal kingdom history.”¹⁹ God has covenanted with the world and humanity to usher in his perfect kingdom. As Geerhardus Vos argues, “Revelation is . . . inseparably attached to another activity of God, which we call *Redemption*. . . . Revelation is the interpretation of redemption.”²⁰ “The Bible is not a self-help book. The Scriptures present one, consistent, organic message. They tell us how we must seek Christ who alone is our Saviour and source of strength to be and do what

¹⁸Ibid., pages 97-98.

¹⁹Ibid., page 100.

²⁰*Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1975, pages 5,6.

God requires. To preach these ‘musts’ of what people should be and do, and yet not mention he who enables their accomplishment warps the biblical message. God’s redemptive work is integral to every biblical passage’s proper exposition.”²¹

Every Biblical text either speaks directly about Jesus Christ, or about our fallen human condition for which Christ died and from which through faith in Christ we are set free. In this way, “the Bible’s ultimate aim is beautifully positive. Scripture addresses features of our incompleteness only because such a focus concurrently signals the work of God that makes us whole.”²² “Expository preaching is Christ-centered preaching.”²³

Hermeneutics assists us by asking the right questions of any Biblical text. Haddon Robinson suggests asking these two questions: “What is the author talking about?” and “What exactly is the author saying about what he is talking about?”²⁴ These questions will enable the expositor to determine the “Biblical idea” of a given Biblical text. The first question (What is the author talking about?) will define the subject and the second question (What exactly is the author saying about what he is talking about?) will define the complement. The Biblical idea will then consist of the two essential elements of an idea: a *subject*

²¹Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, page 271.

²²Ibid., page 267.

²³Ibid., page 272.

²⁴These questions are based on Haddon Robinson’s discussion in *Biblical Preaching*, Chapter 2, “The Big Idea”(pages 33-50).

and a *complement*.²⁵ These two questions can also be combined in one question: “*What is the meaning of the original message?*” This question will satisfy the concerns of the first hermeneutical principle, the principle that has to do with *authorial intent*: *There is only one sense or meaning to be gleaned from every passage.*

Discovering the meaning of the original message is only part of the exegetical process. Bryan Chapell writes:

“Determining a sermon’s subject remains only half-done when the preacher has discerned what the biblical writer was saying. . . . Since God designed the Bible to complete us, its contents necessarily indicate that in some sense we are incomplete. Our lack of wholeness is a consequence of the fallen condition in which we live. Aspects of this brokenness prompt Scripture’s instruction and construction. . . . The corrupted state of our world and our being cry for God’s aid. He responds with his Word, focusing on some facet of our need in every portion. Our hope resides in the assurance that all Scripture has a Fallen Condition Focus (FCF). . . . God intends for each Scripture to give us the ‘endurance and the encouragement’ that we need today. *The FCF is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or for whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage.*”²⁶

To complete the process of exegesis, questions need to be asked about how this passage fits into God’s redemptive plan. Chapell suggests asking this question:

“What is a FCF that required the writing of these text?”²⁷ Haddon Robinson

²⁵“A subject cannot stand alone. By itself it is incomplete, and therefore it needs a complement. The complement ‘completes’ the subject by answering the question, ‘What am I saying about what I am talking about?’ A subject without a complement dangles as an open-ended question. . . . An idea emerges only when the complement is joined to a definite subject” (Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 41; cf. pages 41-46).

²⁶*Christ-Centered Preaching*, pages 40, 41-42.

²⁷*Ibid.*, page 42.

suggests asking two related questions: What is the depravity factor in this passage and what is the vision of God in this passage?²⁸ These questions could be restated as: For what reason was the original message given and what does this text tell us about: [a] our fallen human condition and [b] God's redemptive solution? These questions will satisfy the other two hermeneutical principles: *The Biblical authors always had a certain community of believers in view and wanted to offer a response to concrete occasions in the life of this community and All texts should be understood in the context of the scope of redemptive history.*

Haddon Robinson points out that "when a preacher finds a statement in the Bible, he must be sure that what he or she declares the Bible to say, is what the Bible actually says. To fail to do so is to sacrifice hermeneutics for homiletics."²⁹ Based then on our three hermeneutical principles, the following three questions should be asked to guide the process of exegesis:

- (1) What is the meaning of the original message?
- (2) For what reason was the original message given?
- (3) What does this text tell us about: [a] our fallen human condition and [b] God's redemptive solution?

To arrive at the correct answers to these questions, there are a number of key

²⁸Class notes, Gordon-Conwell Seminary Doctor of Ministry Cohort: *The Preacher and the Message*, January 2000; cf. *Biblical Preaching*, pages 94-95; see also, Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," *Leadership*, Volume XVIII, Number 4 (Fall 1997), page 24.

²⁹*Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 74.

exegetical steps that need to be taken.

Key Exegetical Steps

The word *exegesis* is a transliteration of the Greek word ἐξήγησις which means “narration” or “explanation.” In his seminal book, *Toward An Exegetical Theology*, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. admits that “the pastor, theological student, and serious interpreter of Scripture are shocked to learn that virtually no one has mapped out the actual route that the interpreter is to take as he enters the practice of exegesis.”³⁰ In this book Kaiser proposes what he calls a syntactical-theological method of exegesis consisting of the following steps: (1) contextual analysis, (2) syntactical analysis, (3) verbal analysis, (4) theological analysis, and (5) homiletical analysis. For the purposes of this section, “Careful Listening to God’s Word,” the first four exegetical steps are decisive.³¹ Kaiser’s categories provide a helpful framework from which to engage the process of exegesis.

All exegesis begins with the text itself. This comment might sound redundant, but as Kaiser points out, “if any other concern begins to rival the text in importance or place, the process of exegesis has already been sidetracked. There are many other errors that the exegete may commit, but this one is the

³⁰Page 48.

³¹The final step, (5) homiletical analysis, will be dealt with under the subsequent sections: “Careful Listening to Listeners” and “Connecting God’s Word to Listeners.”

most devastating methodological mistake of all.”³² If a preacher prepares a sermon without a careful reading and listening to the text, then “preaching all too easily derails into the quagmire of personal opinions.”³³ Karl Barth emphasizes the importance of reading the text: “First of all, and very decisively, we must *read the text*. We must get to know word-for-word what is in it, for this must be the content of the sermon.”³⁴

Reading the text begins with an “open and honest engagement with the text.”³⁵ This is important since this is also where the listeners come to the text when the sermon is preached. Listeners “come to the text unaided except for their own thoughts, feelings, and needs. The minister who reads the text does so inescapably as pastor and preacher, sitting more among the parishioners than among the scholars. . . . Very likely . . . the questions to be pursued will be those raised by the text itself in this first reading.”³⁶

The serious expositor of God’s Word written ought to read the text in the original languages. Karl Barth insists on this:

To gain acquaintance with the selected passage of scripture we must always use the original. We must use this first, not avoiding the effort of translation from the Hebrew and the Greek. Superficially this might seem to be unnecessary and time-consuming, but all translations, no matter

³²*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 48.

³³Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, page 123

³⁴*Homiletic*, page 96.

³⁵Craddock, *Preaching*, page 106.

³⁶*Ibid.*

how excellent or authentic, suffer the weakness of being secondary. A translation is not the original, the source. It has the features of an exposition or commentary. To understand fully the written Word we must take the path from the true source to the broad stream of interpretation. Any detour will mean that we miss part of the full journey.³⁷

If the sermon preached is identified as the Word of God only to the extent that it is a faithful exposition of the Word of God written, then a reading of the text in the original languages is not only suggested, but an essential “rule” to follow. This implies that the exegete is knowledgeable of “the syntax and grammar involved in phrases, clauses, and sentences. The bonding material between these otherwise isolated words or groups of words is what all the sweat and tears are about in language study.”³⁸ Reading the Biblical text in the original language in an informed way will assist the expositor to discover the original meaning of the text.

Contextual Analysis

The first step in exegesis after the reading of the text is to set the passage under study in its context. “Each text has an organic connection with the whole biblical corpus; it does not exist in isolation.”³⁹ As writes Haddon Robinson, “As individual verses rest within a paragraph, the paragraphs are part of a chapter, and the chapters are part of the book. . . . The old saw still has a sharp edge:

³⁷*Homiletics*, page 97.

³⁸Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 49.

³⁹Karl Barth, *Homiletic*, page 98.

'The text without the context is a pretext.'⁴⁰ The context is "the connection of thought that runs through a passage, those links that weave it into one piece."⁴¹ Kaiser underscores the importance of contextual analysis: "Unless the exegete knows where the thought of the text begins and how that pattern develops, all the intricate details may be of little or no worth. . . . If the exegete falters here, much of what follows will be wasted time and effort."⁴²

Sectional Context

Kaiser points out that there are four levels of context the exegete ought to examine: sectional context, book context, canonical context, and the immediate context. Each text is part of a larger section. Through sectional analysis "the interpreter will make use of a variety of clues to locate the slightly exposed seams which mark off specific sections of the book."⁴³ For example, there might be a repeated term, phrase or clause, or sentence that delineates a beginning or end of a section. Grammatical clues such as transitional conjunctions or adverbs, i.e., "then, therefore, wherefore, but, nevertheless, meanwhile," indicate a transition of thought. A rhetorical question could signal a new theme. A series of such questions could carry forward the argument or theme of a section. There might be a change in time, location, or setting. This is a literary device used

⁴⁰*Biblical Preaching*, page 59.

⁴¹*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 71.

⁴²*Ibid.*, page 69.

⁴³*Ibid.*, page 71.

frequently in Biblical narratives to begin a new “scene” or “plot.” In the epistles you often find the author shifting the attention from one group to another; this may point to a change of subject matter. Another clue that a new section is beginning is a change in the tense, mood, or aspect of a verb. A repetition of the same key word, proposition, or concept might indicate the beginning or end of a section. In a few instances the theme of each section will be announced as a heading to that section.⁴⁴ Recognizing these various clues will aid the expositor to define the various sectional divisions.

Book Context

The various sections add up to make up the whole book. Kaiser points out that “at this point it should be possible to identify the overall purpose and plan of the book.”⁴⁵ He proposes four ways to discover the intention of the writer as to why the original message was given:

1. Search first to see if the writer himself clearly sets forth his purpose in the preface, conclusion, or body of the text.
2. Study the parenetical sections (the hortatory aspect), particularly of the New Testament Epistles, in order to determine what applications the author himself has made of the factual and doctrinal portions of the text. Usually an author’s exhortations will flow out of his special purpose for writing his book.
3. As a clue to the writer’s overall purpose in collecting and editing history or narrative, observe what details he *selected* for inclusion or how he *arranged* them.
4. When no other clues are available, the interpreter must work out his own statement of the author’s purpose. The interpreter will

⁴⁴See *Ibid.* pages 71-77; Walter Kaiser got most of these ideas and some of the examples from John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1974, pages 279-81.

⁴⁵*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 77.

begin by studying how the topic sentences of individual paragraphs work together to explicate the theme of a given section. Then he will proceed to study the themes of all the sections and to evaluate the connections between and within sections. Only when this have been completed will the interpreter experience any kind of confidence in stating what the author's implied theme is.⁴⁶

Through an analysis of the sectional divisions and how the various sections interconnect, the exegete will be able to ascertain the reason why the original message was given.

Canonical Context

The contextual analysis also extends to the entire canon. The Biblical text is set in the context of the rest of the Bible. But here Kaiser offers a word of caution:

The whole canon must not be used as the context for every exegesis. . . . We . . . argue that the Church at large . . . is in error when she uses the analogy of faith (*analogia fidei*) as an exegetical device for extricating meaning from or importing meaning to texts that appeared earlier than the passage where the teaching is set forth most clearly or perhaps even for the first time. It is a mark of *eisegesis*, not *exegesis*, to borrow freight that appears chronologically later in the text and to transport it back and unload it on an earlier passage simply because both or all the passages involved share the same canon.⁴⁷

Kaiser goes on to suggest that rather than using indiscriminately the Reformed principle of the "analogy of faith" or "Scripture interprets Scripture" (*Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur*), one solution would be to speak of the analogy of antecedent Scripture: "Most interpreters will see the wisdom and good sense in limiting our theological observations to conclusions drawn from the text being

⁴⁶Ibid., page 79.

⁴⁷Ibid., page 82.

exegeted and from texts which preceded it in time.”⁴⁸

While Kaiser’s caution makes good sense, does not our third hermeneutical principle state: “*All texts should be understood in the context of the scope of redemptive history*”? Karl Barth argues that all exegetical work should take into account both what comes before the text and what comes after it. He writes: “We need to see clearly and surely what is the material both before and after to which this passage is indissolubly related.”⁴⁹ Based on the third hermeneutical principle we insist that our exegesis must understand all texts in the context of the history of salvation. Bruce L. Shelley stated it like this: “Our most direct step toward a significant big idea from a given passage of Scripture is to search for the passage’s link with the grand theme.”⁵⁰

A case in point is the often quoted passage: Isaiah 53. There we read about one who “was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. . . . He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; . . . the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”⁵¹ According to Kaiser, the exegete would have to limit his theological observations to conclusions drawn from the text being exegeted and from texts which

⁴⁸Ibid., page 137; Cf. pages 134-37.

⁴⁹*Homiletic*, page 98.

⁵⁰“The Big Idea and Biblical Theology’s Grand Theme,” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching, Connecting God to People*, edited by Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, page 101.

⁵¹Verses 3,5,6.

preceded it in time. Yet in the Christian canon there is important text which was written many centuries later than Isaiah's prophecy and has significant theological implications for a complete understanding of Isaiah 53. Luke tells us in the book of Acts that the Isaiah 53 text refers to the life, death, and ministry of Jesus.⁵² Can the exegete properly take the message of Acts 8 and transport it back to Isaiah 53 to aid in the understanding of this passage? Well clearly in terms of the canon, these two passages of Scripture are related. It would behoove the expositor preparing a message on Isaiah 53 to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.

Having said this, Kaiser's caution is still in order. The first hermeneutical principle entails that the exegete must explain as clearly as possible what the original author meant when he wrote the text under examination. This is the exegete's *first* task. In terms of Isaiah 53 the faithful expositor will initially find out what Isaiah was trying to say when he spoke about the suffering servant. The discovery of the Biblical idea will occur through a thorough analysis of the sections in particular, the book as a whole, and through the other exegetical steps. But the expositor's work is not done. As Kaiser himself points out: "*After* we have finished our exegetical work of establishing what, indeed, the author of the paragraph or text under consideration was trying to say, *then* we must go on to set this teaching in its total Biblical context by way of gathering together what God has continued to say on this topic. We should then compare this material

⁵²See the story of the Ethiopian eunuch and Philip in Acts 8:26-40.

with our findings concerning the passage being investigated.”⁵³ The analysis of the canonical context takes place *after* the authorial intent is established. Having determined the Biblical idea the exegete must then set the text in the context of the history of redemption and the rest of the canon.

Immediate Context

The final contextual analysis mentioned by Kaiser is the immediate context within the section where the text is found. In prose literature this means an analysis of the various connections between individual paragraphs and the immediate context. Borrowing from Milton S. Terry, Kaiser offers a list of the kinds of connections between individual paragraphs and immediate context:

1. *Historical.* There may be a connection of facts, events, or happenings in space and time.
2. *Theological.* A doctrine may be dependent on some historical fact and circumstance.
3. *Logical.* A paragraph may connect with an argument or line of thinking that is under development in the whole section.
4. *Psychological.* Something in the preceding line of reasoning may suddenly trigger a related idea. The result is often a parenthetical aside or an anacoluthon; that is, a breaking off from the argumentation or exposition to present what at first appears to be a totally unrelated idea.⁵⁴

The analysis of the immediate context in poetry is an analysis of how the individual stanzas are connected to each other within the larger section. Kaiser readily admits that “the poetic forms in Scripture will always pose more problems

⁵³Ibid., page 83.

⁵⁴Ibid., page 85; Cf. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, New York: Philips & Hunt, 1890; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964, page 219.

for the exegete than most prose sections ever will.”⁵⁵ Individual stanzas are marked off through the use of recurring refrains, the Hebrew word *Selah* (סלה), alphabetic acrostic schemes, notable changes in rhythm or length of lines, repeated catchwords, and chiasmus. The individual stanzas are then connected together through various poetic devices such as a chiastic patterns, couplets, triads, and parallelism.⁵⁶ The interpreter of the poetic sections of Biblical literature will need to be acquainted with the characteristics of Biblical Hebrew poetic style.

The analysis of the immediate context is an essential part of understanding what the original author is trying to say. As Haddon Robinson points out: “More clues to meaning come from a study of the surrounding context than from an examination of details within a passage. To understand a paragraph or subsection, we must explain how it develops out of what precedes it and relates to what follows it.”⁵⁷

Historical Context

While Kaiser mentions only four tasks for contextual analysis, there is one other context that needs to be mentioned: the historical context. Every Biblical text is set within the certain time, place, and situation in life of its original author. “The historical setting and cultural context of biblical revelation are therefore

⁵⁵*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 230.

⁵⁶Cf. *Ibid.* pages 214-27.

⁵⁷*Biblical Preaching*, page 60.

important for a right understanding of biblical authority . . . and for interpreting Scripture in keeping with its own claim to full authority.”⁵⁸ Fred Craddock

stresses the importance of placing the Biblical text in its historical context:

Faith witnesses to specific persons, in specific places, under specific conditions. The gospel encounters culture, sometimes rejecting that culture’s values and forms, sometimes embracing them, sometimes modifying them. To recover that meeting, to hear interchanges, to know what issues are at stake: this is the understanding the preacher seeks. And much of it comes to the one who is not intimidated by the distance, who is not impatient to get quick relevance, but who takes time to sit nearby and overhear Israel’s king and Israel’s prophet in a fierce exchange or Paul and the church at Corinth discuss what constitutes Christian worship. Before long one moves in closer and distances begin to collapse as ancient issues of life and death, faith and morals, sin and forgiveness, family and society begin to sound remarkably current.⁵⁹

Contextual analysis is the first step of Biblical exegesis. Careful listening to God’s Word involves detecting the clues in the broader context of the passage to be preached: sectional context, book context, canonical context, immediate context, and the historical context. Having analyzed the context, the exegete can move on to the next step of the process, the syntactical analysis.

Syntactical Analysis

Walter C. Kaiser suggests a different approach to Biblical interpretation than simply the grammatico-historical method of exegesis. The goal of this latter approach is to “ascertain the *usus loquendi*, that is, the specific usage of words as employed by an individual writer and/or as prevalent in a particular age.”⁶⁰ He

⁵⁸*Acts of Synod 1972, Report 44*, page 539.

⁵⁹*Preaching*, pages 113-14.

⁶⁰*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 88.

proposes the *syntactical-theological method* of exegesis. He does so not so much because grammatico-historical exegesis is wrong; it simply “fails to go far enough in describing the main job of exegesis.”⁶¹ The syntactical analysis “stresses that syntax is one of the most important avenues for the interpreter to use in reconstructing the thread of the writer’s meaning. . . . syntactical analysis systematically operates from three basic building blocks: (1) the concept, (2) the proposition, and (3) the paragraph. It is through the precise way in which these three units are organized and arranged that the exegete receives all the data he needs to begin the journey of moving the text to the destination of using that text in a teaching or preaching situation.”⁶² But the study of the syntax of a Biblical text is not enough. If this is all the preacher does he is simply left preaching a message that is “a sterile rehearsal of the words and events in a text.” Such a message would be “dead, sterile, and boring.”⁶³

For this reason Kaiser proposes adding a second part to the task of exegesis: theological exegesis. Theological exegesis isolated from syntactical exegesis runs the risk of preachers “delivering a message which . . . is scintillating and refreshing to the Church of God because the message imports doctrine and theological truth by the carload from all over Scripture without

⁶¹Ibid., page 89; Kaiser admits that “the truth of the matter is that the method should be called grammatical-contextual-historical-syntactical-theological-cultural exegesis”(page 90).

⁶²Ibid., page 89.

⁶³Ibid., pages 89,90.

caring in the least whether the practice is legitimate or not.”⁶⁴ The cost of such exegesis is too high. The sermons might be entertaining, but would be “methodologically a fraud.”⁶⁵ The original truth of the Biblical text would be sacrificed.

Our three hermeneutical principles underscore the importance of the syntactical-theological method of exegesis. The first two principles (“*What is the meaning of the original message?*” and “*For what reason was the original message given?*”) underscore the importance of syntactical exegesis; the third principle (“*What does this text tell us about [a] our fallen human condition and [b] God’s redemptive solution?*”) underscores the necessity of theological exegesis.

An interpretative decision has to be made before a syntactical analysis can be done: what kind of literary form is the Biblical text under study? Another way to ask this question is: what is the genre of the text? John Barton defines the term *genre* as “a conventional pattern, recognizable by certain formal criteria (style, shape, tone, particular syntactic or even grammatical structures, recurring formulaic patterns), which is used in a particular society in social contexts which are governed by certain formal conventions.”⁶⁶

There are a number of literary forms that could be identified depending on

⁶⁴Ibid., page 90.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Quoted by Thomas G. Long in *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989; Cf. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984, page 32.

how scholars have classified them. For example, Thomas Long discusses the following five genres as they relate to the preaching task: psalms, proverbs, narratives, parables, and epistles. In addition he also identifies miracle stories, prophetic oracles, and short stories as genres of Biblical literature.⁶⁷ Walter Kaiser lists the various genres in general categories: prose, poetry, narrative, wisdom, and apocalyptic.⁶⁸ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, in addition to some of the other genres, also identify epistles and gospel as literary forms in the Bible.⁶⁹

However the categories are formed, the point is this: the literary form of the Biblical text must be carefully identified. Determining the literary form of a Biblical text is important because each genre of literature has a different rhetorical function. As Thomas Long writes, “The rhetorical dynamics are the effects that the literary features are intended to produce in a reader. Literary features are in the text; rhetorical dynamics, though caused by the text, are in the reader. A punch line is a literary feature of a written joke; the laughter caused by the punch line is a rhetorical dynamic. . . . A *joke* is a genre designed to make us laugh.”⁷⁰ Long, therefore, suggests five questions that will assist the preacher to move from the text to the sermon:

⁶⁷*Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, page 25.

⁶⁸*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 91.

⁶⁹In *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, A Guide to Understanding the Bible, Second Edition*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993.

⁷⁰*Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, page 26.

1. What is the genre of the text?
2. What is the rhetorical function of this genre?
3. What literary devices does this genre employ to achieve its rhetorical effect?
4. How in particular does the text under consideration, in its own literary setting, embody the characteristics and dynamics described in the previous questions?
5. How may the sermon, in a new setting, say and do what the text says and does in its setting?⁷¹

In order to listen carefully to the text, the preacher would do well to understand the characteristics of the various genres of Biblical literature and their differing rhetorical functions. Books that will especially aid the exegete in this task are volumes such as *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* by Thomas C. Long and *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart.⁷²

The next step after the interpreter of the Bible has done the contextual analysis and determined the literary form of the text is to do the syntactical analysis. This is really an in-depth analysis of the individual paragraphs. Kaiser describes this analysis as follows:

1. Isolating the theme proposition or sentence;
2. Identifying all natural divisions in the paragraph as suggested by Hebrew accent marks, Greek participles, and overall punctuation;
3. Underscoring all connectors such as relative pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and transitional adverbs; and
4. Noting the antecedents for each subordinated or coordinated word, phrase, clause, or sentence so that work on the mechanical

⁷¹Ibid., pages 24-34.

⁷²See Bibliography.

diagram or syntactical display can begin immediately.⁷³

He goes on to stress the importance of syntactical exegesis: “Without such analysis the results of exegesis fall stillborn on the ears of the congregation; and exegesis remains only a segment, and usually a poor one, of isagogics.”⁷⁴ Once the contextual and syntactical analyses are done, the exegete can move on to the next step: verbal analysis.

Verbal Analysis

Haddon Robinson writes: “Words are stupid things until placed in a context.”⁷⁵ This punctuates the importance of verbal analysis. Walter Kaiser calls “words and idioms . . . the most basic of all the linguistic building-blocks of meaning. Through the accumulation of words and idioms a writer expresses the distinctive thought he has in mind.”⁷⁶

Henry Virkler points out that “most words that survive long in a language acquire many denotations (specific meanings) and connotations (additional

⁷³*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 99; Cf. pages 95-99; Kaiser advocates the use what he calls a “syntactical display” or “block diagram.” “A block diagram arranges all the material, regardless of its length, so that the interrelationships of whole sentences, clauses, and phrases might be visually apparent at a glance”(Ibid., page 100; cf. pages 99-104, 166-81); see also, Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, pages 93-98.

⁷⁴*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 104; “isagogics” refers to the study of the literary history of the Bible, considered as introductory to the study of Biblical interpretation.

⁷⁵*Biblical Preaching*, page 63.

⁷⁶*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 105.

implications).⁷⁷ He suggests three methods that are commonly used to determine what specific words mean (denotation):

1. Study the way the word was used in other ancient literature.
2. Study synonyms, looking for points of comparison as well as contrast.
3. Study etymology – considering the meaning of the historical roots of the word.⁷⁸

The goal in verbal analysis is not first of all to discover what the various words mean, however, but “to ascertain which of those denotations the author intended when he used the word in the passage under study.”⁷⁹ Kaiser emphasizes: “We are most confident that the meaning of any given word (and therefore its text and context) will be discretely contained in a single intention of the author.”⁸⁰ What is the particular meaning the original author had for the words used? That’s the aim! With this target the exegete will also be able to discern the specific implications or nuances (connotation) the original author gives to the various words. D.R. Dungan writes: “We ought to treat the Bible with as much respect as we do the words of men. Hence the greatest possible care should be taken that every writer in the book divine should be made to mean just what he wished to be understood to say. It is not what we can compel the Bible to say, that we are to seek, but what it was employed to say, what the

⁷⁷Ibid., page 98.

⁷⁸*Hermeneutics*, pages 99-104.

⁷⁹Ibid., pages 104-05.

⁸⁰*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 113.

writer meant when he said what he said.”⁸¹

Kaiser suggests several steps that can be taken to discover with a degree of certainty the meaning of the original author’s words:

1. The meaning of words is determined . . . by custom and general usage current in the times when the author wrote them. . . .
2. In assigning meaning to a word, the exegete is on the most solid basis when the author himself has defined the term he uses. . . .
3. A word may be explained by the immediate attachment of a genitive phrase, an appositional phrase, or some other defining expression. This process is sometimes referred to as *glossing*. . . .
4. The grammatical construction of a word may be another clue to its meaning. . . .
5. The meaning of some words may be determined by contextual antithesis and contrasts. . . .
6. In Old Testament poetry, often one of the best ways to determine the meaning of a word is by means of Hebrew parallelism. . . . Hebrew poetry often uses either a synonymous or antithetic parallelism. . . .
7. A careful comparison of *parallel passages* may help an exegete. A writer may return elsewhere in his writings to a discussion of the same word (*verbal parallel passage*) or at least a treatment of the same subject matter or topic (*topical parallel passage*). It may also happen that another writer has discussed the same word or topic.⁸²

A careful reading of God’s Word in light of the first hermeneutical principle entails that the exegete must allow the original author to give definition to the words employed in the text. A thorough verbal analysis of any given word within the context of the Biblical passage will assist the expositor to discover what the word meant for the original author, both in terms of its denotation and connotation. Having done the verbal analysis the preacher can move on the

⁸¹*Hermeneutics*, pages 173-74.

⁸²*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, pages 106-08; See also Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, pages 104-09.

next step: theological analysis.

Theological Analysis

The third hermeneutical principle (*What does this text tell us about: [a] our fallen human condition and [b] God's redemptive solution*) intimates that once the expositor has done the contextual analysis, reviewed the history of the text, completed the syntactical and verbal exegesis, there is still something missing from our analysis of the Biblical text. In fact, as Walter Kaiser states, the exegete might have "a feeling of betrayal when all the labor fails to deliver a credible message that will speak to modern men and women. Clearly, something further is needed. . . . The missing ingredient . . . is theological exegesis. . . . the most frequently misplaced tool on the exegete's shelf is theological exegesis."⁸³

Kaiser is not alone in pointing out the necessity for theological analysis. Henry Virkler also devotes a chapter in his book on hermeneutics to describe the process of theological analysis. He writes: "The basic question in theological analysis is 'How does this passage fit into the total pattern of God's revelation?'"⁸⁴

Virkler describes five models of Biblical theology or five representative theologies that describe the pattern of salvation history: Liberal, Dispensational, Lutheran, Covenantal, and Epigenetic. After outlining a methodology for deciding

⁸³Ibid., pages 131, 133.

⁸⁴*Hermeneutics*, page 117; Cf. pages 117-56.

among these models, Virkler asked his reader to come to their own conclusion. Walter Kaiser, conversely suggests that there is “a canonical center of the theology of the Old and New Testaments. It is not imposed, but may be *inductively* derived from a careful reading of the writers of Scriptures themselves. It is God’s word of *blessing . . . or promise . . . to be Israel’s God and to do something for Israel and through them something for all the nations on the face of the earth. . . . History shows how it has been and is being fulfilled.*”⁸⁵ For Kaiser a theological analysis would serve to determine how a given Biblical passage fits into this canonical center. For Virkler a theological analysis would serve to determine how a given Biblical passage fits into the model of salvation history the exegete chooses.

There is a danger in having a preconceived “theory” about redemption history as the expositor analyzes Scripture. The danger is “imposing one’s own system *onto* the biblical data rather than deriving the system *from* the data.”

Quoting F.F. Bruce, Virkler cautions:

There is a great danger, when once we have adhered to one particular school of thought or adopted one particular system of theology, of reading the Bible in the light of that school or system and finding its distinctive features in what we read.⁸⁶

For this reason Walter Kaiser emphasizes over and over again that our Biblical theology or subsequent developments in canonical revelation “may be brought

⁸⁵*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 139.

⁸⁶*Hermeneutic*, pages 118-19; Cf. F.F. Bruce, “Foreword,” in *God’s Strategy in Human History*, ed. R. Forster and V. Marston (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1973, page vii).

into our *conclusions* or *summaries* after we have firmly established on exegetical grounds precisely what the passage means.”⁸⁷ The emphasis is on the word *after*! Our theology needs to be shaped by a thorough and faithful exegesis of God’s Word; otherwise, any theology is only a theory.⁸⁸

God’s story in the Bible is the account of the creation of the world, the fall of humanity, and redemption through Christ. Roger Van Harn calls this story “*The Story* behind the Text.”⁸⁹ The Story is entitled “The Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Story is named for its center in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. According to the Story, Jesus is the one God put forth to make peace between us and among us. Because of him, we can know that God is *for* us in spite of all else that we see and hear. The Story reaches back to the beginning and forward to the new beginning.”⁹⁰

The message of Scripture is given to us by God so that we may live and die in the comfort of knowing that Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our fallen human condition assuring us of eternal life. To live and die in the joy of this

⁸⁷*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 140.

⁸⁸*The Belgic Confession, Article 7*, stresses that any conclusions we may arrive at in terms of Biblical theology needs to be submitted to the truth of God found in Scriptures: “We must not consider human writings — no matter how holy their authors may have been — equal to divine writings; nor may we put . . . councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else. For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself” (cf. *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, page 82).

⁸⁹Emphasis mine; See *Pew Rights*, chapter 4, pages 47-68.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, page 49.

comfort requires, as it is confessed in Lord's Day One of the Heidelberg Catechism, that I know three things: "first, how great my sin and misery are; second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery; third how I am to thank God for such deliverance." God's Word has a redemptive focus. Exegesis of God's Word is completed when the expositor sets the Biblical text in the context of the history of redemption. Every sermon, therefore, will have something to say about our fallen human condition and God's redemptive solution.

Theological analysis will also assist preachers in developing sermons that really matter. Setting the text in the context of God's grand Story will "prompt preaching to treat subjects of importance and avoid trivia." Fred Craddock goes on to say:

Theology urges upon the pulpit a much larger agenda: creation, evil, grace, covenant, forgiveness, judgment, suffering, care of the earth and all God's creatures, justice, love, and the reconciliation of the world to God. It is not out of order for theology to ask of preaching, What ultimate vision is held before us? Are there words, deeds, and relationships by which we can move toward that vision? How does God look upon us in our stumbling and failure to embrace that vision? It is almost impossible for a sermon on a matter of major importance to listeners to be totally uninteresting and without impact. But small topics are like pennies; even when polished to a high gloss, they are still pennies.⁹¹

Having carefully listened to the Word of God, the preacher has something to say, something that is not dead, sterile, or boring. She has a Word from God, something that is alive, creative, and interesting. But the preparation continues. Another obstacle needs to be removed. Before a preacher can preach he must do more listening; there must be careful listening to listeners.

⁹¹Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, page 49.

Careful Listening to Listeners

Preparation for preaching includes both a vertical listening as well as a horizontal listening. The vertical listening involves a careful listening to God speak through the written pages of his Word. The horizontal listening consists of a careful listening to the listeners. Henry Farra could not state the importance of listening to listeners more emphatically: “*No preacher has a right to preach who has not first listened. . . . we are called first to identify with people, listen to them, and — then and only then — preach to them.*”¹ John Stott put it like this: “We have to take seriously both the biblical text and the contemporary scene. . . . it is our responsibility to explore the territories on both sides of the ravine until we become thoroughly familiar with them.”² “Study and preparation involve careful listening to the congregation as well as to the text.”³

Successful preaching takes the audience seriously. Aristotle’s comment can be applied to the task of preaching: “Of the three elements in speechmaking — speaker, subject, and persons addressed — it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech’s end and object.”⁴ If the preacher expects to see

¹*The Sermon Doctor*, page 169.

²*Between Two Worlds*, page 180.

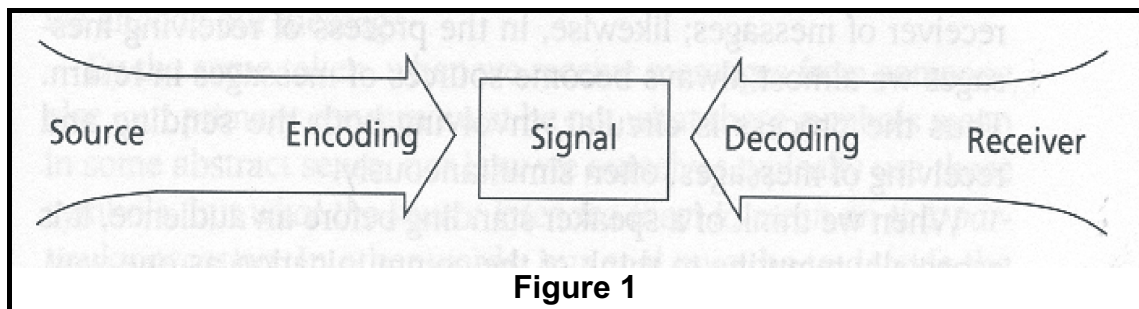
³Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, page 39; Walter Kaiser makes a similar point: “To put it bluntly, exegesis must come to terms with the *audience* as well as with what the author meant by the words he used”(*Toward an Exegetical Theology*, page 149).

⁴Quoted by Duane Litfin, in *Public Speaking, A Handbook for Christians, Second Edition*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1998, page 41; J. Daniel Baumann writes: “There is no single step in speech preparation that

results through the faithful preaching of God's Word then she must not only listen carefully to God's Word; she must also listen carefully to the listener. Preachers would do well to preach by the simple but effective motto: Hearers first.⁵

The importance of careful listening to the listener is born out of communication theory. Duane Litfin explains how communication works:

At the simplest level, human communication involves three steps: (1) a source encodes his or her meaning in a signal; (2) this signal is transmitted to a receiver; and (3) the receiver decodes it, attributing meaning to it (see fig. 1). To the extent that the meaning the receiver finds in the signal is similar to the meaning the source intended, communication has occurred. To the extent that the two meanings do not match, communication has not occurred.⁶



Litfin goes on to point out that the “primary challenge as a speaker lies in the choices you must make about how to reach a *particular audience* with a

deserves more careful attention than the analysis of the particular audience to which the particular message is to be presented. Yet it is a step that is very frequently omitted”(An *Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 54).

⁵Mark Galli & Craig Brian Larson, *Preaching that Connects, Using the Techniques of Journalists to Add Impact to Your Sermons*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994, page 16.

⁶Ibid., pages 18-19.

given idea. No two audiences are the ever the same.”⁷ Fred Craddock writes:

“No book of theology, even if it is addressed to the modern mind; no biblical commentary, even if it moves the text toward the pulpit; no volume of sermons, packaged and ready for delivery, has the Word winged for the hearts and minds of a particular group of listeners. Only the minister there can properly do that. . . . it is only when local soil has been added that the sermon will take root and grow.”⁸

What needs to happen for effective preaching to result is what Duane Litfin calls *audience adaptation* or an *audience-centered approach* to communication. As he writes: “It is not enough, then, merely to combine a speaker with a speech to achieve effective communication. We must have a speaker who has so adapted himself and his speech to the needs of a particular audience that the listeners are both willing and able to assimilate what they receive.”⁹

A good example of *audience adaptation* by a preacher is the apostle Paul’s sermon to the Athenians recorded by Luke in Acts 17. Paul had been “preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” in the local synagogue and in the marketplace day by day(vv. 17-18). Luke tells us that Paul had noticed that the city of Athens was full of idols, something that greatly distressed him(v.16). Paul also knew that among his listeners were Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. So when Paul eventually preaches, he begins with a compliment on their religiosity(vv. 22-23). He follows up later on with two

⁷Ibid., page 39.

⁸*Preaching*, page 98.

⁹Duane Litfin, *Public Speaking*, page 42; See also Howard G. Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives*, Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1987, page 109: “A good communicator is *receptor-sensitive*.”

quotations(v. 28) that come from their poets: the Cretan poet Epimenides, the Cilician poet Aratus, and Cleanthes. Quoting Donald Sunukjian, who studied in detail the messages of Paul in Acts 13, 17, and 20, Duane Litfin writes:

“One of the most prominent features of these messages is Paul’s ‘total adaptation of his message to the particular audience before him.’ Every aspect of his preaching is deliberately suited to the hopes, needs, and understandings of his immediate listeners. . . . Every choice [Paul] makes is guided by the nature of his immediate audience, and every aspect of his preaching is suited to their unique needs.”¹⁰

It is interesting to note the detail Luke ends the chapter with: “A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.” This Word of God that Paul preached, a message adapted to his Athenian audience, was powerfully effective.

So what can a preacher do to adapt his message to a particular audience? Duane Litfin points out that this can be achieved “by (1) understanding your audience, who they are, how they think and feel, what their perceived and unperceived needs are, and then (2) relating your ideas to them in such a way that they can see your meaning and its relevance to them.”¹¹ Our focus in this section is on the first aspect: understanding the listener. If a preacher is going to be effective on the pulpit she not only needs to exegete the Biblical text; she must exegete the audience as well. Unless a preacher carefully

¹⁰Ibid., page 40; Cf. Donald R. Sunukjian, “Patterns for Preaching: A Rhetorical Analysis,” Dallas Theological Seminary, 1972, pages 184, 194.

¹¹*Public Speaking*, page 40.

listens to his listeners a roadblock is set up hindering the effective power of God's Word to connect with the listener.¹²

Audience Analysis

Careful listening to listeners requires that preachers come to know the people of their own congregation — the men, women, and children — who listen to their sermons Sunday after Sunday. Preachers are to come to know who they are, how they think and feel, and what their needs are. Several times in the gospels we read that Jesus *knew* what his listener's thoughts were; he knew the attitudes they struggled with.¹³ Jesus' knowledge of the thoughts and needs of each particular audience shaped the content of the messages he preached.

Every preacher in a local congregation has a particular audience. Haddon Robinson writes:

A church has a postal code and stands near Fifth and Main in some town or city. The profound issues of the Bible and the ethical, philosophical questions of our times assume different shapes in rural villages, in middle-class communities, or in the ghettos of crowded cities. Ultimately we do not address everyone; we speak to a particular people and call them by name.¹⁴

The preacher does not prepare her sermon in isolation from the particular community where she ministers. John Stott writes:

It remains an axiom of Christian preaching that the road from study to

¹²The second aspect Duane Litfin talks about, the issue of relating ideas and relevance, will be discussed in the subsequent section: "Connecting God's Word to Listeners."

¹³See Matthew 12:25; Mark 12:15; Luke 5:22; 6:8; 11:17.

¹⁴*Biblical Preaching*, page 74.

pulpit runs through a living, demanding interrupting manse; out into the noisy street; in and out of houses and hospitals, farms and factories, buses, trains, cinemas . . . up between rows of puzzled people to the place where you are called to preach . . . For the living Word there is no by-pass road from study to pulpit.¹⁵

Before a preacher preaches he must walk with and get to know his audience as together they travel up and down the busy thoroughfares of daily life. As Henry Ward Beecher advised:

Begin your ministry with the common people. Get seasoned with the humanity and sympathies which belong to me; mix with farmers, mechanics and laboring men; eat with them, sleep with them; for after all, there is the great substance of humanity.¹⁶

There are basically three methods by which a preacher can analyze his audience and get to know the particular people of his congregation.¹⁷ The first method Fred Craddock calls the *formal* method. He writes: "A preacher does not move into a ministry and expect to be consistently effective in the pulpit when he or she knows the parishioners solely by a process of gradual absorption.

Initiative and intentionality are essential, if for no other reason than to break the

¹⁵Here Stott quotes David H.C. Read, *The Communication of the Gospel*, the 1951 Warrick Lectures (S.C.M., 1952, page 63); *Between Two Worlds*, page 191.

¹⁶*Yale Lectures on Preaching*, 3 volumes, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890, page 147; quoted in Stafford North, *Preaching: Man & Method*, page 64; "The first need of the speaker is to know his audience"(Ralph L. Lewis, *Speech for Persuasive Preaching*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: LithoCrafters, Inc., 1968, page 90; cf. pages 88-98).

¹⁷Here I am borrowing the categories from Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, pages 93-97.

stereotypes we bring with us.”¹⁸ When I moved from a small non-traditional church of 30 families in a large urban area to my current charge, a large traditional church of 180 families in a small rural town, initially I felt like a duck out of water. Even though both congregations were part of the same denomination the people were worlds apart. Before I could adapt the Word of God to this “different” congregation I had to take the initiative to get to know them.

In the first few months in my current congregation I met with every committee chair, every Council member, and the leaders of the various ministries in the church. In the first two years I also intentionally visited every family and/or individual in their homes. Over cups of coffee and pastries I sat around a kitchen table or on a living room couch and listened. I learned their names. I heard their family histories. I became aware of their hopes, their fears, their dreams, their faith, or lack of faith. This city preacher walked their fields and toured their barns. They talked; I listened and took notes. I started to get to know my congregation and how to adapt the Word of God to meet their needs.

Another formal method for a preacher to get to know the particulars about a local congregation and community is using a tool that J. Daniel Baumann calls *the mechanical type*: “interest inventories, membership records, questionnaires, any form of testing, sometimes a sophisticated attitude scale, and other means

¹⁸Ibid., pages 93f.

of accomplishing statistical information collection.”¹⁹ In the denomination I serve there is an annual *Yearbook* produced that is packed full of all kinds of statistical data on each congregation. There might be an existing archive in the church. Council or board minute books can reveal all sorts of information about the local church. There are community histories available in local libraries. The local business association, town hall, or Chamber of Commerce will have all kinds of statistical data about the town or city. Local community leaders can also be a valuable source of information about the feelings, attitudes, and needs of the local area.

My previous ministry was a church plant which meant there was no immediate congregation to get to know. Yet as I met with the local mayor, police chief, area pastors and other community leaders I soon began to form an image of the audience God was calling us to reach. As Fred Craddock correctly points out:

A few key interviews soon after one’s arrival in the community can hasten the beginnings of pastoral as well as pulpit effectiveness. . . . Clear images of local citizens, including one’s parishioners will soon emerge: how they earn their income, how they spend their leisure, what their attitudes are about themselves and others, what they most cherish, what they most fear, where their power lies officially and where it lies actually are among the questions which will be answered.²⁰

Preachers need to continue to get to know their specific audience long after the initial “get acquainted” period. This can be done both *formally* and

¹⁹*A Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 52.

²⁰*Preaching*, page 94.

informally. Formally, the regular pastoral ministry enables the preacher to exegete his audience and know how to preach messages that are audience-centered. John Stott writes: "The best preachers are always diligent pastors, who know the people of their district and congregation, and understand the human scene in all its pain and pleasure, glory and tragedy." And then somewhat tongue in cheek, but potently true, he adds: "The quickest way to gain such an understanding is to shut our mouth(a hard task for compulsive preachers) and open our eyes and ears. It has been well said that God has given us two ears and two eyes, but only one mouth, so that he obviously intends us to look and listen twice as much as we talk."²¹

Stott goes on to explain how this works itself out in pastoral ministry:

We need to ask people questions and get them talking. We ought to know more about the Bible than they do, but they are likely to know more about the real world than we do. So we should encourage them to tell us about their home and family life, their job, their expertise and their spare-time interests. We also need to penetrate beyond their doing to their thinking. What makes them tick? How does their Christian faith motivate them? What problems do they have which impede their believing or inhibit them from applying their faith to their life? The more diverse people's backgrounds, the more we have to learn. It is important for us to listen to representatives of different generations as well as of different cultures, especially of the younger generation. The married pastor who has teenage children has no excuse not to be earthed in reality. Humble listening is indispensable to relevant preaching.²²

A preacher who gets to know his audience through regular pastoral work is like a good shepherd. The Bible tells us that a good shepherd knows his

²¹*Between Two Worlds*, page 192.

²²*Ibid.*

sheep, he calls his own sheep by name and the sheep recognize his voice.²³

Quoting J.M. Reu, Haddon Robinson writes: “Preaching is fundamentally a part of the care of souls, and the care of souls involves a thorough understanding of the congregation.”²⁴ “The pastor who faithfully calls among his people, gives himself to a counselling ministry, and puts before him on his sermon worksheets some note of the needs he has currently sensed in the parish, will have abundant help to this end.”²⁵ “A good shepherd stays up to speed on the environment within which he proclaims.”²⁶

The preacher’s careful listening is out of respect for his listeners. F. Dean Lueking writes: “. . . the basic meaning of respect is — ‘looking again.’ To *re-spectare*, to look a second time at a tiny or large segment of a person’s life, is to see that to which the person herself may be oblivious. The preacher re-spects, has an eye for the meaning under the apparently humdrum.”²⁷ The preacher

²³See John 10:3,5,14.

²⁴*Biblical Preaching*, page 74; cf. J.M. Reu, *Homiletics: A Manual of the Theory and Practice of Preaching*, translated by Albert Steinhäuser, Chicago: Wartburg, 1924, Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967; see also F. Dean Lueking: “The term *Seelsorge* — the care and cure of souls — defines the whole attitude of wanting to see, wanting to hear, wanting to bring healing to people’s whole needs in the light of Christ’s grace. . . . The call to minister as a bearer of the Word is distinctive; it is at the heart of *Seelsorge*” (*Preaching: The Art of Connecting God and People*, pages 70-71).

²⁵Merrill R. Abbey, *The Word Interprets Us*, Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1967, page 81.

²⁶Joseph M. Stowell, III, “Preaching for a Change,” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, page 136.

²⁷*Preaching: The Art of Connecting God and People*, page 24.

must live among the people of his congregation, and “thereby be sensitized to their weaknesses, pressures, and multiple concerns which inevitably arise in the process of living . This is to say that there ought to be no bifurcation between the pastoral and the preaching roles. The good preacher is a good pastor. One task feeds the other.”²⁸

Not all the pastoral work is done by the preacher in a local congregation. There might be elders or deacons who regularly call on the members of the congregation. Lay visitation teams take up the bulk of pastoral visiting in many churches. Small group ministries enable people to experience the communion of saints and care for one another. Whatever model of pastoral care a church might follow, without betraying personal confidences, there ought to be ways of analyzing the spiritual health of individuals and the congregation as a whole. For example, in the denomination I serve, the elders covenant together to make annual visits to each family and individual in the church. Without betraying any confidences, the elders report monthly on their pastoral visits. Through such reports the minister can quickly get to know his audience: who they are, how they think and feel, their spiritual health, where growth is required, and what their needs are.

The preacher can also get to know his audience *informally*. Fred

Craddock points out:

Hardly a day passes that does not provide many and varied human contacts and occasions to observe the activities and interactions of those

²⁸J. Daniel Baumann, *A Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 52.

to whom and among whom one ministers. In some of these the minister is intentionally and heavily engaged, as in a wedding, a funeral, a hospital visit, or a counseling session. In others, participation is more casual, as in attendance at civic, social, and recreational events, but in all situations, the minister is a listening and observing participant. This is in no way to suggest that any minister is to sit at life's curb and be a spectator of the drama passing by. Nor does it even hint that a preacher could profitably move about among the populace like a vacuum cleaner, picking up human interest tidbits and illustrative materials to enliven the Sunday fare. To be a minister in a community is to be a resident, a citizen, a responsible leader, and one who shares the blame and the credit for the quality of life in that place. One preaches *in* and *out of* as well as *to* that community. What is being said here, however, is that the minister, as much or more than anyone else, has the opportunity to understand the people.²⁹

In these informal settings "one doesn't go . . . with a notepad in hand as if to a research project." But these are times "for absorbing, for listening and seeing, for being in the presence of people whose lives have meaning for preaching. So much can be learned from people in any informal setting by the simple act of being genuinely interested in them and the stories which reveal something of who they are all behind the facade of surface pleasantries."³⁰ Yet to really benefit from all this interaction with the members of a congregation, "preachers must listen: to questions people ask, and for answers they seek. They must observe: needs (expressed or unexpressed, admitted or denied), relationships (personal, family, community), experiences, attitudes, and interests."³¹

Carefully listening to listeners, both formally and informally, not only

²⁹*Preaching*, pages 94-95.

³⁰F. Dean Lueking, *Preaching: The Art of Connecting God and People*, pages 20-21.

³¹Haddon Robinson, *Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 131.

enables the preacher to know his audience, but genuine, active listening can provide the catalyst for change to occur. Harry Farra comments: "Listening can change people. . . . In some ways the so-called generation gap has been the result of the disease of not listening. . . . We have often been too busy having fun or making a living to hear the words of the young people who could not learn to live in our kind of world. The Bible suggests that a fellowship of listeners is one of the few alternatives to destructive, defeated, and unfulfilled living."³² This "listening-that-changes-others" also can be the catalyst that will change the listener. "Listening that heals others is also the best self-therapy. . . . I have yet to see a good listener who is at the same time depressed and fretful. Seeing people change and grow is to live constantly at the edge of daily grace. . . . *Horizontal sensitivity is the key that unlocks the door to vertical grace.*"³³

Besides the *formal* and *informal* methods of audience analysis, there is a third method that can assist the preacher to "know" his congregation. Fred Craddock calls this the *empathetic imagination* method.³⁴ He describes this method as "an effort of the imagination to bring to a specific human condition all that a person has heard, seen, read, felt, and experienced about that condition."³⁵ This is how it works:

³²*The Sermon Doctor*, pages 169-70.

³³*Ibid.*, page 170.

³⁴See *Preaching*, pages 95-98.

³⁵*Ibid.*, page 97.

Take a blank sheet of paper and write at the top, "What's It Like to Be?" Beneath that write a phrase descriptive of one concrete facet of human experience. Examples might be "facing surgery," "living alone," "suddenly wealthy," "rejected by a sorority," "arrested for burglary," "going into the military," "fired from one's position," "graduating," "getting one's own apartment," "unable to read," "extremely poor," "fourteen years old." For the next fifteen minutes scribble on the page every thought, recollection, feeling, experience, name, place, sound, smell, or taste that comes to mind.³⁶

If a preacher were to do this, says Craddock, they "will likely be surprised to discover how much understanding of the human condition they already have but which has not been adequately reflected in either the words or music of their preaching. . . . The cumulative effect of this exercise can be the noticeable reduction in the number of sermons that either make no contact with the listener or make contact in ways unintended and often counterproductive."³⁷

In order to appropriately analyze a specific audience, like a local congregation, the preacher should imagine those human situations that are particular to his listeners. A similar method of *empathetic imagination* is something suggested by Don Sunukjian: "A Life Situation Grid."³⁸ Haddon Robinson refers to this helpfulness of such a grid. He writes: "It is helpful to make a grid of the people in your church in terms of things like age, marital

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., pages 97-98.

³⁸Discussed by Haddon Robinson in *Making a Difference in Preaching*, pages 121-22.

status, housing situation, net worth, education.”³⁹ Robinson explains how this grid might look like:

Across the top of the grid, I label columns for men, women, singles, married, divorced, those living together. On the side of the grid, I have rows for different age groups(youth, young adult, middle-age, elderly), professional groups (the unemployed, the self-employed, workers, and management), levels of faith(committed Christians, doubters, cynics, and atheists), the sick and the healthy to name a few. I develop my grid based on the congregation and community I am preaching to.”⁴⁰

Through the development of a life situation grid for a particular congregation a preacher will be able to know and understand who his listeners are, what their particular fears, hopes, and dreams might be. *Formally, informally,* and through *empathetic imagination* a preacher can analyze the particular audience that will listen to her sermons.

General Analysis

Another way to analyze the audience is for a preacher to look at those things that will be true of all listeners. For example, Duane Litfin points out, “The human mind craves *unity, order,* and *progress.* This is a fundamental pattern of human thought, and we may reliably assume that any audience to whom we speak will be made up of people who share this pattern in common.”⁴¹ Litfin

³⁹“The Heresy of Application,” *Leadership*, Volume XVIII, Number 4(Fall 1997), page 24; J. Daniel Baumann makes a similar point: “A demographic analysis should be conducted in order ascertain general information: age, sex, marital status, place of residence, vocation, income, schooling, and political party preference of the congregation” (*An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 54).

⁴⁰Haddon Robinson, *Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 122.

⁴¹*Public Speaking, A Handbook for Christians*, page 49.

goes on to list a number of other commonalities we may take for granted:

1. Theological Commonalities
 - a. Human beings are made in the image of God
 - (1) We are rational beings
 - (2) We are volitional beings
 - (3) We are moral beings
 - (4) We are social beings
 - b. Human beings possess not simply a material dimension but a spiritual dimension as well
 - c. Humans are unified beings
 - d. Humans are sinful beings.
2. Psychological Commonalities (cf. Abraham H. Maslow)
 - a. *Physiological Needs*: Humans have a fundamental need for food, the need to maintain body temperature, the need to avoid pain and injury, and the need for sensory stimulation.
 - b. *Safety Needs*: Humans have a desire for security.
 - c. *Love Needs*: Humans have need to be loved and to belong to a group.
 - d. *Esteem Needs*: Humans have a need to be respected and appreciated by others.
 - e. *The Need for Self-Actualization*: Humans have the need to fulfill all of one's potential.⁴²

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones contends that the pew doesn't have to control the pulpit. People in the pew have common needs. He writes:

It is a vital part of preaching to reduce all listeners to that common denominator. . . . [The preacher] knows the problem of the factory worker, he knows the problem of the professional man; because it is ultimately precisely the same. One may get drunk on beer and the other one wine, as it were, but the point is that they both get drunk; one may sin in rags and the other in evening dress, but they both sin.⁴³

The point is this: people share a lot in common simply as human beings. These needs have no postal code, no gender preference, no age restrictions, no

⁴²See *Ibid.*, pages 49-59; See also Roger Van Harn, *Pew Rights*, pages 34ff. He suggests that in light of the Biblical story, people bring with them to the pew the "need for dignity, meaning, and hope."

⁴³*Preaching and Preachers*, pages 134-35.

cultural barriers. They are common to believer and unbeliever alike. Preachers should be aware of this. Those who listen to their sermons will take these needs with them into the pew.

It is also important for preachers to remember that they are preaching to ordinary people. "Ordinary people are people who live on the edge, just a step behind the line that separates us from those who fall apart at the seams. Ordinary people are the ones who cry for a sign, any old sign, that it might still be all right even when everything seems horribly wrong."⁴⁴ Lewis Smedes confesses that in his early days of preaching he did not want the people in his church to be ordinary people. He writes,

"I wanted them to be harts panting for the water brooks of my sermons. I wanted them to be minds buzzing like souped-up computers digesting my great ideas. I wanted them to be souls on tiptoe, dancing to the spectacular music of the Spirit. I wanted them to be spiritual athletes, shoulders strong to bear the burden of global justice that my prophetic words laid on them. But while I was offering them the precious promises and walloping them with the heroic mandates of the Word of God, many of them were secretly praying, "O God, I don't think I can get through the week — HELP ME!"⁴⁵

A careful listening to listeners involves the preacher getting to know the ordinary people of his congregation both in terms of the things that are particular to them, but also those things that they share in common with all human beings. But the listening that leads to preparedness for preaching consists of more than simply analyzing the particularities and commonalities of the local congregation;

⁴⁴Lewis B. Smedes, "Preaching To Ordinary People," *Leadership*, Volume IV, Number 4 (Fall 1983), page 114.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pages 115-16.

it also includes analyzing the larger world of the listener: the culture in which they live.

Cultural Analysis

Careful listening to listeners requires that preachers come to know the culture in which they minister, the modern world. Haddon Robinson writes:

We must be aware of the currents swirling across our own times. Each generation develops out of its own history and culture and speaks its own language. We may stand before a congregation and deliver exegetically accurate sermons that are scholarly and organized, but they are dead and powerless because they ignore the life-wrenching problems and questions of our hearers. . . . We must answer not only the questions our fathers and mothers asked; we must wrestle with the questions our children ask. Men or women who speak effectively for God must first struggle with the questions of their age and then speak to those questions from the eternal truth of God.⁴⁶

How can a preacher become aware of these cultural currents and thereby “exegete the culture”? Terry Mattingly suggests that “Day after day, our culture sends us signals. . . . This is especially true of visual media — especially television.”⁴⁷ Quoting from a sermon by Haddon Robinson, Mattingly explains: “Television is omnipresent. We have now moved in our society to a postliterate society. The way in which people get ideas, the way in which they shape their ideals, comes not because they read books, but because they see it, they

⁴⁶*Biblical Preaching*, page 74

⁴⁷“Preaching the Big Idea to Cultures and Subcultures,” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching, Connecting the Bible to People*, edited by Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999, page 85.

visualize it. It's on television."⁴⁸ Through secular media people are influenced on how they view work, success, sex, family, divorce, children, life, death, and eternity.

In order for preachers to carefully listen to the culture around them they need to learn to think more like missionaries. Terry Mattingly writes: "Every time Paul entered a new land he seems to have headed straight to the synagogue and the marketplace. Any preacher who wants to do this today will need to study the signals that people receive while sitting on their couches or strolling through their malls."⁴⁹ "Karl Barth . . . coined a compelling image: the preacher broods with the Bible at one hand and the newspaper at the other. Today, I suppose, we would say that the preacher broods with one eye on the Bible and other on CNN."⁵⁰

Mattingly goes on to define what these signals are. A signal is "a single piece of media or popular culture focusing on a subject that is of vital interest to the church. It can be a newspaper article, a single episode of a television show, a compact disc, a movie, a new video, a best-selling book, or some other item. . . . Above all, preachers must learn to recognize when the media launch a major invasion into biblical territory."⁵¹ Mattingly points out that most signals fall into

⁴⁸From a sermon at Denver Seminary on January 4, 1991, focusing on mass media, seminary education, and the church; *Ibid.*, page 86

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, page 89

⁵⁰Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting the Gospel*, page 15.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, pages 89-90.

three categories:

1. The first is a signal that is so obvious that even the secular media recognize that it has moral and theological content. These signals reach a very high percentage of the population, in and out of the pews. . . .
2. The second signal can be seen as a rifle shot at a specific niche in the population. . . . The broader the audience touched by a signal, the more likely it can be used effectively in the pulpit. . . .
3. Finally, there are signals that are important precisely *because* they haven't exploded into the public consciousness — yet. Often it is possible to hear whispers in the popular culture about issues that will soon be shouted on the rooftops. This is where church leaders must concede that screenwriters, musicians, and journalists often do a better job of monitoring the public pulse than do religious educators, entrepreneurs, and bureaucrats.⁵²

The first step then in cultural analysis is to find these cultural media signals. John Stott suggests that active listening to contemporary culture includes reading “a daily or weekly newspaper, . . . watch some television, and peruse the secular book reviews in order to discover the most influential contemporary books to get and read. It seems clear that we shall also find it necessary to see some of the most notable films and plays, since nothing mirrors contemporary society more faithfully than the stage and the screen.”⁵³

Another place to find these signals is in advertising. Mattingly writes:

“Few ads today make their pitch using lines of type and linear arguments. Instead, they show us images. Some are funny and some are stupid, but they are almost always colorful and gripping. Truth is, these images are the first step in a kind of sacramental system. Step 1: See this image, experience this feeling, feel this need. Step 2: Buy and consume this product. Step 3: Accept, by faith, that using or consuming this product will help you become like the people in the images. The goal is to be able to

⁵²Ibid., pages 90-91.

⁵³*Between Two Worlds*, page 193.

say, “I am the kind of person who consumes this product.” Whether they realize it or not, millions of people make professions of faith at the shopping mall.⁵⁴

Some preachers might object to the suggestion that they need to go and watch contemporary plays, television programs, and movies. John Stott conceives that one of his readers may ask: “Are there not some plays, films, and books which we would be wise to avoid, lest we expose ourselves to unnecessary temptation?”⁵⁵ Yet there are ways to find these media signals without watching the movies and programs. Terry Mattingly shares how he keeps file folders full of essays and reviews about films. He adds: “If the movie would have lasting impact . . . then I would rent it on videocassette and, with pen and notepad in hand, sit down in a responsible and controlled environment — perhaps with seminary colleagues — and take careful notes.”⁵⁶ John Stott gives similar advice: “In the case of borderline plays and films, and of those who influence in particularly insidious because its spirit of antichrist is more subtle than overt, I have found it helpful to go to it not alone but with a group of friends, for it is then easier to retain one’s critical detachment and refuse to be sucked

⁵⁴“Preaching the Big Idea of Cultures and Subcultures,” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, page 87.

⁵⁵*Between Two Worlds*, page 193.

⁵⁶Class notes, *The Preacher and the Message*, Gordon-Conwell Seminary Doctor of Ministry Cohort, Charlotte Campus, Charlotte, North Carolina, January 2001; Cf. “Preaching the Big Idea of Cultures and Subcultures,” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, page 83

into the atmosphere.”⁵⁷ Cultural analysis through an extensive review of contemporary mass media is “not co-operation with the spirit of the age, still less marriage to it, but rather an understanding of it with a view to confronting it with a relevant word from God.”⁵⁸

Another helpful resource for studying popular culture is forming a reading group that is focused on reading and reviewing secular books. John Stott has been doing this for decades. He shares, “We spend a whole evening together, sharing our reactions to the book, discussing its message and implications, and trying to develop a Christian response to it. . . . We have tried to concentrate on secular rather than religious books, because the main purpose of our group is to help us understand the secular mind of the post-Christian West, in order to combat it with a Christian mind.”⁵⁹ Such a group could also watch and review films or plays. Such reading or study groups can be an invaluable resource of identifying the media signals of contemporary society. Stott confirms this. Speaking about his reading group, he writes: “They have helped to drag me into the modern world and have planted my feet on the soil of contemporary reality; I am very grateful to them.”⁶⁰

Once the preacher has found a specific culture media signal, “Step 2

⁵⁷*Between Two Worlds*, page 193.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, page 194.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, page 195.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, page 197.

requires honest, open-minded analysis. We want to find what I call the signal's 'secular subject,' as the artist would define it. . . . In one way or another they have to deal with real issues or with what we could even call 'big ideas' — life, death, love, hate, money, marriage, sex, fear, children, anger, pride, hatred, war, and so forth. We must ask: What was the subject that the artist wanted to address?"⁶¹ As a preacher would exegete a Biblical text in order to discover the "big idea" communicated by the original author, so too the preacher would exegete the media signal in order to discover the "big idea" communicated by the producer of the particular media.

The final step in analyzing a culture media signal "mirrors step 2. Once you have found this 'secular subject,' it will almost always have moral or theological overtones. It will be a 'sacred subject' that we share in common with the saints and sinners through the ages. Stories change. Images change. Questions often sound new and strange. But the 'big ideas' are remarkably constant, because the stuff of human experience is the same."⁶²

Careful listening to the culture media signals is essential for preparedness for preaching. Terry Mattingly writes: "The myths and messages we consume on our couches and at our malls matter. We must talk to our people about their real lives and, like it or not, this means talking about popular culture. We must admit that we are listening. We must try to understand. By doing so, we are not letting

⁶¹"Preaching the Big Idea of Cultures and Subcultures," *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, page 92.

⁶²Ibid.

the world hijack the church's agenda. We will merely be taking part in a debate in which the church cannot afford to remain silent."⁶³

Feedback Analysis

Listening that leads to preparedness for preaching analyzes the particularities and commonalities of the local congregation. It analyzes the contemporary culture where the listener lives. It also consists of analyzing listener feedback.

In response to the question, "What do you think of sermons?" one churchgoer replied, "Most sermons resemble hovercrafts skimming over the water on blasts of hot air, never landing anywhere!"⁶⁴ Reflecting on this response Haddon Robinson writes:

No wonder sermons are occasionally mocked as 'the fine art of talking in someone else's sleep.' Communication experts dismiss them as 'religious monologues.' Communication flows best on two-way streets, they argue, while preaching moves in only one direction. And because congregations can't talk back to register doubts, disagreements, or opinions, many sermons hit dead ends.⁶⁵

But preaching does not only involve the preacher and the sermon; it also involves the congregation.

Haddon Robinson calls listener feedback "the lifeblood of communication.

⁶³Ibid., pages 92-93.

⁶⁴Quoted by Haddon Robinson from a study done by the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies in *Making a Difference in Preaching*, edited by Scott M. Gibson, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999, page 129.

⁶⁵Ibid.

Without it, preaching seldom touches life.”⁶⁶ Donald K. Smith compares communication without listener feedback like trying to go somewhere in a car that has wheels that aren’t round. He writes: “Just as a car needs complete round wheels to make progress, so the circle of communication must be complete for understanding to make progress. It is *feedback* that completes the circle. . . . Completing the circle by listening to what the audience is saying, what the audience is needing and wanting, is a better way than shuffling them to one side while we proclaim.”⁶⁷ Preaching doesn’t have to be “a monologue with no return In fact, significant preaching has always involved dialogue. The most astute preachers allow their eyes and ears to program their mouths.”⁶⁸

Lowell O. Erdahl compares preaching without feedback to driving golf balls in the dark. He writes: “We preachers need all the help we can get, and only the hearers can tell if we are ‘hitting the green.’ One of the best was for us to hear ourselves is to listen to our listeners. As preachers and hearers we can help each other by encouraging feed-back and feed-in.”⁶⁹

There are three types of listener feedback available to the preacher to make dialogue possible. One kind of feedback is *informal feedback*. “Informal

⁶⁶Ibid., page 134.

⁶⁷*Creating Understanding, A Handbook for Christian Communication Across Cultural Landscapes*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, page 338; Howard G. Hendricks writes: “Don’t miss this or you miss it all: Get feedback”(*Teaching to Change Lives*, page 113).

⁶⁸*Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 130.

⁶⁹*Preaching For the People*, page 100; Cf. pages 97-101.

feedback is normally part of all social interaction We simply need to learn how to recognize and interpret it.”⁷⁰ This feedback can come in many different ways. Donald Smith identifies twelve signal systems through which this informal feedback can come:

1. Verbal — speech
2. Written — symbols representing speech
3. Numeric — numbers and number systems
4. Pictorial — two-dimensional representations
5. Artifactual — three-dimensional representations and objects, the “things” used in living
6. Audio — use of non-verbal sounds, and silence
7. Kinesic — body motions, facial expressions, posture
8. Optical — light and color
9. Tactile — touch, the sense of “feel”
10. Spatial — utilization of space
11. Temporal — utilization of time
12. Olfactory — taste and smell⁷¹

A preacher might have a parishioner say something after a Sunday worship service. A note might be written on a pew card or received in the mail. The listeners’ faces during the message — the smiles, nods, confused expressions, worried gazes — are telling. A person might engage in an argument during the coffee fellowship hour after the service. In some church traditions the shouts of “Amen” or lack thereof is saying something. Not all informal feedback is packed with pleasantries. Many preachers are targets of critical feedback. The point is this: feedback is everywhere. Feedback is also given in silence. A preacher concludes his sermon, and the sanctuary is so still

⁷⁰Donald K. Smith, *Creating Understanding*, page 342.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, page 146; Cf. pages 144-64.

one could hear the proverbial needle fall. This too can communicate something to the preacher. As Paul Tournier likes to say, "Silence is more eloquent than speech."⁷²

Preachers need to learn to recognize the various signals that informally communicate feedback. More importantly, they will need to interpret that feedback. As Haddon Robinson cautions: "As people file out of the sanctuary on Sunday, they mumble appropriate clichés: 'You preached a good sermon today' or 'I enjoyed what you had to say.' While those responses are nice, they are often little more than code words to get past the minister as he guards the door."⁷³ As Donald Smith points out: "Not all informal feedback has equal value. It takes the right people to give you the right feedback on each subject."⁷⁴

There is a type of informal feedback that Donald Smith calls "ghost" feedback. This feedback is "*perceived feedback*. Perceived feedback is what we think is there, but actually is not. It is 'ghost' feedback, existing in the imagination. We react to it *as we think it is*."⁷⁵ Smith underscores the impact that this kind of feedback might have on a communicator:

Perceived feedback can be as powerful as real feedback in affecting the message; at times it is even more powerful. When our expectation is correct, there is no problem. But if we expect feedback different from the response that actually comes, our message will not have been 'on target.'

⁷²*The Meaning of Persons*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 1957.

⁷³*Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 133.

⁷⁴*Creating Understanding*, page 344.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, pages 344-45.

We prepared it with a wrong view of the audience in mind. In effect, we talked with someone who was not there and ignored those who were there. . . . Anticipating a particular kind of feedback shapes the message as strongly as actually receiving that feedback. It is very important to have a correct idea of the audience, to anticipate correctly what the feedback will be. It is also critical to get accurate feedback — responses that are representative of the true reaction.⁷⁶

The most effective kind of listener feedback is *formal, systematic feedback*. “Preachers need an organized program of feedback following the sermon to determine whether they have hit their target.”⁷⁷ Preachers need to intentionally solicit feedback if they desire results from their preaching. As Haddon Robinson notes: “Effective speakers look for feedback.”⁷⁸ Donald Smith states that “failing to seek systematic feedback through evaluation is failing to use our opportunities in a Spirit-guided manner. It can too easily result in blind and rigid adherence to irrelevant methods. Instead of our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s leadership being increased, an unchallenged satisfaction (perhaps even smugness) dulls our sense of need for his direction.”⁷⁹

Formal, systematic feedback can best happen *before* or *after* the sermon. This doesn’t rule out the importance of the feedback that takes place during sermon delivery. Alan H. Monroe and Douglas Ehninger emphasize:

It is important to keep a close watch on the reactions of your listeners when your subject is announced and throughout your entire speech. The

⁷⁶Ibid., pages 346-47.

⁷⁷Haddon Robinson, *Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 133.

⁷⁸*Biblical Preaching*, page 219

⁷⁹*Creating Understanding*, page 346.

way your hearers sit in their seats, the expressions on their faces, such audible reactions as laughter, applause, shifting about, or whispering — all these are vivid symptoms of their attitude toward you, your subject, or your purpose. If you are wise, you will develop a keen sensitivity to these signs and learn to adapt your remarks accordingly.⁸⁰

Haddon Robinson stresses a similar point: “Able communicators listen with their eyes. They know that audiences show by their expressions and posture when they understand, approve, question, or are confused. . . . Great preachers do not build strong churches nearly as often as great churches through their feedback make strong preachers.”⁸¹

Listener feedback begins long before the preacher gets behind the pulpit ready to give the sermon. It begins, as Haddon Robinson points out, “as the sermon is still brewing.”⁸² Some of this feedback, as we have already discussed, comes from the preacher’s formal and informal knowledge of his congregation and through using a “life-situation grid.”⁸³ These tools can greatly assist a preacher in understanding how to effectively preach a particular Biblical passage to a specific audience.

Another way to receive listener feedback before a sermon is to form an ad hoc focus group that will give input to the Biblical text or theme for a particular

⁸⁰*Principles and Types of Speech*, 6th ed., Palo Alto: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1967, page 137, quoted in J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 55.

⁸¹*Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 131.

⁸²*Ibid.*, page 131.

⁸³See above pages 145-57.

sermon or sermon series. John Stott writes about the great benefit he received from such resource groups. When he preached a series of messages on contemporary issues that faced Britain he realized that he was ill equipped to preach on those issues with integrity. He confesses: "I had little factual knowledge of race relations or armaments or economics, and no personal experience of industry or employment." Stott needed help in preparing sermons that would be relevant, well-informed, and to which he could speak to from the Bible in a meaningful way. Before each quarterly message Stott would meet for a couple of hours with an ad hoc group of specialists. He explains the process:

Before each group assembled, it was essential for me to do a bit of preparatory homework myself, so that I could identify some key issues and formulate the questions I wanted to put to them. The discussion was invariably lively, and on a number of occasions I found myself sitting back and listening to the debate as it developed between different opinions. Eavesdropping in this way proved extremely stimulating and enlightening. In fact, the whole experience was creative, as we struggled to relate biblical principles and contemporary contexts to one another.⁸⁴

These focus groups have a dual benefit. Not only will a preacher become informed on an issue; the preacher will also discover the questions his listeners will have about a particular issue or Scripture passage. Meeting with a number of your listeners while the message of the Biblical text is still percolating will give focus to the listeners' frame of reference.

For a sermon on divorce I asked a number of people to meet with me for a feedback session. I selected people from our congregation whom I felt might provide interesting and informative input. The group included the following:

⁸⁴*Between Two Worlds*, page 199; Cf. pages 197-201.

a woman living in a loveless relationship;
a man who married a woman who had been divorced;
a couple who are married, the husband having been previously divorced;
a woman separated from her husband who recently came out as a
homosexual and is presently pursuing this lifestyle;
a single man divorced from his wife;
a mother whose son went through a difficult divorce;
a young married couple in a healthy relationship;
two older married couples in healthy relationships; and
an older woman who is part of our abuse response team.

I provided each of these participants with a copy of the text(Matthew 19:1-12), preliminary biblical and sermon outlines, and a copy of the questions that would be considered in the input session.⁸⁵

We met for a couple of hours. By the end of our session, some were in tears, others had given heated arguments for or against divorce, and a number painfully had shared their deep hurts. The listeners answered the questions that I had about how to preach this sermon. The sermon would need to be handled sensitively and pastorally. The focus of the sermon ought to be on divorce prevention rather than scolding those in broken relationships. They especially told me to not forget the children whose parents are either divorced or going through a divorce. The listener feedback I received became formative for the sermon I later preached.

Listener feedback before a sermon can also come through the weekly Bible studies or other small group ministries. Haddon Robinson reports about a church that “turns monologue to dialogue by basing its midweek Bible study on the passage for the following Sunday’s sermon.” He explains:

⁸⁵See Appendix A for a sample of “Goal and Questions for Feedback Session”.

The pastor provides notes explaining the text, and then the people divide into small groups to explore further meanings and implications for themselves. Out of this encounter, the pastor zeroes in on terms, ideas, and issues he must address and, as an added benefit, often finds illustrations and applications for his sermon. Surprisingly, everyone agrees studying the passage beforehand heightens rather than diminishes interest in the sermon. They are made aware of the biblical material, and they become curious about how the preacher will handle it.⁸⁶

Haddon Robinson also reports about another church where the minister goes over his sermon for the following Sunday with members of his board during a weekly breakfast meeting. He concludes: “While the minister prepares the sermon, he does not do so in solitary confinement; instead he benefits from the insights and experiences of others in the body of Christ.”⁸⁷

Effective preachers seek formal, systematic feedback prior to the sermon; they also seek it following the sermon. Donald Smith reminds us that “structured evaluation . . . is a *deliberate* effort to get specific information about what is happening and how this outcome stacks up against objectives.”⁸⁸ Roger E. Van Harn writes that “people who listen to sermons *have the right to be listened to before and after the sermons are spoken.*”⁸⁹ If the kind of results a preacher expects from his preaching do not happen, the wise preacher will want to know why not. What could be done better next time to maximize the kind of results a preacher can realistically expect from the faithful preaching of God’s

⁸⁶*Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 132.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*

⁸⁸*Creating Understanding*, page 347.

⁸⁹*Pew Rights*, page 150.

Word?

Howard G. Hendricks speaks about a time when he spoke in a Sunday evening service on the West coast. He writes:

The place was jammed to the doors. Before I went in the pastor said, "Dr. Hendricks, I forgot to tell you: Once we're inside you'll notice a table on the left. Tonight you'll see seated there a plumber, a medical doctor, a housewife, a high school student, and a missionary home on furlough. After you get through speaking, they're going to ply you with questions. You don't mind, do you?" *Now he tells me*, I thought. I've never been asked such perceptive questions as I was asked that night. They punched holes in my presentation with questions that reflected the deepest needs out there in the audience. The panel was there to make sure I spoke in terms of those needs.⁹⁰

This church was serious about effective communication. They knew the need for formal, systematic feedback following the sermon.

William H. Willimon has been dean of the chapel and professor of Christian ministry at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, since 1984. In 1996, an international survey conducted by Baylor University named him one of the Twelve Most Effective Preachers in the English speaking world. Willimon suggests that one of the ways to remain effective as a preacher is to use a questionnaire. He refers to the "Sermon Reaction Questionnaire" that was developed by Boyd E. Stokes as part of his doctoral work at Emory University in the early 1970's. This questionnaire, based upon many months of research, focuses on the criteria most frequently cited as a "good" sermon.⁹¹

⁹⁰*Teaching to Change Lives*, page 115.

⁹¹William H. Willimon, "Getting The Feedback You Need," *Leadership*, Volume XIII, Number 2 (Spring 1992), pages 40-41; See Appendix B for a copy of the "Sermon Reaction Questionnaire."

Willimon states that this questionnaire has helped him with two specific areas in his preaching. As he writes:

This questionnaire has helped me focus on particular problems. For instance, since I had always prided myself in not referring to my notes, I was surprised to see my listeners thought I looked at my notes too often. So over the following few weeks, I disciplined myself to look less at my notes, and my scores improved. The questionnaire has also helped me see how many different groups within the church react to my preaching. In general, younger respondents like my preaching better than do older respondents, and women are more positive about my preaching than are men. I'm not always able to make changes in my preaching based on what I learn, but knowing how I came across has made me a more sensitive preacher.⁹²

One of the benefits of using a questionnaire is that you can do a structured research that is both formal and systematic. The preacher will be able to total and then average up all the scores on each item and on the questionnaire as a whole. Donald K. Smith emphasizes that for proper listener feedback to happen, "after criteria are decided, a method to measure those criteria *must* be selected."⁹³ Using the "Sermon Reaction Questionnaire" or another measurable tool like this will enable a proper evaluation to be done.⁹⁴

Another benefit that I have found from using questionnaires is that they are easy to administer. Having an administrative assistant or church secretary is helpful in that he or she could distribute, collect, and tally up the questionnaires. If the preacher does not have the luxury of additional church

⁹²"Getting the Feedback You Need," page 41.

⁹³*Creating Understanding*, page 350, emphasis mine.

⁹⁴See Appendix C for a sample of the questionnaire I developed and have used.

staff, this administrative detail could easily be delegated to other volunteers within the church.

An issue with using questionnaires is where will the sampling come from? Who will fill in the evaluation forms? William Willimon says that he had used the questionnaire in a couple of different ways. He explains:

In one church, I gave the questionnaire to a selected group of laypersons to evaluate my sermons my first two weeks with the congregation. Then, two years later, I gave the same questionnaire to the same laypeople for two more weeks. That helped me gauge my progress over the long term. I've also randomly selected a group of about twenty laypeople, asking them to attend worship every Sunday for five weeks. . . . I gave them questionnaires and asked them to fill them out and return them at the end of the service. After five weeks, I met with all of the respondents and shared the results of the research. Together we looked at individual sermons and the scores they received, and I asked the people to clarify some of their responses. This discussion greatly increased the value of the questionnaire for me.⁹⁵

Another way to do a formal evaluation is to set up interviews with listeners following a sermon. The preacher will formulate a number of questions based on the criteria of "good" sermons. The interview questions will be distributed to those willing to be interviewed prior to the sermon being preached.⁹⁶ The interview will take place in the week following the Sunday when the sermon was preached. There are several benefits that I have found in conducting these interviews as opposed to simply handing out questionnaires and tallying the results. First, as a pastor-teacher I am able to not only receive listener feedback

⁹⁵"Getting the Feedback You Need," page 41.

⁹⁶See Appendix D for a sample of the interview questions that would be asked. These questions are based on the criteria of "good" sermons that I have selected.

but also visit with my congregational members. Sharing their lives with them enables me to better understand their needs. Second, through my willingness to invite and receive criticism from them, people come to appreciate the value I place on faithfully and effectively preaching the Word of God. Third, the honest sharing done in these interviews deepens our understanding of the Word of God preached. Listener feedback has enabled a dialogue to occur between preacher and listener.

Another way to do listener feedback following a sermon is to incorporate opportunity for feedback immediately after the sermon as part of the worship service. Haddon Robinson reports how “Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas, devotes the last fifteen minutes of the service to questions and answers. . . . When questions are few, members tell what the sermon could mean in their lives. Both questions and testimony not only benefit the people but provide immediate information to the pastor.”⁹⁷

Listener feedback is critical for effective communication to occur through the preaching of God’s Word. As Haddon Robinson writes, “If the minister listens carefully, he will discover how his congregation responded, what they heard and did not hear, what they understood and did not understand.”⁹⁸ Perhaps better yet, “the sensitive preacher will discover in his postsermon analysis that even messages which he is inclined to dismiss as relatively

⁹⁷*Make a Difference in Preaching*, page 133..

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, page 134.

insignificant have had some effect.”⁹⁹

If the results a minister can realistically expect from the faithful preaching of God’s Word is contingent on how carefully he listens to his listener, then the preacher must take an audience-centered approach to communication. The word of encouragement to preachers is: “Cultivate a listening ear to those who hear you preach, and maybe because you have listened to them, they will hear you.”¹⁰⁰ To carefully listen to listeners, the preacher must analyze his audience. He can do that formally, informally, or through empathetic imagination. The preacher must also analyze the culture. She can do that by finding and analyzing the cultural signals that exist and come along in contemporary society. The preacher must also welcome formal, systematic feedback and analyze the response he receives. Having carefully listened to both God’s Word and listeners, in order to communicate God’s Word effectively, there is still another obstacle that needs to be removed. The preparation for preaching continues. The preacher must connect God’s Word to listeners.

⁹⁹J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 56.

¹⁰⁰Craig A. Loscalzo, “Feedback,” *Best Advice for Preaching*, edited by John S. McClure, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998, page 150.

Connecting God's Word to Listeners

Careful listening to God's Word gets the preacher into the world of the Biblical text, the original author, and the original audience. Careful listening to listeners gets the preacher into a modern context, the world of his contemporary audience and the present-day culture in which he lives. In order to effectively communicate the truth of God's Word to a modern audience the preacher needs to build a bridge between these two worlds. If these two worlds are not connected by the preacher then an obstacle is set up hindering the effective power of God's Word in a sermon to bring about the intended results in the listener.

Howard G. Hendricks suggests that the process of bridge building" is the essence of communication: "*To truly impart information requires the building of bridges.*"¹ This idea of bridge building stems from the word "communication" itself. This word comes from the Latin word *communis*, meaning "common." As Hendricks points out: "Before we can communicate we must establish commonness, commonality. And the greater the commonality, the greater the potential for communication."² Applied to the task of preaching this implies that the closer together we can bring the ancient world of the Biblical text and the modern world of the listener, the more effective the sermon will be.

¹*Teaching to Change Lives*, page 99.

²*Ibid.*, page 98.

Shaping the Life of the Listener

Stafford North writes that the key to effective preaching is to “*make preaching relevant*. . . . The way to make preaching relevant is not to abandon the old gospel but to make it meaningful in terms of current problems, longings, and needs.”³ The main aim of preaching is not simply “to shed light on the Bible but to shed the light of the Bible on life.”⁴ As J. Daniel Baumann stresses:

The ultimate goal of preaching is not the transmission of information, but the transformation of persons; not simply data exchange, but behavioral change. This means that preaching is done for a change in attitudes, beliefs, and values expressed verbally and nonverbally on the part of the persuadee. Preaching calls for radical transformation; not simply changes of life fashion, but a whole new foundation for existence.⁵

Connecting God’s Word to listeners is helping them understand the relevancy of the Bible and how their lives can be shaped by its message.

The importance of making the Bible relevant through preaching is a growing emphasis in homiletics. Haddon Robinson talks about relating the Bible to life, bringing “the ancient world, the modern world, and our particular world together” as preachers prepare sermons.⁶ A recent book on homiletics, a book dedicated to Haddon Robinson in gratitude to God for his ministry and life, has the subtitle: “Connecting the Bible to People.”⁷ In this book Joseph M. Stowell III

³*Preaching: Man & Method*, page 65.

⁴Lowell O. Erdahl, *Preaching for the People*,” pages 61-62.

⁵*An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 236.

⁶*Biblical Preaching*, page 75.

⁷*The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, edited by Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson.

writes: “An effective sermon is measured not by its polished technique but by the ability of the preacher *to connect the Word to the reality of the listener’s life.*”⁸ F. Dean Lueking’s book on preaching is entitled: *Preaching, The Art of Connecting God and People.*⁹ In Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson’s book, *Preaching that Connects*, they write: “Preachers face a bracing challenge: to proclaim the millenniums–old Scriptures in a way that never grows musty. We can say nothing really new, but it must seem new.”¹⁰ Lowell O. Erdahl states that “Preaching is for the people!”¹¹ John Stott speaks of a view of preaching “which is conceived as an activity of bridge-building between the revealed Word and the contemporary world.”¹² Hence the title of his book: *Between Two Worlds*. Before the preacher stands behind the pulpit she must stand between two worlds, the world of the Bible and the world of her listener. Through the sermon she must build a bridge between these two worlds. She must connect God’s Word to her listeners.

The importance of connecting God’s Word to listeners is rooted in the aim of preaching. As we have already pointed out, the ultimate goal of the Word of

⁸Ibid., page 125, emphasis mine.

⁹See Bibliography.

¹⁰Page 1.

¹¹*Preaching For the People*, page 11.

¹²*Between Two Worlds*, page 178.

God preached is to make the Word of God written relevant to the listener.¹³ This is echoed in Haddon Robinson's definition of expository preaching: "*Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.*"¹⁴ Some might contend that the task of preaching is simply to state and restate the truth of the Bible, say the "Amen," and give the benediction. But that is not the purpose of preaching. "It is the preacher's job to make Scripture come alive for us, to speak to us. In the sermon, the Bible becomes God's Word addressed to us in our time and place."¹⁵ The idea of the Bible text has to be developed in such a way that the listener understands what God is saying in His Word. Haddon Robinson reminds preachers that "restatement does not develop thought. It simply says the same thing in other words. To develop a thought, however, we must do one or more of three things. We must explain it, prove it, or apply it."¹⁶

The development of a Biblical idea, either by explaining it, proving it, or applying it, requires the preacher to do the necessary work of Biblical interpretation. Fred Craddock describes the nature of the interpretative task as

¹³See above, page 69.

¹⁴*Biblical Preaching*, page 21, emphasis mine.

¹⁵Tony Campolo and William Willimon, *The Survival Guide for Christians on Campus*, pages 140-1.

¹⁶*Biblical Preaching*, page 77.

“the negotiation of the distance between past and present.”¹⁷ Interpreting the Biblical text for the listener is building a bridge between the ancient Biblical world and the modern world. If the preacher aims to connect God’s Word to the listener, the task of interpreting Scripture is not optional.¹⁸

Haddon Robinson suggests three developmental questions that will enable the preacher to either explain, prove, or apply the Biblical idea in a text. These questions, to use Robinson’s words, are “the very nuts-and-bolts questions” needed to be asked in order to interpret God’s Word for God’s people today. The three developmental questions are:

1. We explain it: “What does this mean?”
2. We prove it: “Is it true?”
3. We apply it: “What difference does it make?”¹⁹

Explanation

The first developmental question focuses on explanation: Does this concept, or parts of it, need explanation?²⁰ Explanation is required because the modern audience is far removed from the persons and conditions of the original message. Listeners will ask: “What does this mean? Who wrote this? For whom was this message intended?”²¹ Haddon Robinson states that “the

¹⁷*Preaching*, page 126.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, page 127.

¹⁹*Cf. Biblical Preaching*, pages 77-96.

²⁰*Ibid.*, page 77.

²¹Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, page 127.

developmental question ‘What does that mean?’ . . . deals with both the passage and the people. If you imagine some courageous soul standing up in the middle of your sermon to shout, ‘Pastor, what exactly do you mean by that?’ you will become aware of matters that must be talked about to make yourself clear as your sermon develops.”²²

Validation

The second developmental question “centers on validity. After we understand (or think we understand) what a statement means, we often ask, ‘Is it true? Can I really believe it?’ We demand proof.”²³ The preacher cannot simply assume that everybody in his audience believes what is stated in the Bible simply because it is in the Bible. Haddon Robinson points out that “before and even during the 1950’s, the authority for the sermon rested in the preacher. People trusted the preacher to tell them what the Bible said. . . . Today, the validation for a sermon tends to be within the hearer. . . . The hearer is the seat of truth in a culture in which there are no absolutes. Listeners believe what appeals to them.”²⁴ In his book, *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson offers this word of advice to preachers:

Merely to ask, “Is it true? Do I and my hearers believe that?” does not produce instant answers. But failing to contend with those basic

²²Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, pages 77,80.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Emily Brink, “When Flint Strikes Steel, an interview with Haddon Robinson on how preaching has changed in the last century,” *Reformed Worship*, Number 40 (June 1996), Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 1996, page 16.

questions means we will speak only to those who are already committed. Worse, because we have not been willing to live for a time on the sloping back of a question mark, we may become hucksters for a message that we do not believe ourselves. A congregation has the right to expect that we are at least aware of the problems before we offer solutions. Work your way through the ideas in the exegetical outline and deal honestly with the question, "Would my audience accept that statement as true? If not, why not?" Write down the specific questions that come and, if possible, the direction of some of the answers. Before long you will discover much that you and your hearers have to think about as the sermon develops.²⁵

Application

It is with the third developmental question that the preacher begins to understand how to connect God's Word to his listener. The third question has to do with application. Haddon Robinson writes: "While it is essential that you explain the truth of a passage, your task is not finished until you relate that passage to the experience of your hearers. Ultimately the man or woman in the pew hopes that you will answer the questions, 'So what? What difference does it make?'"²⁶ "In application we attempt to take what we believe is the truth of the eternal God, which was given in a particular time and place and situation, and apply it to people in the modern world who live in another time, another place, and a very different situation. That is harder than it appears."²⁷

One difficulty with interpretation and application lies with the interpreter.

Fred Craddock points out:

²⁵pages 85-86.

²⁶Ibid., page 86.

²⁷Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," *Leadership*, Volume XVIII, Number 4(Fall 1997), page 22.

For preachers there is . . . the vocational hazard of going to the text not to listen to but to get a sermon, or perhaps even to go in search of a text to authorize a sermon already in mind. Such utilitarianism is the enemy of interpretation, and, as a result, of preaching itself. Some interpreters are inhibited by their profound respect for the sacred text and, therefore, are hesitant to engage the Scriptures vigorously with all faculties at work. Perhaps what is really at work here is not a concern for the fragility of the text but for the fragility of one's faith, a fear that investigation may turn over a stone and make a discovery that will unseat a favorite notion.²⁸

To overcome this difficulty preachers must always begin with the Biblical text, with the original message addressed by the original author to an original audience. Accurate application begins with accurate exegesis. Haddon Robinson insists:

We cannot decide what a passage means to us unless first we have determined what the passage meant when the Bible was written. To do this we must sit down before the biblical writer and try to understand what he wanted to convey to his original readers. Only after we comprehend what he meant in his own terms and to his own times can we clarify what difference that should make in life today. In order to apply a passage accurately, we must define the situation into which the revelation was originally given and then decide what a modern man or woman shares, or does not share, with the original readers. The closer the relationship between people now and people then, the more direct the application.²⁹

A second difficulty with interpretation and application lies in the text. Fred

Craddock explains:

Its quality of historical particularity seems to withhold it from availability or relevance for later readers. Most, though not all biblical texts . . . are fixed in time, place, and circumstance and, therefore, seem to possess a uniqueness, a quality of 'once but never again.' . . . If the preacher operates on the principle of analogy, applying texts to events and conditions of demonstrable similarity, would not many of the biblical

²⁸*Preaching*, page 132.

²⁹*Biblical Preaching*, page 87.

records have to remain under glass, visited and viewed, but untouched?³⁰

For example, Craddock mentions how in Genesis 22 we read about Abraham going up “Mount Moriah” to sacrifice his son. The events and conditions of this story have little correlation to the events and conditions of present-day people. Craddock asks: “When will circumstances be such as to warrant telling about Abraham raising his knife to offer Isaac, his young and only son to God?”³¹

In spite of the difficulty of minimum correspondence between the ancient world of the Biblical text and the modern world of the listener, J. Daniel Baumann highlights the necessity of preachers doing the hard work of interpretation and application: “The gospel of Jesus Christ was never intended as mere information which could simply be transmitted from generation to generation. Rather, it must bring the hearer under its claims, search his heart, and mediate a divine encounter.”³² Charles Spurgeon emphasized: “Where the application begins, there the sermon begins.”³³ It is through the application of the Biblical idea that the listener will understand the difference the Word of God ought to make in his or her life. It is through applying the Biblical idea that the preacher connects God’s Word with his listener. Through this connection God’s Word comes to life. “The living Word of God always occurs *at the point of intersection* of the

³⁰*Preaching*, page 130.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 243.

³³Quoted J. Daniel Baumann, *Ibid.*

message of the text with the concrete situation of those who hear the message.”³⁴

The imperative that the preacher interprets how a Biblical idea applies to his listener is also rooted in the nature and authority of God’s Word. The Bible texts are “the authoritative rule by which to measure belief and conduct; to say that they are Scripture is to say they are living documents, addressing believers in every age and place with a word that is fresh and appropriate as well as authoritative.”³⁵ The listener desiring to live according to the definitive norm of God’s Word needs to know how to apply a particular Biblical text. The application of a Biblical idea by the preacher in a sermon meets that need. “The Word comes through interpreting the Word.”³⁶

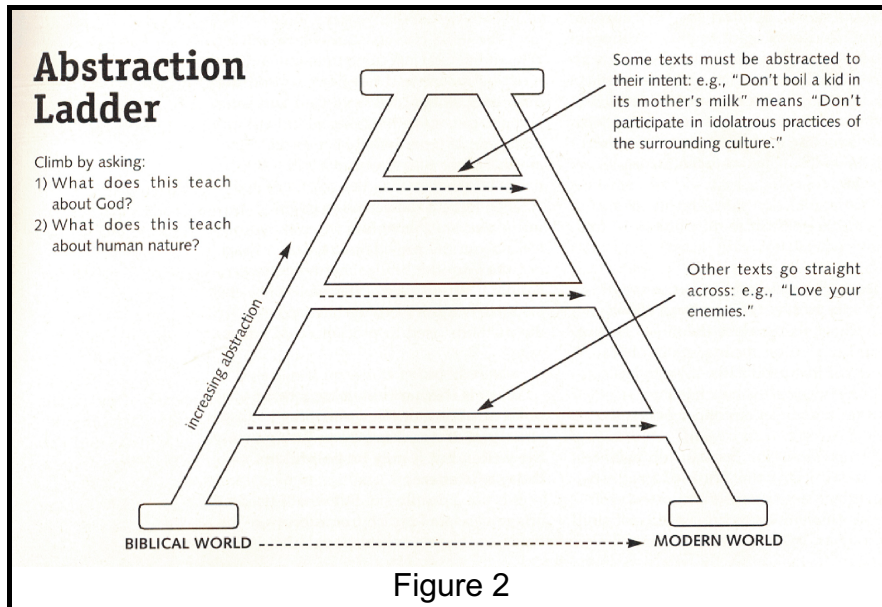
An illustration that can help the preacher understand the task of applying a Biblical passage is what Haddon Robinson describes as “The Ladder of Abstraction.”³⁷ Texts low on the ladder of abstraction are those where the ancient situation and the modern situation correspond. These biblical passages the preacher can take straight over to the modern situation. Robinson gives an example: “Jesus says, ‘Love your enemies.’ I say to my listeners: ‘Do

³⁴Klaas Runia, *The Sermon Under Attack*, page 65.

³⁵Fred Craddock, *Preaching*, page 128.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷See Figure 2(next page) taken from “The Heresy of Application,”*Leadership*, page 25.



you have enemies? Love them.”³⁸

Straight application of Biblical passages is more difficult where the correspondence between the world of the Bible and the modern listener is less direct. For example, in two gospels Jesus says: “Sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow me.” A direct application of Jesus’ words would be to tell the listeners that they must liquidate all their assets and possessions, have a huge auction sale, and give the proceeds to the world’s poor. But as Robinson adds: “I hesitate to bring this straight over because I think, If everybody does this, we’ll have problems, big problems.”³⁹

A clear illustration given by Haddon Robinson of how the “ladder of abstraction” works is the passage from Exodus 23:19 which reads: “Do not cook

³⁸Ibid., page 22; Cf. Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27.

³⁹“The Heresy of Application,” *Leadership*, page 22; Cf. Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27; Cf. also Fred Craddock’s example from Genesis 22, above page 169.

a young goat in its mother's milk." He explains:

First, you have to ask, "What is this all about?" At face value, you might say, "If I have a young goat, and I want to cook it in its mother's milk for dinner tonight, I should think twice."

But now we know the pagans did that when they worshiped their idolatrous gods. Therefore, what you have here is not a prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk, but against being involved in the idolatry that surrounded God's people or bringing its practices into their religion.

If that's the case, it does no good for the preacher to bring this text straight over. You must climb the ladder of abstraction a couple of levels until you reach the principle: You should not associate yourself with idolatrous worship, even in ways that do not seem to have direct association with physically going to the idol.⁴⁰

Accurate application is possible by using the "ladder of abstraction." The less direct the correspondence between the world of the Bible and the world of the listener the more the preacher needs to move up the "ladder of abstraction." The preacher keeps climbing until she arrives at a general truth or guiding principle that can be applied to her contemporary audience. As the preacher moves up the rungs of the ladder the third hermeneutical question acts as a guide: "What does this text tell us about: [a] our fallen human condition and [b] God's redemptive solution?"⁴¹ Or in other words, as Haddon Robinson suggests:

"One thing I always do with a passage is abstract up to God. Every passage has a vision of God, such as God as Creator or Sustainer. Second I ask, 'What is the depravity factor? What in humanity rebels against that vision of God?' These two questions are a helpful clue in

⁴⁰Ibid., page 23.

⁴¹See above, pages 100-01.

application because God remains the same, and human depravity remains the same.”⁴²

These theological questions will enable the interpreter to express the main idea of the text in language that is timeless. “The proposition uses language that is timeless and applicable to God’s people at any time. The proposition is stated as a timeless principle.”⁴³ The interpreter then moves on from this general truth or timeless principle to discover the application for the particular modern audience.

There are several questions that will assist the preacher to discover the application of God’s Word for the present-day listener living a situation different from the original audience:⁴⁴

1. *What was the setting in which God’s Word first came? What traits do modern men and women share in common with that original audience?*
2. *How can we identify with biblical men and women as they heard God’s Word and responded — or failed to respond in their situation? . . . We do well to remember J. Daniel Baumann’s observation: “ We are very much like the people of the ancient world. It is only in some superficial thoughts, rational beliefs, and mental moods that we are different. In all of the basic heart realities we are the same. We stand before God exactly as people in every age have stood before Him. We have all experienced David’s guilt, the doubting of Thomas, Peter’s denial, the falling away of Demas, perhaps even the kiss of the betrayer Judas. We are linked across the centuries by the realities and ambiguities of*

⁴²“The Heresy of Application,” *Leadership*, page 24.

⁴³Keith Willhite, “A Bullet versus Buckshot: What Makes the Big Idea Work,” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, edited by Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998, page 18.

⁴⁴These questions are suggested by Haddon Robinson and taken from *Biblical Preaching*, pages 91-92.

the human soul.”⁴⁵

3. *What further insights have we acquired about God’s dealings with His people through additional revelation? . . . Because the Bible stands entire and complete, no passage should be interpreted or applied in isolation from all that God has spoken. Each text should be interpreted within the book in which it appears. But each of the books of the Bible makes up a part of the entire revelation.*
4. *When I understand an eternal truth or guiding principle, what specific, practical applications does this have for me and my congregation? What ideas, feelings, attitudes, or actions should it affect? Do I myself live in obedience to this truth? Do I intend to? What obstacles keep my audience from responding as they should? What suggestions might help them respond as God wants them to respond?*

The difficult task for preacher is to discover what “those specific, practical applications” might be for both the preacher and her listeners. Application is more than simply answering the question: “So *what?* Application is also answering the question: “*Now what?*” The first question asks of the passage, “What difference does it make?” or “Why is this passage important to me?” The second questions gets to the specific, practical applications. As David Veerman points out: “The second question asks, “What should I do about it today? Application focuses the truth of God’s Word on specific, life-related situations. It helps people understand what to do or how to use what they have learned. Application persuades people to act.”⁴⁶

David Veerman goes on to explain four steps that are necessary for a listener to act on the timeless truth of the Biblical text:

⁴⁵Cf. *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 100.

⁴⁶“Sermons: Apply Within,” *Leadership*, Volume XI, Number 2 (Spring 1990), page 122.

1. The listener must receive the message: *Do I understand what was said?*
2. The person should find reason to reflect on his or her own life: *What does the message mean for me?*
3. The individual needs to identify necessary behavior changes: *What should I do about it?*
4. The person should lay out a plan or steps to make a change: *What should I do first?*⁴⁷

David Veerman suggests that the preacher use what he calls the Dynamic Analogy Grid to discover possible applications in a Scripture passage.⁴⁸ He explains how he uses this grid:

I work across each horizontal row of three boxes, starting with boxes 1 through 3. These three boxes deal with the information in the text. I decide what the passage says about mankind's need/problem, God's action/solution, and mankind's necessary response/obedience. That helps me put the passage in its cultural/historical context and determine the biblical principle or timeless truth.

Next I'd move to boxes 4 through 6, which put the text into a contemporary context. When filled in, these boxes make the text relevant.

The final step is to fill in boxes 7 through 9. This applies the passage personally as I think of specific needs in my community and congregation. This leads us to answer the question *Now what?*⁴⁹

The preacher might find it difficult to come up with specific needs in his listeners.

DYNAMIC ANALOGY GRID			
	Mankind's Need/Problem	God's Action/Solution	Mankind's Response/Obedience
Then	1	2	3
Now	4	5	6
Me	7	8	9

Figure 3

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸See Figure 3; Ibid., page 123.

⁴⁹Ibid., pages 122-23.

David Veerman gives some guidelines that will help the preacher dig for applications. He states: "I generally think in terms of felt needs, hidden needs, and spiritual needs." *Felt* needs refer to the way people are feeling; *hidden* needs refer to those things people need but are not aware of at the moment; *spiritual* needs refer to God's special demands on life and the implications of what it means to call Christ Lord.⁵⁰ Veerman also offers a list of categories where "mining for applications" could take place:

1. Relationships (for example, with family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, fellow believers).
2. Conflicts (in marriage, with children, at work).
3. Personal burdens (sickness, family pressures, death, loss).
4. Character weaknesses (dishonesty, lack of integrity, anger).
5. Lack of resources (in time, energy, money, materials, information).
6. Responsibilities (work demands, church programs, volunteer efforts, home projects).
7. Opportunities (learning, working, serving, witnessing, etc.).⁵¹

These lists of different categories of needs would provide the preacher with a helpful resource as he seeks to come up with specific, practical applications.

Haddon Robinson also suggests three questions that will help the preacher test the accuracy of an application:

1. Have I correctly understood the facts and properly formulated the questions involved in the issue? Can those questions be stated another way so that other issues emerge? Would those who disagree with me state the issue another way?
2. Have I determined all the theological principles that must be considered? Do I give the same weight to each principle? Are there other principles that I have chosen to ignore?
3. Is the theology I espouse truly biblical, derived from disciplined

⁵⁰Ibid., page 124

⁵¹Ibid.

exegesis and accurate interpretation of biblical passages? Proof-texting poses a special danger here. This practice finds support for a doctrine or ethical position in passages ripped from their context or interpreted without reference to the author's purpose, or without looking at other passages that might limit the application.⁵²

An overall guiding principle that should be remembered when interpreting the application of a Biblical text is that "application must come from the theological purpose of the biblical writer."⁵³ This principle is rooted in the second hermeneutical principle (*The Biblical authors always had a certain community of believers in view and wanted to offer a response to concrete occasions in the life of this community*) and the related question: For what reason was the original message given?⁵⁴ Quoting John Bright, Haddon Robinson writes:

. . . the preacher needs to understand not only what the text says, but also those concerns that caused it to be said, and said as it was. His exegetical labors are, therefore, not complete until he has grasped the text's theological intention. Until he has done this he cannot interpret the text, and may egregiously misinterpret it by attributing to its words an intention quite other than that of their author.⁵⁵

The theological purpose of the biblical writer, as we discussed earlier, can be discerned through a *contextual analysis*, particularly an analysis of the *sectional* and *book* context.⁵⁶

⁵²*Biblical Preaching*, page 93.

⁵³Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 88.

⁵⁴See above, pages 95-96.

⁵⁵Ibid., Cf. John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1967; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975, pages 171-72.

⁵⁶See above, pages 96, 103-05 for a fuller discussion.

At times the preacher will not begin his sermon preparation with a specific Biblical text but with a certain need in his listener or to respond to a media signal in his cultural context. In such instances, the preacher must first choose Scripture passages that speak to the issues being raised. He then would do a thorough exegetical study of the selected texts. When through faithful exegesis the preacher discovers a guiding principle that speaks directly to the questions dealt with in the sermon, the “application and authority still come directly from Scripture.”⁵⁷

The preacher, through faithful Biblical interpretation, and particularly through accurate application in his sermon, connects two worlds — the ancient world of the Biblical message and the present-day world of the listener. Biblical truth is related to the life of the listener. “The most effective sermons are those that do this in a specific, not a general way. If you do not apply the Scriptures to people’s life experience, you cannot expect that they will do it.”⁵⁸ If a preacher desires to see results from the faithful preaching of God’s Word he must connect God’s Word to listeners.

Shaping the Culture of the Listener

Having said this, connecting God’s Word to listeners is not simply accurately applying the Biblical text to the preacher’s audience. The preacher must also connect God’s Word to the contemporary culture. She must bridge

⁵⁷Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 93.

⁵⁸Ibid., page 96.

the chasm between the world of the Biblical text and the modern world of today. She needs to preach messages that will help her listener understand how as individuals and as a Christian community we can “shape our cultural patterns.”⁵⁹ “. . . the preacher needs to help the community ponder the implications of the gospel in personal and social relationships, in racial and ethnic matters, in political and economic affairs.”⁶⁰

John Stott, in his book *Between Two Worlds*, makes the bold assessment that the church of his day, having been weighed on the scales of shaping cultural patterns, has been found wanting. He writes:

On the one hand, conservatives are biblical but not contemporary, while on the other liberals and radicals are contemporary but not biblical. Why must we polarize in this naive way, however? Each side has a legitimate concern, the one to conserve God’s revelation, the other to relate meaningfully to real people in the real world. Why can we not combine each other’s concerns? Is it not possible for liberals to learn from conservatives the necessity of conserving the fundamentals of historic, biblical Christianity, and for conservatives to learn from liberals the necessity of relating these radically and relevantly to the real world?

Meanwhile, each group stays on its favourite side of the cultural chasm, and almost nobody seems to be building bridges. Yet we preachers are supposed to be in the business of communication. A lecture has been wittily defined as the transfer of information from the lecturer’s notes to the students, without it passing through the mind of either; but sermons should not be equally dismal examples of non-communication.⁶¹

What isn’t happening needs to happen; bridges need to be built. Earlier

⁵⁹Excerpt from the contemporary testimony of the Christian Reformed Church, “Our World Belongs to God,” paragraph 47.

⁶⁰Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting the Gospel*, page 15.

⁶¹*Between Two Worlds*, page 144.

we made the claim that careful listening to listeners involves *cultural analysis*.⁶² To be effective in the pulpit, preachers must come to know the culture in which they minister, the modern world. As Graham Johnston writes, “Preachers must demonstrate a working understanding of the issues, concerns, and the interaction of people’s daily lives.” But Johnston does not end there. He adds: “. . . helping the listeners to interpret their world from a biblical standpoint.”⁶³ It is one thing to listen to and understand the Biblical message; it is another to listen to and understand the culture of today. The task of effective preaching is to bridge the two. As Roger E. Van Harn writes, as listeners “*when we listen to a sermon, we have the right to see our culture in the light of God’s Story*.”⁶⁴ What will listeners be looking for? As listeners, “in order to live faithfully, we need to see when and where to say Yes, No, and Maybe as participants in God’s Story and in our culture.”⁶⁵ As preachers connect the world of the Biblical message to the world of today bridges are built and listeners will be able to give shape to their lives and their culture.

Shaping cultural patterns is a major challenge facing preachers and the contemporary church. The lives and values of Christians and non-Christians alike are being shaped and reshaped by modern culture. David F. Wells has

⁶²See above, pages 141-46.

⁶³*Preaching to a Postmodern World, A Guide To Reaching Twenty-First-Century Listeners*, Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001, page 79.

⁶⁴*Pew Rights*, page 96.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, page 101.

identified three factors that are experienced by everybody in the culture, three factors that “have generated enormous power in reshaping the inner psyche of both believers and unbelievers”:

1. Modern consciousness is being shaped by a *world* civilization and not merely the homogeneous culture of a particular nation that is in the throes of being modernized.
2. Today’s mass media, which are vital conduits for the values arising from modernization, are so intrusive, so pervasive, so enveloping as to render the *experience* of modernity intense to a degree that is without precedent.
3. As a consequence, we are seeing on a social scale that is without precedent the mass experimentation with and adoption of the values of modernity.⁶⁶

Listeners today live in a culture where “unbelief seems normal . . . [and] . . . a world in which Christian faith is alien.”⁶⁷

This challenge against the Christian faith is precisely why the church today needs preachers that are able to bridge the gap between the Biblical message and modern secular society. The church of the twenty-first century needs preachers like Henry Ward Beecher of the nineteenth century. Halford R. Ryan reflects on how Beecher’s contemporaries regarded him as a preacher:

He stepped to the rostrum with the fervor of the evangelical preacher. He brought sacred Protestantism to secular politics. If his sermons were speeches, his addresses were homilies. The Old Testament oracle who called the chosen people back to God became a nineteenth-century prophet who challenged the citizenry to abandon slavery; the New Testament Gospel became the good news of progress in civic virtue and individual character; St. Paul became Paul the pleader for Victorian values; Christ crucified became the Union expiated and Beecher

⁶⁶*No Place For Truth, Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993, pages 89-91.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, page 91.

exonerated; and the Republican Party, bloated with avarice and graft, became in Beecher's hands lapsed heretics, accused of political apostasy. . . . Mr. Beecher was the greatest orator I have ever heard; and in my judgement, whether measured by the immediate or by the permanent effects of his addresses, takes his place in the rank of the great orators of the world.⁶⁸

As a preacher Henry Ward Beecher "made straight paths for the preacher to adjust Americans to God and God to Americans."⁶⁹ He built a bridge between two worlds – the world of the Bible and the world of nineteenth century America.

The need today, in the words of John Stott, is "that God will raise up a new generation of Christian communicators who are determined to bridge the chasm; who struggle to relate God's unchanging Word to our ever-changing world; who refuse to sacrifice truth to relevance or relevance to truth; but who resolve instead in equal measure to be faithful to Scripture and pertinent to today."⁷⁰

To bridge the chasm between the Biblical message and culture, the preacher needs to apply the principles of the homiletical "big idea" in ways that assist the listener in knowing how to give shape to present-day cultural patterns. "The applicational preacher looks at the text for references to biblical values that counteract the prevalent cultural values."⁷¹ Joseph M. Stowell suggests a

⁶⁸Ryan, Halford R., *Henry Ward Beecher, Peripatetic Preacher*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1990, pages 12-13.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, page 87.

⁷⁰*Between Two Worlds*, page 144.

⁷¹Joseph M. Stowell III, "Preaching for a Change," *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, page 137.

number of questions that will help the preacher in the application process:

1. What biblical value is taught in this text?
2. What is the countervalue our culture promotes?
3. How will this message:
 - a. define, articulate, and illustrate this biblical value?
 - b. address the countervalue?
 - c. encourage and enable Christians to transition from one to the other?⁷²

If a preacher expects results from the faithful preaching of God's Word, then the world of the Bible, the world of the original author and original audience, needs to be connected to the modern world and culture of the listener. The Word written needs to be faithfully explained and convincingly proven. But most importantly, the Word written needs to be accurately applied to the world of the listener and to the culture in which he or she lives. Preparedness for preaching involves connecting God's Word to listeners. Build a bridge between the world of the Bible, the particular world of the listener, and the general world of the culture around, and the preacher will have removed another obstacle that would hinder the effective power of God's Word to come through a sermon preached. There is one last obstacle that needs to be removed. The preacher must communicate in such a way that the sermon is worth listening to.

⁷²Ibid., page 140.

Communication Worth Listening To

Preparation for preaching begins with listening, careful listening to both the Word of God and the listener. Having carefully listened a connection is made between the message of the Bible and the world of the listener. The Biblical message is developed so that the listener will know how to give shape to his life and culture. The message now needs to be delivered. “Sermons do not come into the world as outlines and manuscripts.”¹ As Henry Ward Beecher said: “Truth is the arrow, but man is the bow that sends it home.”² The preacher needs to preach. How this message is delivered will make a difference on the results a preacher can realistically expect from the faithful preaching of God’s Word.

Success in the pulpit requires effective delivery. David A. MacLennan wrote: “There are three kinds of preachers: there is the preacher you CAN’T listen to; there is the preacher you CAN listen to; and there is the preacher you CAN’T HELP listening to.”³ What is the difference? Demosthenes said that “the first, second, and third laws of effective speaking were ‘delivery, delivery, delivery.’”⁴ As Stafford North writes: “Good delivery can make the average

¹Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 201.

²Said in a speech entitled “Oratory” delivered in Philadelphia on May 29, 1876; Henry R. Ryan, *Peripatetic Preacher*, page 109.

³Quoted by Ralph L. Lewis, *Speech for Persuasive Preaching*, page 88; Cf. David A. MacLennan, *Pastoral Preaching*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955, page 132.

⁴Quoted by Stafford North, *Preaching, Man & Method*, page 163

sermon listenable, and the good sermon excellent. On the other hand, poor delivery makes even the best message weak and ineffective.”⁵ Or as Haddon Robinson writes, “A sermon ineptly delivered arrives stillborn.”⁶ A sermon effectively delivered is communication worth listening to.

Effective Communication: Sermon Has Unity

“Effective communication demands a single theme.”⁷ So writes Haddon Robinson and virtually all rhetoricians. Duane Litfin concurs:

There exists a remarkable consensus among those who have studied and practiced public speaking over the last twenty-five hundred years that the most effective way to structure a speech is to build it around a single significant thought. From the ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians to the latest communication theorists, from the preaching in the Bible to the sermons heard in pulpits today, from the political oratory of democracies long past to the persuasive messages of our own times, the history of public speaking and the lessons we have learned from that history unite to argue forcefully that a speech, *to be maximally effective, ought to attempt to develop more or less fully only one major proposition.*⁸

What is true for good speeches is true for good sermons. Quoting J. H. Jowett from his Yale lectures on preaching, Haddon Robinson writes: “I have a conviction that no sermon is ready for preaching, not ready for writing out, until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as crystal. . . . I do not think any sermon ought to be preached or even written, until that

⁵Ibid.

⁶*Biblical Preaching*, page 201.

⁷Ibid., page 35.

⁸*Public Speaking*, page 80; “. . . an effective speech ‘centers on one specific thing, a central idea.’”(Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 36).

sentence has emerged, clear and lucid as a cloudless moon.”⁹ As Robinson adds: “To ignore the principle that a central, unifying idea must be at the heart of an effective sermon is to push aside what experts in communication theory and preaching have to tell us.”¹⁰ Effective communication requires that a sermon have *unity*.

Unity is the central characteristic of being made in the image of God. When God created man and woman we are told that “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”¹¹ We are further told that the outcome of the creation of the man and woman was unity: “They will become one flesh.”¹² In our unity as human beings we image God, the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – “one God in trinity and the trinity in unity.”¹³

When sin entered the world this unity was broken. Man and woman hid from each other and God. Division resulted in shame, murder, and human

⁹Ibid., page 37; Cf. J.H. Jowett, *The Preacher: His Life and Work*, New York: George H. Doran, 1912. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968, page 133.

¹⁰*Biblical Preaching*, page 37; Robinson defines an idea as “a distillation of life that abstracts out of the particulars of experience what they have in common and relates them to each other.” An idea is made up of a *subject* — the complete, definite answer to the question, “What am I talking about?”— and a *complement* — the answer to the question, “What exactly am I saying about what I’m talking about?”(Ibid., page 47).

¹¹Genesis 1:27.

¹²2:24.

¹³Taken from the *Athanasian Creed*; See *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 1988, page 9.

brokenness. Humanity was driven “east of Eden,” away from the presence of God. The human longing is to come home, to return to the garden, to again experience *unity*, oneness with God and with each other. Jesus’ prayer to God the Father reflected his longing for all people that “they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity. . . .”¹⁴ The renewed community of believers are to embody the mark of unity: “Make every effort to keep the *unity* of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is *one* body and *one* Spirit – just as you were called to *one* hope when you were called — *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism; *one* God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”¹⁵ The yearning for unity is at the heart of what it means to be human.

Duane Litfin argues that this longing for *unity* is also the way God has designed our minds. He writes: “The human mind is constantly seeking to discover unity in the stimuli it receives, to separate those items that seem to be related to one thing from those that are related to another.”¹⁶ People see a number of stars in the night sky and they try to organize what they see into a unity; we call them “constellations.” The human mind craves unity.

Our minds not only seek unity, but also *order*. Litfin says: “This is intimately involved with our desire for unity. It is not enough to discover which

¹⁴John 17:22-23.

¹⁵Ephesians 4:3-6, emphasis mine.

¹⁶*Public Speaking*, page 80.

parts are related to which whole; we also seek to discover orderly relationships between and among the parts.”¹⁷ Children take a jig-saw puzzle and spend hours putting all the pieces together until the individual parts make up a unified whole.

In addition to unity and order, the human mind also seeks *progress*. Litfin points out:

Some entities have a chronological dimension to them. A symphony . . . is made up of thousands of notes played on perhaps scores of different instruments. Yet the composer has so designed the symphony that it organizes all these many notes into a unified whole. In this the symphony is not unlike the puzzle On another level, however, the symphony is very different. We may lay out the pieces of the puzzle . . . so we can see them all at once, but with the symphony we can only hear one part at a time. All we have of the symphony is what we are hearing at the moment (combined, of course, with what we can recall of the past and what we may be able to anticipate of the future). Thus, for us to make sense of a symphony — or any “unity” that has a time dimension, such as a play, a novel, or a speech — the matter of progress becomes significant. As we try to sort out the pieces we are perceiving, to discover their relationships, we are looking for an order consisting largely of some sort of *progression*, one thing following another in an appropriate chronological relationship.¹⁸

When it comes to preaching, “the mind of the listener searches for overall unity.”¹⁹ The person in pew wonders: how does the whole sermon fit together? How do the various parts of the sermon relate to each other? How does the one part lead into the next contributing to the overall order and unity of the message?

¹⁷Ibid., page 81.

¹⁸Ibid., pages 81-82.

¹⁹Keith Willhite, “A Bullet versus Buckshot: What Makes the Big Idea Work,” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, page 21; Cf. pages 20-22.

“Because our minds — and our listeners’ minds, too — seek unity in what we perceive, a speech, to be maximally effective, ought to be the embodiment of one major idea. *Having a central idea tends to build unity into a speech*, allowing us to work in conjunction with the natural tendencies of our listeners’ minds.”²⁰ As Haddon Robinson writes, “Effective sermons major in biblical ideas brought together into an overarching unity.”²¹ This is the “big idea” of Biblical preaching. “The sermon should be a bullet, not buckshot.”²² As Keith Willhite writes: “A single bullet is much more powerful than a small piece of shot or even the collective effect of many shots. A disjointed comment on words or phrases will be of little value in changing lives since propositions of God’s Truth, not minutiae, move people to think and act differently.”²³ To see results from the faithful preaching of God’s Word, the preacher’s sermon must have unity.

Effective communication requires that the biblical ideas are brought together in the central, unifying idea of the sermon. Mark Galli and Craig Brian Larson argue that in order to structure a sermon for maximum effect, the sermon needs to be unified psychologically. They write: “Every sermon needs to have a psychological center. By ‘psychological center’ I mean the fundamental emotion

²⁰*Public Speaking*, page 82.

²¹*Biblical Preaching*, page 39.

²²*Ibid.*, page 35.

²³“A Bullet versus Buckshot: What Makes the Big Idea Work,” *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, page 22.

or need the sermon speaks to: fear, anger, gratitude, love.”²⁴ This fundamental need or fear is not initially derived from the listener, but from the Biblical text and the theological purpose of the Biblical author. But in order to keep the various parts of the sermon working together for maximum impact the preacher should ask of each part: “Does this contribute to the psychological center – to the fundamental emotion or need the sermon speaks to?” If the answer is no, the preacher should “ruthlessly cut it.”²⁵

Sermon unity also implies that the ideas of the sermon are well-organized. There is a smooth transition from one part of the sermon to another. The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that when it came to worship, “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”²⁶ What is true for worship is also true for sermons. As people look for unity, they also crave order. Harry Farra writes, “If people have to work harder to get our ideas, we are wasting both their time and their mental energy. Such waste, like all waste, is sin.”²⁷ He adds: “People look for patterns and connections that move them from one idea to another or from one part of a communication to another. . . . Syllable by syllable they build words, sentences, and paragraphs. Good organization gives them signposts. Good organization will provide much needed maps to the territory of

²⁴*Preaching that Connects*, page 54.

²⁵*Ibid.*, page 56.

²⁶1 Corinthians 14:40.

²⁷*The Sermon Doctor*, page 74.

your ideas.”²⁸ It doesn’t matter if the sermon is organized inductively, deductively, or semi-inductively. It doesn’t matter if the sermon takes the shape of a first-person narrative or a story-told. It doesn’t matter if the ideas are developed through a series of moves.²⁹ What matters is that there is order, and that order contributes to the overall unity of the sermon. Because such sermons are worth listening to, successful preaching requires sermons that have unity.

Effective Communication: Sermons Are Timely

The apostle Paul has this to say about speech: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is *helpful for building others up according to their needs*.”³⁰ Preaching is not just about passing on information; it is about the business of transformation. It is about meeting people where they are at with the intent of encouraging growth and change in the lives of people and society. As such sermons need to be appropriate. Lewis B. Smedes writes: “A person of integrity does more than tell people what is on his mind. He learns the art of telling the truth well. To tell it in love – helpfully, healingly, even though painfully – this is the skill that turns honesty into art. This fact takes me back to Aristotle’s recipe for honesty with style: *the right truth to*

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹David Buttrick underscores the importance of unity: “Above all, moves must be unified. They must make a single statement. Basically moves are an elaboration of an idea that can be expressed in a single clear sentence” (*Homiletic*, page 49).

³⁰Ephesians 4:29; The RSV reads: “. . . *as fits the occasion*.”, emphasis mine.

*the right person at the right time in the right way for the right reason.*³¹ For a sermon to be effective, it not only needs to be right in terms of truth, but it needs to be preached at the right time in the right way for the right reason. Preachers ought to say those things that are *helpful for building others up according to their needs*. Effective communication requires that sermons be *timely*.

Timely sermons are sermons that address the needs of the listener and are culturally relevant. These sermons answer the “So what?” and “Now what?” of application. Stafford North writes: “How foolish it would be for the captain of a sinking ship to stand on the deck with water washing over the sides and explain to the panic-filled passengers how to excel at chess. Still more foolish, however, is it for a preacher to speak to lost souls held briefly in dying bodies only to declare to them the beauties of literature or to entertain them with his wit. . . . a preacher should take special care to strike directly at the greatest needs of his audience.”³²

Preaching to the needs of the listener has several foci. First, preaching to needs refers to selecting preaching texts that address the specific current needs of the congregation. After September 11, 2001 and the horror of the World Trade Center/Pentagon attacks it would have been untimely to preach a message the following Sunday that did not address the fear and uncertainty that

³¹*A Pretty Good Person, What It Takes to Live with Courage, Gratitude & Integrity OR When Pretty Good Is as Good as You Can Be*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990, page 80.

³²*Preaching: Man & Method*, page 52.

were on the minds and in the hearts of listeners throughout North America. Imagine the Rev. Billy Graham standing behind the pulpit on September 14th at the National Cathedral and preaching a sermon on the differences between the Infra-Supralapsarian positions. One might question whether it would ever be appropriate to preach on this subject, but the point is this: Rev. Billy Graham's sermon on that day addressed the immediate needs of America. He called the nation to courage, grace, and truth. It was timely message for it addressed the needs of his audience.

Preaching to needs has to do with selecting Biblical texts for preaching; it also means choosing applications that address the specific felt needs, the hidden needs, and the spiritual needs of a particular audience. It would be untimely to apply a message to an audience filled exclusively with teenagers with applications that address the specific needs of their grandparents. Timely sermons use audience-adapted applications.

Preaching to needs also means addressing the current cultural media signals that demand a listener response. Rev. John Van Sloten preached a series of sermons focusing on the blockbuster movie "The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring" shortly after its release and plans to do the same with its sequel, "The Two Towers." His messages focused on the themes of the film, as he reports: "The hearts of those who live in the shadow of an evil kingdom of darkness yearn for the day when the kingdom of light shall rule again."³³ This

³³As reported by the Canadian Press, *The Kitchener Record*, December 28, 2002, Section H, page 8.

series of messages would have been timely since they took current media signals and interpreted them in light of God's Word.

Timely sermons do not only address the needs of the listener's world and culture; they also have *purpose*. There is a reason why this sermon is being preached. It is a *right* reason to deliver a sermon. Some wrong reasons to preach a particular message would be: "When 11:25 comes on Sunday morning, I'll be expected to say something religious," or "Last week I covered Genesis 21, so this week I'll preach on Genesis 22."³⁴ As Haddon Robinson states: "No matter how brilliant or biblical a sermon is, without a definite purpose it is not worth preaching."³⁵ I would add, a sermon without a definite purpose is not worth listening to.

If a preacher desires to see results from his preaching, then he must determine the purpose for his sermon. "The purpose behind each individual sermon is to secure some moral action. We need to know what that action is. . . . The purpose states what you expect to happen in your hearers as a result of preaching your sermon."³⁶ The purpose of a sermon is determined, as we noted earlier, by "discovering the purpose behind the passage you are preaching."³⁷ This exegetical task is not optional if the preacher desires successful preaching.

³⁴As suggested by Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 106.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., page 107.

³⁷Ibid., page 108; See above pages 106.

The key to a good purpose statement is to describe the intended outcome(s) for a particular sermon. Robert F. Mager describes an instructional objective in this way:

1. *An instructional objective describes an intended outcome of instruction, rather than the procedures for accomplishing these outcomes.*
2. *An objective always states a performance that describes what the learner will be DOING when demonstrating mastery of the objective.*³⁸

Haddon Robinson points out: “Educators realize that an effective statement of purpose goes beyond procedure and describes the observable behavior that should come as a result of teaching. A purpose statement not only describes our destination and the route we will follow to get there, but if possible, tells us how we can know if we have arrived. If we are not clear about where we are going, we will probably land someplace else. . . . stating the purpose of a sermon . . . makes the sermon more direct and effective.”³⁹ The purpose statement will not only state the reason why a particular sermon is being preached; it also will enable the preacher to measure the specific intended outcomes. Based on the feedback received the preacher will be able to make the necessary adjustments for maximum effect in preaching. Timely sermons have purpose.

Timely sermons are also driven by love, a love for the listener. The gospel writer Mark tells us that “when Jesus . . . saw a large crowd, he had

³⁸*Preparing Instructional Objectives, A critical tool in the development of effective instruction, Third Edition*, Atlanta, Georgia: The Center for Effective Performance, Inc., 1997, page 82.

³⁹*Biblical Preaching*, page 109.

compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.”⁴⁰ Jesus’ love for the people motivated him to preach. Richard Cecil, an Anglican preaching in London at the turn of 19th century said: “To love to preach is one thing, to love those to whom we preach is quite another.” Reflecting on these words Martin Lloyd-Jones adds: “The trouble with some of us is that we love preaching, but we are not always careful to make sure that we love the people to whom we are actually preaching. If you lack this element of compassion for the people you will also lack the pathos which is a very vital element in all true preaching.”⁴¹

Pathos (compassion), in addition to *ethos* (character) and *logos*(content), is what Socrates called the essence of communication. “*Pathos*, or compassion, concerns how the teacher arouses the passions of his hearers, and massages their emotions. Socrates knew that your emotions must run in the direction of your action. That’s the secret of motivation, because God created us as emotional, feeling beings.”⁴² If preachers truly want to set the results of changed lives and a changed society, then the act of preaching must be motivated by *pathos*, or compassionate love. “Love provides the only right motive for the act of preaching itself. It is the power which moves the one who preaches out

⁴⁰Mark 6:34.

⁴¹*Preaching and Preachers*, page 92; J. Daniel Baumann lists *compassion* as one of the marks of the *preacher*(*An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, pages 39-40).

⁴²Howard G. Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives*, page 120.

among the people with care for the uniqueness of every human. It quickly shows in the manner as well as the content of preaching. The difference between preaching *at* people and preaching *for* people is the difference that love makes.”⁴³ It is the love that the preacher has for her listeners that will motivate them to change. As Howard G. Hendricks points out: “If I sense you love me, I’ll be eager to do all kind of things you want me to do.”⁴⁴ As preachers love the people in pew, and the people truly sense it, hearts will be open to God and to change. Harry Farra put this truth in a formula: “*Horizontal sensitivity is the key that unlocks the door to vertical grace.*”⁴⁵

Timely sermons present the truth of God’s Word in such a way that they address the specific needs of the listener, they have an intended outcome for the listener, and they speak the truth in genuine love for the listener. Listeners respond to sermons that meet their needs, that have specific outcomes in mind, and which are spoken in love. Because such sermons are worth listening to, successful preaching requires sermons that are timely.

Effective Communication: Sermons are Delivered Skillfully

The time had come for the delivery of our fourth child. Our first child was delivered Caesarean section. Our second child lay in a posterior position which caused lots of back pain for my wife and a long, long delivery. Our third child

⁴³F. Dean Lueking, *Preaching, The Art of Connecting God and People*, page 24.

⁴⁴*Teaching to Change Lives*, page 121.

⁴⁵*The Sermon Doctor*, page 170.

was induced and there was cutting and stitching that had to be done. So with our fourth child we did not know what to expect. But the calm doctor allayed our fears and with the skillful hands of well-trained gynaecologist he went to work and delivered our second baby boy. We were amazed how different this birth was compared to the other three. No long delivery. No cutting. No pain. No anesthetic. The difference consisted in the extraordinary skill with which the doctor delivered our child.

Skillful delivery also makes a huge difference in the delivery of sermons. Harry Farra points out that the hallmark of effective communication is “a person with good ideas who is skilled in speaking. . . . how you say what you say is very important to the success of your sayables. How you deliver the goods affects how those good will be received. Do you want your gift delivered in pretty paper with ribbons and bows or in a brown lunch bag sullied with dobs of tuna and smears of mayonnaise?”⁴⁶ Effective communication requires that sermons be delivered skillfully.

The content of a sermon *is* important. Socrates, as we pointed out, emphasized that *logos* (content) is part of the essence of communication. The good ideas that make up the content of a message are derived through a careful listening to God’s Word, a careful listening to the listener, and connecting God’s Word to listeners. But good ideas are delivered in three ways: the *actual content*, the *tone of voice*, and the *nonverbal communication*. All three

⁴⁶Ibid., page 138.

components of communication are important and must complement each other.

“The effectiveness of our sermons depends on two factors: what we say and how we say it. Both are important.”⁴⁷

Albert Mehrabian has done extensive research in the field of nonverbal communication. His experiments helped identify nonverbal ways in which people communicate like-dislike or persuasiveness. His research concluded that in terms of total-liking the three components of communication did not carry equal weight.⁴⁸ Most important was the non-verbal communication. The tone of voice rated second. And the actual content of the message rated last. The percentages indicate how much of the message is sent through each component:

Content of message / 7%
Tone of voice / 38%
Nonverbal communication / 55%

If a preacher desires to effectively communicate his sermon then he must deliver the content of the message skillfully.

Skillful sermon delivery is important for successful preaching because it creates a response in the listener. Harry Farra writes:

‘You cannot *not* communicate.’ . . . whatever you do in terms of communication behavior has an impact on the audience. Your listeners read meaning and messages into every behavior. Delivery has effect on

⁴⁷Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 201.

⁴⁸Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971, pages 42-44; See also his other book, *Non-Verbal Communication*, Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972; Harry Farra, *The Sermon Doctor*, page 138.

attitude change, comprehension of sermon content, and, more decidedly, upon the ethos or the credibility of the speaker.⁴⁹

Skillful sermon delivery begins with the *emotional* ingredient. Haddon Robinson writes: “In the preacher, technical knowledge and training in the art of public address cannot take the place of conviction and responsibility. Having something to say to a congregation that you want them to understand and live by provides an *essential stimulus for effective delivery*. . . . We are communicating ideas that matter to us.”⁵⁰ “What is preaching,” asks Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. “Logic on fire! Eloquent reason! . . . It is theology on fire. . . . Preaching is theology coming thorough a man who is on fire. A true understanding and experience of the Truth must lead to this. I say again that a man who can speak about these things dispassionately has no right whatsoever to be in a pulpit, and should never be allowed to enter one.”

The preacher needs to be excited about his message, and if he is, it will show. As Howard G. Hendricks points out: “All kinds of books on public speaking will give you material on meaningful movements, but no one in the world, even the best authority, can teach you anything better than the gestures you’ll use naturally and comfortably *if you really feel what you’re saying*.”⁵¹ “We need to . . . let the meaning of our messages grab us.”⁵² Effective sermon

⁴⁹Ibid., pages 141-43.

⁵⁰*Biblical Preaching*, page 204, emphasis mine.

⁵¹*Teaching to Change Lives*, pages 102-03.

⁵²Lowell O. Erdahl, *Preaching for the People*, page 95.

delivery begins with an enthusiasm for the content of the message and a desire to help the listener feel the same way about the Word of God.

Effective communication applies to *how* the preacher says something, the *tone of her voice*. There are many books on public speaking that will aid the preacher in the area of vocal delivery.⁵³ Matters of *pitch, punch (volume), progress, pause, articulation, and voice quality* all contribute to making sermon delivery interesting and pleasant, and therefore, worth listening to. Preachers also will benefit from rehearsing their sermons. As Haddon Robinson writes: “Rehearsing . . . improves delivery. Effective delivery must be practiced because you cannot think about delivery much as you speak. The good habits acquired in your preparation will come more easily in the pulpit.”⁵⁴ Henry Ward Beecher said that “the very object of a preacher was to give the truth a living form, and not have it lie in the dead letter.” Halford R. Ryan adds: “Perhaps that was the secret of Beecher’s success as an orator and preacher: through his practiced delivery he gave his words a polished impact.”⁵⁵

Sermons worth listening to are those that avoid the “preacher tone” and resemble a “conversational tone.” Stafford North stresses that the “preacher tone” or “sanctimonious wail” that many preachers use should be avoided since it

⁵³See for example, Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, pages 213-18; Duane Litfin, *Public Speaking*, 323-30; Stafford North, *Preaching: Man & Method*, pages 163-68; J. Daniel Baumann, *A Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, pages 191-93.

⁵⁴*Biblical Preaching*, page 219.

⁵⁵*Henry Ward Beecher, Peripatetic Preacher*, page 83.

is distracting to the audience.⁵⁶ He adds: “There is no reason for a preacher to sound unlike himself or other human beings when he preaches and a special, unnatural use of the voice will hinder, not help, his development.”⁵⁷ North is not alone in this assessment of vocal delivery. Harry Farra writes: “For all purposes, a conversational tone is far superior to the obnoxious lecture sound that some ministers fall into. Avoid the so-called preacher’s tone at all cost since it only damages your message and your credibility and likeableness. Think of preaching as simply enlarged conversation.”⁵⁸ Since our goal in successful preaching is to maximize the results from the faithful preaching of God’s Word, sermons should come close to everyday conversation.

My introduction to a conversational style of preaching was through my doctoral studies with Haddon Robinson. I recall the initial attempts of employing a conversational tone to my preaching. After a Sunday service my teenage son remarked to me: “Dad, your preaching sure has changed.” “Why,” I asked. “You don’t shout at us anymore. You simply talk to us.” This was ample proof to me about the importance of preaching sermons that take on a conversational tone. Pulpit delivery ought to approximate “the everyday give-and-take of honest conversation.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶*Preaching: Man & Method*, page 167.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pages 167-68.

⁵⁸*The Preaching Doctor*, page 142.

⁵⁹Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, page 205.

Effective communication applies not only to the preacher's *tone of voice* but also to *nonverbal communication*. Nonverbal communication is the most important component in building likeableness with a listener. Nonverbal communication has to do with eye contact, gestures, body movement, physical appearance, and proxemics (distance). Again there are excellent resources the preacher can turn to learn how to communicate more effectively nonverbally.⁶⁰ As preachers learn how to use their bodies to speak for them, sermons will be more interesting and worth listening to.

Since nonverbal communication is so critical to a sermon being received well, there are three aspects of nonverbal communication that need to be underscored. First, "the medium *is* the message."⁶¹ That is to say, nonverbal communication communicates. We speak with our bodies. For this reason, rhetoricians emphasize that our nonverbal signals must concur with the content of our message for effective communication to take place. Haddon Robinson points out: "If nonverbal messages contradict the verbal, listeners will more likely believe the silent language. It seems more difficult to lie with the whole body than with the lips alone."⁶² He explains:

If you shake your fist at your hearers while you say in scolding tones,

⁶⁰See Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, pages 206-13; Duane Litfin, *Public Speaking*, 312-23; Stafford North, *Preaching: Man & Method*, pages 168-69; J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, pages 187-91.

⁶¹J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 186; Harry Farra, *The Sermon Doctor*, page 120.

⁶²*Biblical Preaching*, pages 203-04.

“What this church needs is more love and deep concern for one another!” The people in the pew will wonder whether you know about the love you are talking about. Because a vast amount of our preaching involves attitudes that either reinforce or contradict what our words proclaim, we dare not ignore delivery.⁶³

If a preacher desires to deliver sermons with maximum effect then he must pay attention to the incongruence between verbal and nonverbal communication.

“Nonverbal clues pay an important role in the message the listener interprets.”⁶⁴

The second aspect of nonverbal communication that the preacher should pay attention to is proxemics. “The basic principle behind proxemics is that physical distance is related to psychological distance. . . . As a general rule you will want to get as close to your audience as possible.”⁶⁵ Duane Litfin goes on to state:

Another rule of thumb is to eliminate any physical objects between you and your audience. Objects blocking the audience’s view of our body, especially if they are large and bulky, tend to block communication as well. They encourage a psychological wall between you and your listeners which will inhibit your communication. . . . Stay away from large, bulky podiums if you can. They work against your efforts to communicate effectively through nonverbal communication.⁶⁶

Harry Farra gives this advice for improving delivery to preachers: “. . . be as free from the physical confines of the pulpit as possible. So much is conveyed in body language. Why, then, should you deprive yourself of one

⁶³Ibid., page 204.

⁶⁴J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 186.

⁶⁵Duane Litfin, *Public Speaking*, page 315.

⁶⁶Ibid., page 316.

more language for communicating your message? Why hide behind a heavy, massive pulpit?"⁶⁷ Henry Ward Beecher's success as a communicator and preacher was in part due to his innovative delivery. He would not use a pulpit. When his church, the original Plymouth Church, burned in January 1849, and a new sanctuary had to be built, Beecher insisted that a speaker's platform be built that would arch into the audience. He was not glued to the spot but freely ranged over the platform as he preached.⁶⁸ Beecher poked fun about the contemporary pulpit architecture of his day:

As to the pulpit, but one thing is usually considered necessary, and that is, that it should be put as far as possible from all sympathetic contact with the people to be influenced by it; that it should be so constructed as to take away from the speaker, as far as it can be done, every chance of exerting any influence upon those whom he addresses. . . . In this way the minister is as much as possible kept out of the way of the people, and all that is left is his voice. . . . Is it any wonder that so little is done by preaching . . . ? Daniel Webster is reported to have said . . . that he considered the survival of Christianity in spite of pulpits as one of the evidences of its divinity.⁶⁹

If our aim in successful preaching is to remove all obstacles for effective communication, then large, obtrusive pulpits need to go!

If preaching for success is the preacher's aim, a third aspect of nonverbal communication that needs to be emphasized is "eye-to-eye contact." J. Daniel Baumann writes: "The electric spark which should leap between pulpit and pew

⁶⁷*The Sermon Doctor*, page 143.

⁶⁸Halford R. Ryan, *Henry Ward Beecher, Peripatetic Preacher*, page 8.

⁶⁹In his *Star Papers*, published in 1859; *Ibid.*, pages 8-9.

never occurs when no eye contact is effected.”⁷⁰ Haddon Robinson notes that “pastors who gaze over their audiences’ heads, read a manuscript, stare down at notes, look out of windows, or worse, shut their eyes while they speak, place themselves at a crippling disadvantage. Almost without exception, a congregation will not listen attentively to speakers who do not look at them.”⁷¹ Preachers need all the advantage they can get in order to preach sermons that will change lives. “Eye contact ranks as the single most effective means of nonverbal communication at your disposal. Eyes communicate.”⁷²

To maximize eye contact, therefore, the preacher should refrain from manuscript preaching. One parishioner commented to me about a guest minister, “The preacher was like a chicken feeding from a trough. His head bobbed up and down the entire sermon.” This is the downfall of manuscript preaching. Stafford North writes: “The preacher will find much better results from extemporaneous speaking.”⁷³ Preaching without a manuscript or notes does not mitigate against preparing full manuscripts during sermon preparation. Effective sermons are not those that are done ad-lib or thought of on the spot. Rather, effective sermon delivery happens when the preacher is not staring down at his notes but rather connecting and establishing contact with his listener

⁷⁰*An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 190.

⁷¹*Biblical Preaching*, page 212.

⁷²*Ibid.*, page 211.

⁷³*Preaching: Man & Method*, page 170.

using his eyes.

Listeners know when sermons are delivered skillfully. They catch the “fire” in the preacher’s heart through the words that are spoken. They experience the warmth in the preacher’s conversational tone. The preacher is not speaking at them, but for them, and with them. They are not confused by the preacher’s tone of voice or the nonverbal clues of his movements and gestures. They never lost attention as the preacher kept his eye on them. Because such sermons are worth listening to, successful preaching requires sermons that are delivered skillfully.

Effective Communication: Sermons Express Integrity

The *logos*(content) component of communication consists of the message that is preached; the *pathos*(compassion) component is reflected in the love the preacher has for her listener; the *ethos* component has to do with the person of the preacher: her *character*. Howard G. Hendricks writes:

“ . . . the teacher’s *character* is what produces the learner’s *confidence*. When I see the quality of your life, I know you have something significant as a teacher to contribute to me. I can trust you. I know you wouldn’t lie to me. This trust factor, this confidence in you, is the greatest commodity you have going for you in communication.”⁷⁴

What is true of teachers is also true of preachers. “The practice of preaching cannot be divorced from the person of the preacher.”⁷⁵ Preachers must not only talk the talk, but they must be committed to walk the walk. As someone

⁷⁴*Teaching to Change Lives*, page 121.

⁷⁵John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, page 265.

once said, "The best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds."⁷⁶

Effective communication requires that sermons express *integrity*.

The integrity of the preacher is important since *ethos* (character) contributes to persuasiveness. Aristotle wrote:

Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to this power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.⁷⁷

Saint Augustine, likewise, stresses the importance of preachers living lives of integrity. He says:

The life of the speaker has greater weight in determining whether he is obediently heard than any grandness of eloquence. . . . [preachers] benefit many by preaching what they do not practice; but many more would be benefited if they were to do what they say. For there are many who seek a defense of their evil lives in those of their superiors and teachers, responding in their hearts or, if it breaks forth so far, with their lips, and saying, "Why do you not do what you preach that I do?" Thus it happens that they do not obediently hear one who does not hear himself, and they condemn the word of God which is preached to them along with the preacher himself.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Author unknown.

⁷⁷Quoted by J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 42; Cf. Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, ed. Friedrich Solmsen, New York: The Modern Library, 1954, page 25.

⁷⁸*On Christian Doctrine*, translated by D. W. Robertson, Jr., New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958, pages 164-65.

John Stott echoes the claims of Aristotle and Augustine when he wrote: “. . . integrity or authenticity always attracts.”⁷⁹ J. Daniel Baumann points out that “the things that have been said in homiletics textbooks for many years are basically true: there must be integrity, the man who says one thing and does another cannot be trusted, and the man who lives the good life does have a claim to listeners.”⁸⁰ Dwight Eisenhower said the same thing: “In order to be a leader a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionable integrity. Without it, no real success is possible.”⁸¹ Since our goal in preaching for success is to see people persuaded to live changed and new lives, character is essential for effective communication.

Without integrity, no real success in preaching is possible. Frank Pollard writes: “An unsaved preacher is an armless person teaching the art of pitching a baseball. It is an bankrupt person teaching economics and investments. It is an alcoholic lecturing on abstinence. It is a guide showing people things he has never seen, taking them to places he has never been.”⁸² In Jesus’ “Sermon on

⁷⁹*Between Two Worlds*, page 271.

⁸⁰J. Daniel Baumann, *An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 43.

⁸¹Quoted by John Maxwell, *Developing the Leader Within You*, Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993, page 38; cf. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Great Quotes From Great Leaders*, ed. Peggy Anderson(Lombard: Great Quotations, 1989).

⁸²“Preparing the Preacher,” *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, Michael Dudit, editor, page 136.

the Plain” he leveled with his listeners by telling a parable: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?” Jesus then explained the principle of this parable: “A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher.”⁸³ The point is this: if a preacher does not believe what he is preaching, then it is like the blind leading the blind. If a preacher does not expect his life being shaped by the Word of God, how can he expect his listeners lives to be shaped by his sermons? “People will no more accept our Christian message if our life contradicts it than they would take a cold cure recommended by a salesman who coughs and sneezes between each sentence.”⁸⁴ J. Daniel Baumann writes: “Effectiveness in the pulpit is indeed tied to the life, the integrity, the Christian character of the man who declares the gospel. Good men are full of their message and will be heard.”⁸⁵

John Maxwell calls integrity “the most important ingredient in leadership.” He points out that “Integrity is not what we do so much as who we are. And who we are, in turn determines what we do. Our system of values is so much part of us we cannot separate it from ourselves. . . . It establishes priorities in our lives and judges what we will accept or reject. . . . Integrity . . . will not allow our lips to violate our hearts. . . . our beliefs will be mirrored in our conduct.”⁸⁶ We could

⁸³Luke 6:39-40; cf. John 13:16.

⁸⁴Quoting Spurgeon, John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, page 268.

⁸⁵*An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 43.

⁸⁶*Developing the Leader Within You*, page 36.

add that integrity is the most important ingredient in effective communication.

Communication with integrity calls for preachers to regularly examine their personal walk with God. Frank Pollard suggests using the following checklist, or one of the preacher's own making:

1. *Do I know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in my life?* I can no more tell what I do not know that I can come back from where I have not been.
2. *Is my walk with Christ up-to-date?* Are my sins confessed and forgiven? "The hand that makes another clean cannot itself be dirty."
3. *Do I preach to communicate His truth or my cleverness?* It is a good thing for preachers to be clever or they will not likely be heard. It is a better thing to honestly evaluate my motivation for preaching.
4. *Do I pretend to be more spiritual than I am?* I cannot act like Mother Teresa if I have no ministry to the needy.⁸⁷

There are also checklists a preacher can use which are found in the Bible: the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20), the Beatitudes (Matthew 5), the acts of the sinful nature/the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5). Haddon Robinson suggests that in the task of sermon preparation a question the preacher should ask of himself is: "*Do I myself live in obedience to this truth? Do I intend to?*"⁸⁸ For sermons to express integrity the preacher should be committed to living for Jesus, a life that is true, striving to please Him in all that they do.

Communication with integrity also calls for a commitment to personal spiritual growth. Preaching for success calls for preaching where change and

⁸⁷"Preparing the Preacher," *Handbook for Contemporary Preaching*, pages 136-37.

⁸⁸*Biblical Preaching*, page 92.

growth are expected in the listeners' lives. But as Howard G. Hendricks writes, "Effective teaching comes only through a changed person. The more you change, the more you become an instrument of change in the lives of others. If you want to become a change agent, *you* also must change."⁸⁹

Robin Mark sings about "the Preacher preaching when the well is dry."⁹⁰ With the preaching well dry, empty preaching results. But as Haddon Robinson reminds preachers that "the more full our souls, the more we preach without running dry."⁹¹ Jesus reminds his followers, preachers too, that wells are filled to overflowing when they come to him and drink: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."⁹² John adds that this water refers to the fullness of the Spirit that would be poured out upon believers.⁹³ Through a personal walk with God, the preacher's well will be filled with God's presence, the Holy Spirit. The preacher's thirst will be quenched and his preaching well will never run dry. In fact, the water God gives him will become in him a spring of water welling up to abundant life.⁹⁴ The personal spiritual growth

⁸⁹*Teaching to Change Lives*, page 32.

⁹⁰From the song *Revival*, ©1998 Daybreak Music.

⁹¹*Making A Difference in Preaching*, page 105.

⁹²John 7:37.

⁹³Verse 38.

⁹⁴See John 4:13-14; Cf. 10:10.

of the preacher will overflow into the lives of the listeners.

The path to personal spiritual growth is through practicing the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. Richard J. Foster has pointed out in his classic book, *Celebration of Discipline*, that these disciplines represent the movement of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer:

1. *The Inward Disciplines* of meditation, prayer, fasting, and study;
2. *The Outward Disciplines* of simplicity, solitude, submission, and service;
3. *The Corporate Disciplines* confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.⁹⁵

Foster warns, however, about turning these spiritual disciplines into laws. He writes: “If we are to progress in the spiritual walk so that the Disciplines are a blessing and not a curse, we must come to the place in our lives where we can lay down the everlasting burden of always needing to manage others.”⁹⁶ The spiritual disciplines are there for our benefit and are not meant to be reduced to external laws that we impose on each other. Haddon Robinson’s suggestion ought to be heeded: “Of the many spiritual disciplines that enlarge spirit, mind, and soul, we need to find the ones that benefit us the most.”⁹⁷

Preaching with integrity requires that preachers discover those spiritual disciplines that encourage personal spiritual growth in their own life. Renewed and filled with God’s Spirit through these disciplines, preaching becomes what

⁹⁵*Celebration of Discipline, The Path to Spiritual Growth*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 1978,1988, 20th Anniversary Edition, 1998.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, page 10.

⁹⁷*Making a Difference in Preaching*, page 105.

James Black calls “the natural overflow of religion. . . . Our religion is like joy we cannot suppress or contain. It bubbles over like a brimming cup. . . . It is a spontaneous passion.”⁹⁸ Such preaching will result in sermons that are worth listening to. Listeners will also be persuaded to change and grow. Successful preaching requires sermons that express integrity.

The key to effective preaching is being prepared to preach “in season and out of season.” This requires that preachers do their part in removing any and all obstacles that hinder the effective power of God’s Word to come through a sermon preached. In this chapter we have reviewed what preachers need to do in order to remove these roadblocks. Preaching for success begins with a careful listening to God’s Word and a careful listening to listeners. As preachers connect God’s Word to listeners through explanation, validation, and application, shape is given to the world and culture of the listener. Like an arrow in a bow, the preacher skillfully sends the truth of God’s Word through sermons that have unity, are timely, and express integrity. Truth finds a home in the hearts and lives of the listener. Results happen. Listeners change and grow as the Word preached does its work. In the final chapter we will list the kind of results a preacher can realistically expect from the faithful preaching of God’s Word.

⁹⁸Quoted by John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, pages 266-67; Cf. James Black, *The Mystery of Preaching*, the 1923 Warrack and Sprunt Lectures, James Clarke, 1924; revised edition, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1977.

4 The Preaching Group

*As iron sharpens iron,
so one man sharpens another.
Proverbs 27:17*

Pastor Chuck came to the shed in our backyard where I was busy working. Ever since my dad left our family, he had regular visits with my mother. That afternoon he also came to talk with me. As a fourteen year old, what conversation do you have with your minister? He noticed I had been busy with a bunch of tools. “What are you going to do with your life?” he eventually asked me. I replied, “I really don’t know. Perhaps I’ll become an architect.” I always seemed to be building or fixing things. “Why don’t you become a preacher?” “Me, a preacher? Forget it,” I politely told him. But Pastor Chuck would not give up so easily. He prodded: “Why not?” I explained, “There is no way I can stand in front of people and be able to preach. I wouldn’t know what to say and how to say it.” Then he told: “Jack, many times I feel so inadequate to the task of preaching, but God has always enabled me to say something when I get up to the pulpit.”

Those words haunted me for the next several weeks. I began to think if God could do this for Chuck, God could also do it for me. Like seeds planted in good soil, Pastor Chuck’s words germinated into hearing God’s call to become a preacher. Now several decades later and after two decades of being a preacher, my query about preaching that afternoon continues to spark curiosity. When a preacher is ready to deliver a sermon, what does she say and how does

she say it? How can I as a preacher be successful at the task of speaking God's Word through sermons?

What is preaching for success? What is success? John C. Maxwell has defined success as:

*knowing your purpose in life,
growing to reach your maximum potential, and
sowing seeds that benefit others.*¹

Maxwell goes on to explain that by this definition "success is a journey rather than a destination. No matter how long you live or what you decide to do in life, you will never exhaust your capacity to grow toward your potential or run out of opportunities to help others."²

Maxwell's definition of success has helped me frame preaching for success. First, as a preacher I need to know what my *purpose* is. I need to know what I am aiming for as a preacher. Second, I need to keep *growing* so that I may reach my maximum preaching potential. "Commitment to continual improvement is the key to reaching your potential and to being successful. Each day you can become a little bit better than you were yesterday."³ And third, I need to *help* others. "Success in life has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others."⁴

¹*The Success Journey, The Process of Living Your Dreams*, Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997, page 11.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., page 15.

⁴Ibid., page 17.

The previous chapter dealt with the purpose of preaching – what do I say and how do I say it? But in the success journey, as a preacher, I also need to keep “growing” and “sowing.” My desire to keep growing led me several years ago to apply to Gordon-Conwell Seminary to study under Dr. Haddon Robinson in the Doctor of Ministry Program, *“The Preacher and The Message.”* These three years of learning have enabled this fledgling preacher to soar to new heights. My commitment to continual improvement and helping other preachers has led me this past year to begin what I call the “Preaching Group.”

The genesis of this group goes back almost eight years. I was asked by our local Classis (group of neighbouring churches within the Christian Reformed Church) to serve on a two member sermon evaluation committee. Such a committee is formed when candidates are being examined for ordination into the office “Minister of the Word.” The candidate is asked to prepare a sermon on an assigned text as well as submit two additional sermons. The sermon evaluation is based on both sermon content and delivery. Since serving on this initial committee, I have been a sermon examiner a total of seven times.

The process of these sermon evaluations would include:

- examining the manuscript as to proper exegesis;
- listening to the delivery of the sermon in a worship service;
- meeting with the other committee member to compare findings;
- preparing a sermon evaluation report;
- meeting with the candidate to go over the report; and
- giving the report at the meeting of Classis.

This process would result in an excellent overview of the principles and practices of preaching. Another outcome of this process was people challenging me to

begin a preaching group through which ministers could continually improve in the areas of sermon preparation, composition, and delivery.

In additional, several years ago, our local church Council overtured Classis to provide a teaching opportunity for those licenced to exhort. There are people within the bounds of Classis who have been given recognition as “exhorters.”⁵ They are examined by classis as to their giftedness and potential to edify congregations and then are given a preaching licence. The reason our congregation sent this overture to Classis was to assist those who have been given licence to exhort. We discovered that many exhorters had no or little training in Biblical exegesis, sermon preparation, and delivery. Their sermons were ample evidence. Yet this overture was eventually turned down, the reason being that no one showed an interest in availing themselves of such training opportunities.

The challenge of my preaching peers, the discerned need among Classis exhorters, and in order to fulfill the project requirement for my Doctor of Ministry program, last summer (July 2002) I initiated the “Preaching Group.” I sent an email to twelve preachers seeing if they would be interested to be part of a preaching group. These preachers were both from our denomination and from other churches in our town. Of the twelve, six responded back expressing

⁵Historically our denomination has made a difference between preaching, exhorting, and expounding. Ordained men can preach; unordained men exhort, and women expound the teachings of the Bible. To this day I am baffled by these distinctions, and thankfully, women are now also recognized as being able to preach and exhort.

interest and made a commitment to join the preaching group.

The makeup of this group consists of:

- Gary: ordained for 26 years serving his fifth congregation;
- Peter: ordained for 6 years and serving his second church;
- Steve: ordained for 1 year, serving his first congregation;
- Chris: a candidate who was ordained in October (I was his sermon examiner);
- Fred: an exhorter within Classis for the past 3 years (never yet has written a sermon manuscript); and,
- Frank: a Youth For Christ worker recently ordained.

The first five are from my denomination while Frank is a member of one of the local churches in our town. We began meeting in September and meet monthly for a two hour session.

The purpose of this preaching group is *to provide the members through teaching and peer mentoring an opportunity to develop and improve the skills of sermon preparation and sermon delivery that are necessary for successful preaching*. Each member is expected to take an initiative in setting the agenda of subsequent meetings.⁶ Their particular needs will be the focus of what is discussed and what objectives are set. Each member will participate by:

- (1) Preparing Biblical and homiletical outlines;
- (2) Preparing full sermon manuscripts on selected passages;
- (3) Preaching sermons in front of the group; and
- (4) Giving feedback to the other members of the group.

⁶The reason I am taking a learner self-directed approach is to maximize the learning that occurs. Howard and William Hendricks write: "Learning involves change. The learner is a different person as a result of the learning process. If he's not, then what's the point? But *he* is entirely in control of the change that takes place. That's why the more the learner establishes the agenda, the more learning will take place"(As *Iron Sharpens Iron, Building Character In a Mentoring Relationship*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1995, page 196).

This preaching group will take an inductive approach to learning. The various skills of sermon preparation and sermon delivery will be discussed as part of the evaluation and feedback process.

In our opening session the criteria of successful preaching were summarized, i.e.,:

- (1) There must be a careful listening to God's Word.
- (2) There must be a careful listening to the listener.
- (3) God's Word must connect to the listener.
- (4) God's word must be communicated in such a way that it is worth listening to.⁷

The particulars of these criteria would be detailed in subsequent meetings as the occasion and/or need warrants.

To help lay a common reference point for the exegetical work in future meetings we discussed a number of key concepts:

1. Haddon Robinson's working definition of expository preaching: *Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of the passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.*⁸
2. The structure of an idea: a subject (What am I talking about?) and a complement (What exactly am I saying about what I'm talking about?).
3. The "exegetical idea."
4. The three developmental questions:
 - a. Explanation: What does it mean?
 - b. Validation: Is it true?

⁷These criteria are based on the theoretical framework detailed in chapter 3, "Removing the Obstacles."

⁸*Biblical Preaching*, page 21; I reviewed the particulars of this definition in light of the four criteria for successful preaching.

- c. Application: What difference does it make?
- 5. The “homiletical idea.”

To assist the group members to understand what these various concepts mean we studied two Biblical passages: Luke 10:38-42 and 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10. For each passage we came up with the exegetical idea and the homiletical idea. Since the goal of preaching is to connect God’s Word to listeners we placed special attention on the third developmental question: application.

One of the outcomes of this initial session was that the group members wanted to study texts that could be used during the season of Advent. This would benefit them in two ways: (1) they would preach relevant sermons during this season and (2) they would have some additional sermon texts to work from. In this way they would preach better sermons and save on some sermon preparation time during this busy season of the year. I asked each participant to select a passage from one of six different genres of Biblical literature. As a result the following passages were selected:

Parable: Mark 13:32-37	Narrative: Joshua 2	Poetry: Psalm 89
Apocalyptic: Revelation 12	Epistle: Romans 8:18-27	Prophetic: Joel 2:18-27

Each participant was asked to study these passages prior to the subsequent meetings and to present to the group (1) the homiletical idea; (2) the logical structure of the sermon; and (3) the application of the sermon.

Over the next three sessions each participant reported to the group and received feedback from the group. The feedback analysis centered around the

three hermeneutical questions: (1) What is the meaning of the original message? (2) For what reason was the original message given? (3) What does this text tell us about [a] our fallen human condition and [b] God's redemptive solution? The exegetical idea, the homiletical idea, the sermon outlines, and the application were examined closely to see if they truly reflected the intent and purpose of the Biblical author.

Since each of the participants presented a sermon outline we also discussed the shapes sermons take: inductive, deductive, and semi-inductive. We noted the factors of determining what shape the preacher should use, i.e., (1) *the purpose of the sermon* (inform, persuade, convince) and (2) *the passage of Scripture* (Where does the passage state the big idea?). We also discussed the characteristics and rhetorical functions of the various genres of Scripture represented in the selected texts and what this might mean in terms of preaching on these texts in a contemporary setting.

The preaching group has made a commitment to keep meeting indefinitely. The group decided to select passages to preach on during the upcoming Lenten season. The passages selected are:

Mark 1:4-15	Isaiah 55:1-9	Zephaniah 3
Matthew 26:36-46	Ephesians 4:22-24	Joshua 5:9-12

In addition to the exegetical idea, homiletical idea, and sermon outline, the group members have been asked to prepare a full sermon manuscript. Future feedback on these sermons will include an analysis of introductions, conclusions,

and transitions. Yet at the core of all the evaluation done are these questions: Does this sermon connect God's Word to listeners? In what specific ways does the biblical concept communicated apply to the hearers?

Since the criteria for successful preaching also includes sermon delivery, the preaching group eventually will also listen to each other preach sermons. In these sessions, in addition to an evaluation of the exegetical and homiletic analysis of the Biblical text, the group members will evaluate each other on sermon delivery. The principles and practices of effective communication will be reviewed and discussed as part of the evaluation.

This preaching group has given me an opportunity to develop and improve the skills of sermon preparation and sermon delivery that are necessary for successful preaching. I know that my growth as a preacher is not automatic but requires effort. This is true for me and true also for my preaching peers. It will require constant evaluation and feedback. Through this preaching group we can mentor each other and sharpen our skills at preparing and delivering messages that connect God's Word to our listeners and are communicated in ways that are worth listening to. As John C. Maxwell points out: "When you surround yourself with people from whom you can learn — instead of just people who are learning from you — you are most likely to grow."⁹

This preaching group will not only facilitate continual growth as a preacher; it will also provide an opportunity where I can intentionally sow some

⁹*The Success Journey*, page 108.

seeds that will benefit others. One of the blessings of studying at Gordon-Conwell Seminary these past three years with people like Haddon Robinson, Duane Litfin, Don Sunukjian, Sid Buzzell, Terry Mattingly, Max McLean, and my colleagues is that I have received bushels of seeds to sow. John C. Maxwell points out that in the success journey a person's goal should be to "take others with you and help them change their lives for the better. Nothing in life is more fun — or has a greater return. You'll never regret the time you invest in people."¹⁰ As others have invested in me, so in turn I can also invest in others. As I grow as a preacher I can take others along with me and grow together.

An elder of a neighbouring church called a couple of weeks ago. He said, "I just called to say 'thank you!' Thank you for 'raising the bar' for our pastor!" I realized he was talking about one of the preachers in our group. When I asked him to explain, he said: "I've come to realize that many ministers are individual islands. It is difficult to come up with new inspiration every week. Not all ministers are equally equipped. It is my conviction that preachers need to continually improve themselves. The group you initiated has done that for our pastor."

And so the journey continues. It is a journey with a goal in mind – to "preach the Word," to faithfully deliver sermons in such a way that God's Word connects with listeners. It is a success journey, a journey to new preaching heights in knowing what to say and how to say it.

¹⁰Ibid., page 219.

5 Conclusion

*As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
it will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
Isaiah 55:10-11*

In Ann Landers' final column, a column written on the day of her death, June 22, 2002, a fan in Ohio asked Ann to reprint a definition of success. Ann did so "with pleasure." This definition of success was written in 1904 by Bessie Anderson Stanley:

He has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often, and loved much; who has enjoyed the trust of pure women, the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has left the world better than he found it, whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul; who has never lacked appreciation of Earth's beauty or failed to express it; who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had; whose life was an inspiration; whose memory a benediction.¹

Bessie Anderson Stanley's definition of success is how people typically understand success. Success has to do with results and outcomes.² Success, according to the Webster's Dictionary, is a "degree or measure of succeeding.

¹*The Kitchener Record*, July 27, 2002, Section G, page 6.

²The Webster Dictionary points out that prior to 1755 the word "success" used to be considered synonymous with the words "outcome, result" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1979, page 1154).

To succeed in life is “to turn out well . . . to attain a desired object or end.”³

According to Bessie Anderson Stanley, if the desired goals in life would be to live well, laugh often, and love much, success is measured in terms of attaining those goals. In our North American result-orientated society people measure success in terms of accomplishing specific results: achieving wealth, prestige, happiness, and/or power. Successful people are those who are on the Fortune 500 list, who have climbed the corporate ladder to the top, or who have been given a Nobel Peace Prize Award.

We might have an idea of what it means to be successful measured by the standards of modern society. But what does it mean to be a successful preacher? Many preachers might cringe in using the words “preaching” and “success” in the same sentence. Some Christians even hesitate to use the word success. As Charles L. Chaney and Ron S. Lewis write, “Immediately, when the word ‘success’ is used . . . many modern Christians get up tight. ‘Success’ is a ‘b-a-a-a-d’ word!”⁴ If success has to do with results and outcomes, what results can a preacher realistically expect from the faithful preaching of God’s Word? What is preaching for success?

Expect Results!

First of all, the preacher should expect results from the faithful preaching of God’s Word. This expectation is rooted in the nature and authority of both

³Ibid.

⁴*Design for Church Growth*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1977, page 189.

Scripture and sermons.⁵ God's Word written and God's Word preached are powerfully effective. The effective power comes from the fact that God speaks through both. Both are the Word of God. Preachers are God's mouthpiece. For this reason, preaching bring results. People change and grow as God's Word does its work in their lives.

The resulting growth and change are the purposes behind preaching. The desired goal of preaching is to shape the lives of the listeners and the culture in which they live. As Joseph Stowell writes,

The end game of God's Word is not just to make us smart or theologically astute but rather to effect change. It is about leading listeners to change their minds and hearts. To repent of sin. To relate to God and others more constructively. To grow in our capacity to reflect the reality of Christ in our lives. To think more clearly about him and who he is. To think more clearly about who we really are.⁶

There are certain ways to categorize the different results a preacher can expect from the faithful preaching of God's Word. Baumann discusses the various results of preaching in light of four distinct purposes for contemporary preaching. He relates the function or purposes of preaching to the various forms sermons take and the targeted audience⁷:

⁵Cf. detailed discussion in Chapter 2, pages 15-87.

⁶"Preaching for Change," *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, page 126.

⁷An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching, page 206; Baumann concedes that perhaps *persuasion* could be listed as a separate function of preaching, but later points out that "all preaching . . . is persuasive by its various nature"(Ibid., page 224; Cf. pages 205-06).

Forms	Audience	Function
1. Kerygmatic	Unbelievers	to redeem
2. Didactic	Believers	to teach
3. Therapeutic	Believers	to heal(personally)
4. Prophetic	Believers	to heal(socially)

As Baumann goes on to explain, *Kerygmatic* preaching refers to evangelistic sermons resulting in people being saved; *Didactic* preaching refers to doctrinal preaching resulting in knowledge of doctrinal truth; *Therapeutic* preaching refers to sermons that address the life-situations of people resulting in broken lives healed; *Prophetic* preaching refers to sermons that address the social ills of society resulting in a Christians making a difference in society.⁸ As Bauman concludes:

The purpose of preaching is to address the whole man — a man who first of all needs to be redeemed by the power of Jesus Christ, a man who makes a personal decision to let Jesus Christ come into his life as Saviour and Lord. He needs also to be taught regarding the Christian faith. Then he needs the encouragement that the “Balm in Gilead” can sooth his aches and heal his hurts. Finally, he needs to know that God has a word for him regarding his society and his place in it as a Christian.⁹

Another way to categorize the results a preacher can expect from the faithful preaching of God’s Word is related to the three developmental questions used to interpret God’s Word for God’s people today.¹⁰ In order to develop any Biblical idea the preacher can only explain it, prove it, or apply it. The results of preaching then are three:

⁸Cf. *Ibid.*, pages 206-219.

⁹*Ibid.*, pages 218-19.

¹⁰See above, pages 165ff.

1. Growth in **Understanding** resulting from **Explanation**.
2. Growth in **Conviction** resulting from **Validation**.
3. Change in **Behavior** resulting from **Application**.

The preacher who faithfully preaches the Word of God can expect that his listeners will grow in their *understanding* of the teachings of the Bible. They will know what the Bible teaches, what it means to be a Christian, and what the shape of their life and culture ought to take. They will understand how the original message of the Biblical authors apply specifically in their lives and life situations. They will also know what they ought to do as they apply God's Word to their lives.

Christian leaders today talk about a crisis of knowledge in the Christian church. Theologian Kenneth Kantzer wrote in *Christianity Today* that "every . . . Christian educator I know laments the fact that knowledge about religion, the Bible, and Christianity has fallen off. This is certainly true for the general public, but unfortunately it is true for evangelical Christians as well."¹¹ The state of Biblical illiteracy among Christians was evidenced by a 1988 Gallup poll that concluded that "many professing believers remain woefully ignorant about basic facts of Christianity."¹² Or as David F. Wells writes:

The disappearance of theology from the life of the Church, and the orchestration of that disappearance by some of its leaders, is hard to miss . . . in the evangelical world — in the vacuous worship that is so prevalent, for example, in the shift from God to the self as the central focus of faith, in the psychological preaching that follows this shift, in the erosion of its

¹¹"What Happened in 586 B.C.?", *Christianity Today* (March 4, 1988), page 11.

¹²Quoted by Richard Walker, "Trends: More Christians Saying No to Church," *Christianity Today* (September 2, 1988), page 57.

conviction, in its strident pragmatism, in its inability to think incisively about the culture, in its reveling in the irrational.¹³

Speaking about the people in his day Hosea writes: “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.”¹⁴ Could the same devastation happen in the Christian church of the 21st century? Could the erosion of Christian knowledge create such a gap that the church slides into extinction? It could happen, as Jo H. Lewis and Gordon A. Palmer warn: “We could float sleepily along with the tide until we die for lack of knowledge. . . . In the end, the salt would be worth nothing, and all that ever was of our Christian culture would be, at best, a faint and mocking memory.”¹⁵ But it doesn’t have to happen if preachers faithfully preach the Word of God. Preaching is like a lamp that shines in darkness enlightening people in the way of truth.¹⁶ Preaching will instill faith – a knowledge that comes by hearing the Word of God through preaching.¹⁷ People will “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and . . . know this love that surpasses knowledge — . . . filled to the measure of all the fulness of God.”¹⁸ Preaching brings results, a growth in understanding that

¹³*No Place For Truth, Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, page 95.

¹⁴Hosea 4:6.

¹⁵*What Every Christian Should Know*, Wheaton, Illinois: Christianity Today, 1989, page 118.

¹⁶Cf. above pages 34,35.

¹⁷Cf. Romans 10:17, above pages 70ff.

¹⁸Ephesians 3:18,19.

results from explanation.¹⁹

Faithful preaching of God's word will also result in growth in *conviction*. Paul reminded the Thessalonians that their preaching came to them "not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit with *deep conviction*."²⁰ As preaching validates the truth of God's Word, people are convicted of their need to confess their sin, to repent of their wicked ways, and surrender their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Through faithful sermons people will grow in their conviction of their need to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that by believing in him they may have life in his name.²¹ People are "cut to the heart" knowing that they need to change their lives. Faithful preaching will convict people that "nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."²² Preaching will infuse in the listener the kind of faith that is not only a knowledge, but a "conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true."²³ People will be assured of God's comfort and grace knowing that have their sins forgiven, and have been granted eternal life.

¹⁹ Jo H. Lewis and Gordon A. Palmer arrived at a preliminary list of about eighteen hundred items or terms that every Christian should know. While such a list might be, as they admit, dangerous, it can serve the preacher well in grasping what knowledge Christians should have. See Appendix 1, *What Every Christian Should Know*, pages 119-153.

²⁰1 Thessalonians 1:5, emphasis mine.

²¹Cf. John 20:31.

²²Romans 8:39.

²³Lord's Day 7, "Heidelberg Catechism," *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, page 19.

Preaching brings results, a growth in conviction that results from validation.

Faithful preaching of God's Word will also result in a change in *behavior*. Unbelievers convicted of the truth of the Christian gospel will join the church. Believers convicted of sin, will make confession. Believers growing in knowledge of God's kingdom requisites will shape their lives and their culture by the outline of God's Word. People will apply Biblical truth in concrete, specific behavior changes. They will put off the old self and put on the new self, clothing themselves "with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."²⁴ Husbands and wives will walk in marital purity and mutual submission, parents and children will live together in respect and unity, employers and workers will serve each other wholeheartedly.²⁵ As J. Daniel Baumann points out: " This behavioral change may take any number of directions including salvation, vocation, adoration, praise, confession, baptism, church membership, service within the life of the community, or wholeness regarding psychological and emotional health."²⁶ Preaching brings results, a change in behavior that results from application. Preachers: expect results. Expect results because God's Word preached is powerfully effective.

Be Realistic!

The evidence of the dynamic power of preaching are the results of people

²⁴Colossians 3:12.

²⁵Cf. Ephesians 5:21-6:9.

²⁶*An Introduction to Contemporary Preaching*, page 205.

growing in knowledge, growing in conviction, and changing their behavior. But these results are not automatic; nor are they always instantaneous. The preaching task does not only involve the preacher; it also involves the listener and the Triune God. For this reason, preachers need to be realistic about the results they can expect from the faithful preaching of God's Word.

Listener response will affect the outcome of preaching. Preachers cannot make listeners respond. For example, “the shepherd of Psalm 23 brings his flock to the green pastures and he probably shows them where the best grass is to be found – but the sheep have to select, eat, and digest the food themselves.”²⁷ The lack of listener response might be because of a person's self-righteousness or stubborn refusal to listen. Hardened hearts hinder the effective power of God to bring results. No matter how effectively and faithfully a preacher might communicate God's Word, the soil of the listener might not be receptive to receive it. Biblical ideas explained will not be understood. Truth convincingly proven will not be accepted. The Biblical message faithfully applied will not be acted upon. Lack of listener response might also be a result of being blinded by “the god of this age.”²⁸ Results are not automatic because the faithful preaching requires listener response.

The second factor that affects the outcome of preaching is *sovereignty of*

²⁷Gijsbert D.J. Dingemans, “Hearer in the Pew: Homiletical Reflections and Suggestions,” *Preaching as a Theological Task, World, Gospel, Scripture, In Honor of David Buttrick*, Long, Thomas G. And Edward Farley, editors, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, page 43.

²⁸Cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4; see also above pages 82-83.

God. Before listeners can respond God needs to do a prior work in the heart of a person to make it soft and pliable, ready to receive the Word preached. Without the Spirit of God assisting a person to understand spiritual truth, what is faithfully preached might sound like foolishness. As preachers we cannot control the listener. Neither can we control God nor the power of His Word. As Duane Kelderman writes: “Preaching doesn’t change people. God changes people through preaching.”²⁹ Preaching might be one of the keys of the kingdom, but it is God who opens doors.³⁰ God’s sovereignty remains intact.

God’s sovereignty and human success are closely linked in Scriptures. It is God who ultimately gives success.³¹ When Eliezer, Abraham’s chief servant, went to look for a wife for Isaac he knew that the LORD would have to make his journey successful.³² Joseph had success in the home of Potiphar because the LORD was with him and gave him success in everything he did.³³ King David was successful because the LORD was with him.³⁴ This was also true of King Hezekiah: “And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he

²⁹“What Makes a Sermon a Good Sermon?”, *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum* (Spring 2002), Volume 9, Number 2, page 9.

³⁰See above pages 81-85.

³¹Cf. Job 5:12; Psalm 20:4; 21:11; 118:25 140:8; Proverbs 21:30.

³²Genesis 24:12, 21.

³³39:3; Cf. verse 23.

³⁴1 Samuel 18:14; Cf. 18:15,30; 25:31; 1 Chronicles 12:18.

undertook.”³⁵ Nehemiah knew that the return of the exiles to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls was dependent upon the Lord God for success.³⁶ As James also reminds New Testament believers:

Now listen, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.” Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”³⁷

People may plan and do all they want, but the eventual outcome is dependent upon God’s will. God is the ultimate source of success, also successful preaching. Results from faithfully preaching God’s Word are not automatic because they require God to do his part.

Results are also not instantaneous. In a society of fast food, instant coffee, and ever faster Internet communication, preachers might expect that results happen immediately. A truth is explained and right away people understand it. Proof is given about a Scriptural concept and, presto, listeners are convinced. The homiletical “big idea” is faithfully and pointedly applied. The listener heads home straightaway to repair the broken, heal the hurt, forgive the culprit, and witness to their neighbour. But that is not stuff of everyday faithful exposition and application of God’s Word.

Spiritual growth happens over a lifetime. Michael Yaconelli, in his

³⁵1 Kings 18:7.

³⁶Nehemiah 1:11; 2:20.

³⁷James 4:13-15.

provocative book, *Messy Spirituality*, argues against a spirituality that is all about instant perfection. He writes: “Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God being present in the mess of our unfixedness.”³⁸ The spiritual life of sanctification is a process of an ever increasing state of repair in a believer’s life.

As Yaconelli points out:

We would all like to believe that growth results from one mighty decision, a once-an-for-all commitment to God. . . . it’s just the beginning of our spiritual journey, not the end. It’s the first of many decisions, all of them important, all bringing growth. Hundreds — maybe even thousands — of decisions make up genuine growth, some moving us closer to God, some moving us farther away, but all contributing to a deeper, richer, and more textured relationship with God.³⁹

Preachers who expect instant results from their preaching will be disappointed.

Change and growth take time.

Preachers can expect results from the preaching of God’s Word. But those expectations need to be realistic. For faithful preaching to result in understanding, conviction, and behavioral change requires receptive and obedient listeners, God’s grace, and time.

Remove All Obstacles!

Successful preaching calls for preachers to realistically expect results from the faithful preaching of God’s Word. But instead of focusing on the results of faithful preaching, in order to preach for success preachers should focus on the process of faithful preaching.

³⁸*Messy Spirituality, God’s Annoying Love for Imperfect People*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002, page 13.

³⁹*Ibid*, page 99.

Kenneth Haugk differentiates between *process goals* and *results goals*. He writes, “*Process goals* differ from *results goals* as verbs differ from nouns. Kindling a fire is a process; a fire is a result.”⁴⁰ He goes on to explain that process goals imply a “passage of time. All the results goals are beneficial, but each comes at the end of a process. You can’t have an outcome without going through a process. And if you have your eye on the outcome, you probably will miss the process altogether.”⁴¹ As Haugk stresses, a focus on results stymies growth and change; change and growth are maximized when the focus is on process.⁴² Applied to the task of preaching, this means that rather than focusing on the results of people growing and changing, preachers need to focus on the process of faithfully and effectively preaching God’s Word. Since results are ultimately dependent upon God’s grace, preachers are to put their trust in God that he will use the faithful preaching of His Word to bring about growth and change.

The process of faithful and effective preaching requires that preachers remove all obstacles that hinder the effective power of God’s Word to come through a sermon preached. With the roadblocks removed, the potential of

⁴⁰*Christian Caregiving, A Way of Life*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984, page 139; Cf. Kenneth Haugk, *Reopening the Back Door, Answers to Questions about Ministering to Inactive Members*, St. Louis, Missouri: Tebunah Ministries, 1989, 1992, pages 30-31.

⁴¹*Christian Caregiving*, page 140.

⁴²*Reopening the Back Door*, page 31; “When you push for results, results flee” (Ibid., page 32); “Results start happening when you stop pushing for them!” (*Christian Caregiving*, page 138).

preaching for success is maximized.

A Biblical understanding of success also indicates that people can set up obstacles that will hinder success. The LORD God reminds Joshua that there will be no success without faithful obedience:

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. *Then you will be prosperous and successful.*⁴³

A similar point is made in the opening song of the psalter. In order to prosper one needs to delight in and obey the law of the LORD.⁴⁴ David reminds his son Solomon that his success is dependent upon his obedience to do God's will.⁴⁵ To maximize success people need to do what is right. "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed."⁴⁶ Without humble submission to God's will for your life success will not be achieved.

Preaching for success means that all the obstacles for faithful and effective preaching of God's Word need to be removed. There must be a

⁴³Joshua 1:7,8, emphasis mine.

⁴⁴Psalms 1; The psalmist lists the results or evidence of success: "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers"(verse 3).

⁴⁵1 Chronicles 22:11,12; This is a recurring theme of the Chronicler: obedience to God results in success. For example, about King Uzziah we read: "As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success"(2 Chronicles 25:5).

⁴⁶Proverbs 16:3; Cf. 3:5-6; Psalm 90:17.

*careful listening to God's Word.*⁴⁷ The exegesis of the Biblical text must disclose the meaning of the original message, the reason why this original message was given, and what the text tells us about [a] our fallen human condition and [b] God's redemptive solution. This requires that the preacher follow the steps of good exegesis (contextual, syntactical, verbal, and theological analysis).

There must also be a *careful listening to listeners.*⁴⁸ The preacher must take an audience-centered approach to communication. To carefully listen to listeners, the preacher must analyze his audience. He can do that formally, informally, or through empathetic imagination. The preacher must also analyze the culture. She can do that by finding and analyzing the cultural signals that exist and come along in contemporary society. The preacher must also welcome formal, systematic feedback and analyze the response he receives.⁴⁹

The preacher must also *connect God's Word to listeners.*⁵⁰ The Word of God needs to be faithfully explained, convincingly proven, and accurately applied to the world of the listener and the culture in which he or she lives. Some ideas might need to be explained. Others might need to be proven. But all homiletic ideas need to be applied. The listener needs to know specifically what he or she

⁴⁷See above pages 91ff.

⁴⁸See above pages 124ff.

⁴⁹While the preacher should not focus on "result goals" it is through both informal and especially formal feedback that the preacher can measure the results of his preaching ministry.

⁵⁰See above pages 161ff.

needs to do. The specific results of growth in understanding, growth in conviction, and change in behavior will not happen if God's Word is not connected to listeners. As Haddon Robinson points out:

. . . great sermons take place when flint strikes steel. When the flint of a person's problem strikes the steel of the Word of God, you get a spark, and the spark will burn. Some sermons are too "flinty": they're all problem, and not much Scripture. Others are all steel and no flint: they are strong on the Bible but stop short of challenging people's lives. What we want is some combination of the eternal Word of God striking people where they live.⁵¹

Finally, the preacher must also *communicate effectively*.⁵² The sermon focuses on a single Biblical idea and its order reflects its unity. The sermons are worth listening to. Sermons meet the needs of the listener, have specific outcomes in mind, and are spoken in love. The preacher is skillful in her delivery. There is "fire" in the preacher's heart and warmth in her conversational tone. The preacher does not speak at them, but for them, and with them. The preacher understands the importance of non-verbal cues. The preacher is not only a communicator of the gospel but he is a child of God. He studies the Word of God to understand it. He is convicted of the truth of God's Word, beyond doubt. He is committed to be a person who lives his convictions. The preacher has integrity.

The preacher who preaches for success is one who focuses not on the results of her preaching, but the process. She listens carefully to God's Word

⁵¹Brink, Emily, "When Flint Strikes Steel," page 17.

⁵²See above pages 184ff.

and her listeners. She builds a bridge between both as she applies to the truth to her hearer. When she preaches she says something that is worth listening to. As she focuses on the process, the results of growth and change will happen.

The successful preacher expects results but his expectations are realistic. He knows he has to faithfully and effectively preach God's Word. He does his part. God and the listener will have to their parts. This realization brings the preacher down to his knees. "He is a petitioner before he is a speaker. . . . He raises his thirsty soul to God in order that he may give forth what he shall drink, or pour out what shall fill him."⁵³ The minds and hearts of listeners need to be opened and receptive. As he commits his sermon to the Lord, he asks God to give him success. In God's time the results will come.

As rain and snow come down from heaven
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making bud and flourish,
so is God's Word that goes out
when the preacher faithfully and effectively delivers a sermon:
it does not return empty but accomplishes
what God desires and achieves the purpose for which he sent it.

SGD April 1, 2003

⁵³Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, translated by D. W. Robertson, Jr., New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958, page 140.

Appendix A

“Goal and Questions for Feedback Session”

Text:

Message Theme:

Feedback Session Date:

Sermon Delivery Date:

Goal of the Feedback Session:

*To meet with members of the congregation to clarify issues, problems, and/or questions they have with the above text I hope to preach on. With this feedback I hope that I will be able to see preaching from **their** perspective and incorporate this input into the preaching on the above text.*

Questions about the text we will consider:

- (1) What questions do you have about this passage that you need to have explained?
- (2) What feelings are evoked when you read this passage of Scripture? In other words, how does this text affect you?
- (3) What ideas in this text do you have a problem believing to be true?
- (4) What issues or problems do you see addressed in the passage? Why do you think God put this passage in the Bible?
- (5) How would you state the one major idea in this passage?
- (6) Has this text ever spoken to you previously in such a way that it changed something in your life? Explain.
- (7) What applications to your life or others do you see growing out of the text? What specifically does the message of this text ask you to do?

Appendix B

Sermon Reaction Questionnaire

Questionnaire Version
by William H. Willimon

in: "Getting The Feedback
You Need," *Leadership*,
Volume XIII, Number 2 (Spring
1992), page 41.

SERMON REACTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Do not sign your name.

Supply the following information:

Sex: male ____ ; female ____

Age: under 20 ____ ; 20-29 ____ ; 30-39 ____ ;
40-49 ____ ; 50-59 ____ ; over 59 ____

Regarding the sermon you just heard, indicate whether you agree or disagree with these statements. Circle 1 if you strongly agree, 2 if you agree, 3 if you're uncertain, 4 if you disagree, 5 if you strongly disagree.

Your honesty and frankness will be appreciated.

1. My interest was maintained. 1 2 3 4 5
2. The sermon was integrated into the service of worship. 1 2 3 4 5
3. I was not inspired. 1 2 3 4 5
4. The preacher's personality came through. 1 2 3 4 5
5. The Scripture text was not used or illumined. 1 2 3 4 5
6. The preacher used contemporary language. 1 2 3 4 5
7. The preacher did not evidence a personal faith. 1 2 3 4 5
8. The sermon was too long. 1 2 3 4 5
9. I did not understand the sermon well. 1 2 3 4 5
10. The preacher referred to notes too often. 1 2 3 4 5
11. The preacher sounded like he/she loved us. 1 2 3 4 5
12. The sermon spoke to some of my personal needs. 1 2 3 4 5
13. The sermon did not sufficiently emphasize the greatness of Christ. 1 2 3 4 5
14. The preacher showed self-confidence. 1 2 3 4 5
15. The sermon did not make me eager to serve God any more than I'm already serving him. 1 2 3 4 5
16. I identified with the preacher. 1 2 3 4 5
17. The preacher spoke down to us. 1 2 3 4 5
18. The sermon did not have a sufficiently forceful conclusion. 1 2 3 4 5
19. The sermon did not help me encounter God. 1 2 3 4 5
20. I can remember most or all of the sermon's points. 1 2 3 4 5

Appendix C

Sermon Evaluation Form

Text:

Message Theme:

Sermon Delivery Date:

Feedback Session Date:

Evaluation done by:

_____ (Your name)

Your age and gender:
(Circle one in each category)

10-20

20-30

30-40

♂ Male

40-50

50-60

60+

♀ Female

SCALE

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Superb Good OK Poor

PART ONE:

Using the scale above, evaluate the following by circling the appropriate number:

General Comments:

Content of Message 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Structure of Message 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Delivery of Message 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction:

Introduces the main idea of the text . . 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Gets your attention. 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Touches a need directly or indirectly . . 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Structure:

The structure is clear 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The flow of the message is clear 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contains adequate and appropriate:

Explanation of the text 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Illustrations 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Application of the text 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

SCALE				
5	4	3	2	1
Definitely YES.....		Definitely NO		

PART TWO: Using the scale above for “yes” or “no”, evaluate the following by circling the appropriate number.

Explanation of the Text

- This message is what *this* text is about 5 4 3 2 1
- The overall passage content and question(s)
are sufficiently handled. 5 4 3 2 1
- The explanations are accurate, understandable,
and support the points made 5 4 3 2 1
- The context of the passage are adequately considered 5 4 3 2 1
- The explanation of the text is not overemphasized
once the points are sufficiently made 5 4 3 2 1
- The content of the message shows creativity. 5 4 3 2 1

Application of the Text

- Is clear 5 4 3 2 1
- helpful. 5 4 3 2 1
- practical 5 4 3 2 1
- The application is motivated by grace
and not by legalism or guilt. 5 4 3 2 1
- Supported with sufficient biblical
proof from *this* passage 5 4 3 2 1

Illustrations

- Contain sufficient real or believable detail 5 4 3 2 1
- Truly clarify or strengthen the main idea or overall
message impact 5 4 3 2 1
- Are in appropriate proportion both in number
and length to the message as a whole 5 4 3 2 1

SCALE
5 4 3 2 1
Definitely YES.....Definitely NO

Conclusion

- The message builds to a climax 5 4 3 2 1
- There is an adequate summary of ideas 5 4 3 2 1
- There are effective closing appeals or suggestions. . . 5 4 3 2 1

Style

- The speaker use correct grammar. 5 4 3 2 1
- His/her vocabulary is realistic 5 4 3 2 1
 - descriptive. 5 4 3 2 1
 - varied 5 4 3 2 1
- Words used are used correctly 5 4 3 2 1
- The choice of words add to the effectiveness of the sermon 5 4 3 2 1

Delivery

- The speaker wants to be heard 5 4 3 2 1
- He/she is alert 5 4 3 2 1
- You feel he/she is talking with you 5 4 3 2 1
- The tone is friendly 5 4 3 2 1
- The delivery sounds like he/she is having a conversation 5 4 3 2 1

Oral Presentation

- His/her voice is easy to listen to 5 4 3 2 1
- There is clear expression of words 5 4 3 2 1
- There is variety in voice sounds 5 4 3 2 1
- There is a variety in force 5 4 3 2 1
- The rate varies enough 5 4 3 2 1
- He/she use pauses effectively. 5 4 3 2 1

SCALE				
5	4	3	2	1
Definitely YES.....		Definitely NO		

Physical Presentation

- His/her entire body is involved in the delivery. 5 4 3 2 1
- He/she gestures appropriately 5 4 3 2 1
- There are distracting mannerisms 5 4 3 2 1
 If so, what are they? _____
- His/her posture is good 5 4 3 2 1
- He/she has good facial expression 5 4 3 2 1

General Effectiveness and Sensitivity to the Audience

- The message speaks to your
 - interests 5 4 3 2 1
 - attitudes 5 4 3 2 1
- The message is related to your knowledge 5 4 3 2 1
- The message meet needs in your life 5 4 3 2 1
- The speaker
 - looks you in the eye 5 4 3 2 1
 - is aware of audience response 5 4 3 2 1
- The message length was appropriate 5 4 3 2 1

PART THREE: Please complete the following statements:

- (1) The main idea of this message is _____
 _____ .
- (2) This message explained that God is _____
 _____ .
- (3) This message explained that our sinful nature is _____
 _____ .

Appendix D

Listener Feedback: Interview Questions

Introduction

- (1) Did the introduction to the message interest you? Why?
- (2) Did the introduction raise interest for you to listen to the rest of the message?

Content

- (3) Did the content explain the scripture passage to you?
- (4) Do you think that after the message you could explain to someone else the basic message of that scripture passage?
- (5) Did the ideas in the message seem to be coming from the Bible or from me?
- (6) Did the main idea of the message seem relevant to your life today? In what way?
- (7) What did this message teach you about...
 - a. God?
 - b. Our sinful human condition?
- (8) Did this passage from the Bible raise any questions for you that the message did not answer? If so, what are they?
- (9) How did this message apply the passage to your life and/or life situation?

General

10. Can you describe in one sentence what the message was about?
11. Did the message seem to go too long? (too short?)
12. Could you give the major subpoints or movements of the message?
13. Did you sense that I did my homework in preparing this message?

Presentation

14. Were there any things about my delivery that distracted you?
15. Was my delivery such that you felt I was talking to you?
16. Did I maintain good eye contact with the congregation?
17. Is there anything about the message that I haven't asked you about that you think I need to hear?

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Vita

The author of this thesis is Jacob (Jack) De Vries. He was born December 10, 1957 in Trenton, Ontario, Canada, the eldest son and third child of Garrett and Andrea De Vries. He lived in Brampton, Ontario for most of his childhood and teenage years. He attended John Knox Christian elementary school and Brampton Centennial Secondary School. In 1977 he began his university studies at York University in their Humanities program (Vanier College) with a major in Religious studies. In 1978 he married Jeannie Van Loenen. After graduating in 1980 from York University with a Bachelor of Arts he began his seminary studies at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. He graduated from Calvin Seminary in 1983 and was ordained in the Christian Reformed Church of North America. He served two churches, Alliston Christian Reformed Church, Alliston, Ontario (1983-87) and New Life Community Church, Pickering, Ontario (1987-95), before accepting a call in 1995 to serve the Bethel Christian Reformed Church of Listowel, Ontario. This thesis project is in partial fulfillment for the requirement of the Doctor of Ministry degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. His studies will be completed in May, 2003.

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