LISTENING TO THE LISTENER

Preaching as Dialogue
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We have noted in the first two lectures of this lectureship that reverent listening is essential for powerful Biblical preaching. First, and foremost, preachers must listen to the Word personally. We have no right to speak for God unless we have first listened to Him. Reverent listening to the Word is essential for powerful Biblical preaching. And so the Scripture records in Acts 4:31 that "after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and went out to preach the Word of God boldly."

We have also noted that preachers must listen to the community. We must develop what John Stott calls "the art of double listening." We listen not only to the Word but also to the world. And particularly, the world in which we live, the world where we preach. Reverent listening to the community is also essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

In this third lecture, I want to emphasize the importance of reverent listening to the listener during the preaching of the sermon. The reverent listening to the listener is also essential for powerful Biblical preaching. Because all effective communication is dialogue, all effective preaching will involve a reverent listening to the listener during the preaching of the sermon. Unfortunately, as Reuel Howe has observed, a " "monological illusion about communication is widely prevalent in the church."[1] "Preachers," according to Harold Brack, "have been

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[1]Reuel L. Howe, "Overcoming the Barriers to Communication," *Pastoral Psychology* 14 (October 1963): 30.

preoccupied with schemes of being listened to and not with ways of becoming better listeners."[2]

Reuel Howe, whose ground-breaking work on preaching as dialogue radically transformed my own preaching ministry, explains the prevalent monological approach to preaching as follows: "In monological communication the minister is so preoccupied with the content of his message, his purposes, and his delivery that he is blind and deaf to the needs of his people and their search for meaning."[3]

Clyde Reid agrees with Howe's conclusion: "Basically, as it is generally practiced, preaching is a monologue by one (person) man directed at (the) his congregation. The listener has no opportunity to express his doubts or disagreements to the assembled group. He may even know factually that the preacher is wrong about some of the statements he makes in his monologue."[4] In an attempt to preserve the monological illusion in preaching, Howe has identified the following strategy:

> Ministers frequently attempt to carry on both sides of the dialogue. They think they know what their people are thinking and they make their statements with these assumptions in mind. Experience, however, would seem to indicate that it might be wiser for them to devise means by which they might find out what their people are really thinking, and leave them free to make their own responses to their preaching and

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[2]Harold Brack, "Good Preachers Are Good Listeners," *Quarterly Review* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 86.

[3]Howe, "Overcoming the Barriers to Communication," 30.

[4]Clyde Reid, *The Empty Pulpit: A Study of Preaching as Communication* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 78.

teaching.[5]

The result of a monological approach to communication is predictable. According to Howe, research at the Institute of Advanced Pastoral Studies confirms that "monologue fails to accomplish the communicative task."[6] He emphasizes that "monologue . . . is not only unable to breach the barriers to a meeting of meaning but even creates them (barriers) because it does not take the other person seriously. In monologue, communication becomes only a juggling of opinions."[7]

One might wonder why so many preachers cling tenaciously to monological preaching when monologue is inadequate. Reid offers the following suggestion: "The introduction of dialogue is threatening to both clergy and laity. It means that the minister is exposed to the possibility of embarrassing questions he (or she) may not be able to answer. He may lose his position on the pedestal. . . . It may mean that one may be called to account for what he says."[8] Brack suggests another explanation:

> Preachers may also shy away from any real listening to the congregation before or during the worship event because they do not want to risk being distracted from their own leadership focus. In some cases this is because their preparation is so minimal that they do not have a firm mental grasp of the content of the worship service. In other cases it

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[5]Howe, "Overcoming the Barriers to Communication," 31.

[6]Ibid., 30.

[7]Reuel L. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1963), 44.

[8]Reid, *The Empty Pulpit*, 97-98.

may be due to a lack of confidence in their personal communication skills.[9]

Reuel Howe observed from his research at the Institute of Advanced Pastoral Studies that "young ministers are disillusioned about the effectiveness of preaching and suspect that 'telling' is not a sure means of communication, but because they know of no alternative they are caught in the one-way street of monologue."[10]

In spite of the fact that a great deal of preaching seems to be a zero-feedback event, Robinson suggests that by listening to the listeners, "the pull toward monologue can be broken."[11]

Why is it so important to listen reverently to the listeners during the preaching of the sermon? After all, your sermon manuscript is clear and cohesive. You have carefully articulated, on paper at least, the whole counsel of God. But we easily forget that words are only a small portion of the communication process. Research by Albert Mehrabian, in his book *Silent Messages*, suggests that only 7% of communication is words. Thirty-eight percent of communication is tone of voice, and 55% of communication is facial expression and body language.[12] If I say, "I love you," what message is conveyed? But if I change my intonation and

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[9]Brack, "Good Preachers Are Good Listeners," 89.

[10]Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue*, 32.

[11]Robinson, "Listening to the Listeners," 69.

[12]Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company,

say, “I love you,” what message is conveyed now. And even if my intonation is congruent with my words, if I say “I love you,” and my body language looks like this, what message do you receive? Is it clear to you that variations in your tone and body language during the preaching of your sermon can drastically affect the reception of the message? How, then, do you know if your listeners are receiving the message that you intended? By listening to the listener during the preaching of the sermon. Reverent listening to the listener is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

Traditionally, many preachers have viewed the preaching event as a time to speak while the congregation listens. Harold Brack suggests that the preacher should also listen attentively to the listeners during the sermon. He emphasizes: “All preachers could improve their responsiveness to the congregation’s participation in the preaching of the gospel by more actively listening to the congregation during the delivery of their sermon.”[13]

Receiving feedback from the listener during the sermon can occur in one of two ways: verbal feedback and non-verbal feedback. Let’s consider first reverent listening to the verbal responses of your listeners during the preaching of your sermon. And here, congregations with an African heritage show great kindness to their preachers. For it is in that context that preachers are more likely to receive verbal responses to their sermons.

A core component of Black preaching is the process of call and response, or call and

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1971), 43.

[13]Brack, “Good Preachers Are Good Listeners,” 90.

recall. This process requires verbal feedback from a participating audience.[14] Henry Mitchell suggests that "if the Black preaching tradition is unique, then that uniqueness depends in part upon the uniqueness of the Black congregation which talks back to the preacher as a normal part of the pattern of worship."[15] He maintains that this verbal feedback by the listeners is a powerful dynamic in the preaching event: "Few preachers of any race can deny the sense of the enhancement of their own powers of proclamation in the spiritual dialogue that takes place with the typical Black congregation."[16]

Research conducted by Arthur Smith on twelve black congregations in south central Los Angeles discovered that certain congregations had special seating sections for *preacher supporters*. That sounds like a wonderful idea to me! What do you think? He notes:

> While some churches relied heavily on "platform guests" to urge the preacher, most had three or four pews to the right or left side of the pulpit "reserved" for supporters. This section is called the "amen corner" by members as well as visitors. The pews are actually "reserved" only in the sense that certain people consistently occupy them. Others who, from time to time, inadvertently sit in the amen corner are quickly made a part of the ritual response.[17]

Spencer notes that "during this call and response or responsorial event, worshipers

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[14]Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 95.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid., 96.

[17]Arthur L. Smith, "Some Characteristics of the Black Religious Audience," *Speech Monographs* 37, no. 3 (August 1970): 209.

engage in more than simply acknowledging the preached word with 'amen' or like responses, they actually preach back."[18] Common verbal feedback in Smith's research in addition to the traditional "amen" included comments like "Lord, help us," "Make your point," and "Speak brother."[19] Mitchell cites an example of call and response in a sermon about the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross. He notes: "It is almost obligatory that he pause after the first 'truly' and wait for the congregation to repeat the word. In fact, this may be done several times before the quotation (excellent for climax) is completed with 'this was the Son of God.'"[20]

Because dialogical communication is occurring between the preacher and the listeners, both must be very attentive to the other. Mitchell maintains that "real dialogue" can be distinguished from habitual "perfunctory dialogue." According to Mitchell:

> It occurs characteristically in response to the preacher's reference to something that is vital in the life experience of the respondent-- . . . He is able to respond because he is at home; he is interested in what the preacher is saying because he is involved, crucially involved in the issues as the preacher shapes them with scriptural reference and skillful allegory.[21]

Costen observes that "this verbal call-and-response African form can easily evolve into a

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[18]Jon Michael Spencer, *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 6.

[19]Smith, "Some Characteristics of the Black Religious Audience," 208-9. Other verbal responses were "Preach," "Say on," "Right," "True," "Fix it," "Come on up," and "Yes, Lord."

[20]Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 167.

[21]Ibid., 97.

musical dialogue, sometimes with the aid of a skilled organist or pianist."[22] As the process of call and response unfolds, "the language becomes rhythmically poetic; the tune becomes evident; and the speech fulfills itself in song."[23] Reciprocity is vitally important in this process, according to Spencer, "for seldom is song spontaneously produced by a preacher during the sermon without the participation of the congregation."[24] It is this verbal/musical response from the congregation that inspires climactic celebration. Adams suggests that this setting of the Gospel to music is "the most beautiful aspect of Black preaching."[25]

Mitchell is convinced that the vast majority of preachers who utilize call and response are convicted that "*God* will have to help them, both directly and through the congregation's participation in the dialogue, if an in-depth spiritual happening is to occur."[26] However, such a process of call and response can be abused. Preachers may attempt to manipulate congregations,

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[22]Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 105.

[23]Charles G. Adams, "Some Aspects of Black Worship," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 11 (January 1971): 136.

[24]Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 234.

[25]Adams, "Some Aspects of Black Worship," 136.

[26]Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 105.

and vice versa. As a result, a substantial minority of Black preachers have moved away from utilizing the call and response process in their preaching. Others, like Dr. Vernon Johns, have called not for the elimination of dialogue during the preaching event but for disciplining it.[27] The preacher must certainly avoid the danger of viewing verbal feedback during the sermon as an end in itself at the expense of enlightenment and spiritual edification. However, when utilized in an appropriate way, Mitchell notes that "authentic dialog in black preaching . . . is profoundly healing and cathartic. There is a freedom granted in black worship which allows the full range of human emotions to be expressed in God's presence, from the greatest joy to a healthy purging of 'guilt, sorrow, pain, and frustration.'"[28]

Can a congregation, a group of listeners, be encouraged, or even trained to articulate their verbal responses to the sermon? I don't believe that you can create a culture, but you can help listeners to understand that their feedback is an essential part of the dialogical process.

One way to encourage verbal feedback from the listener is to design the sermon event with dialogue in mind. Harry Emerson Fosdick advocated a dialogical approach to preaching in his article "What is the matter with preaching?"[29] Fosdick made the following assertion: "Every

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[27]Ibid., 106.

[28]Henry Mitchell, "Narrative in the Black Tradition," in *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletical Method*, ed. Richard L. Eislinger (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 50.

[29]Harry Emerson Fosdick, "What is the matter with preaching," *Harper's Magazine* 157 (July 1928): 133-41.

sermon should have for its main business the solving of some problem--a vital, important problem, puzzling minds, burdening consciences, distracting lives-- . . ."[30] With this method in mind, Fosdick suggested the following implication for the preaching process: "It makes a sermon a co-operative enterprise between the preacher and his congregation. . . . A wise preacher can so build his sermon that it will be, not a dogmatic monologue but a co-operative dialogue in which all sorts of things in the minds of the congregation--objections, questions, doubts, and confirmations--will be brought to the front and fairly dealt with."[31]

For Fosdick, all of this dialogue with his listeners occurred in his own mind. He asserts: "This requires clairvoyance on the preacher's part as to what the people are thinking, but any man who lacks that has no business to preach anyway."[32] Few would challenge Fosdick's assertion that it is important for a preacher to understand the needs, struggles, and dreams of the listeners. However, contemporary approaches to dialogue preaching bring the interaction out of the preacher's imagination and into reality during the preaching event. Wagley notes this important shift: "Participatory preaching builds on this relational emphasis in modern preaching and takes it a step further. Instead of simulating dialogue, participatory preaching enters into actual verbal transaction with the congregation. The communication doesn't just give the

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[30]Ibid., 134.

[31]Fosdick, "What is the matter with preaching," 137.

[32]Ibid., 137.

appearance of being two-way--it is."[33]

One contemporary suggestion for adding dialogue to the preaching event is to design the sermon as a conversation between two individuals in the presence of the congregation.[34] In this setting, two individuals converse on a given topic. The two participants may both be preachers, the preacher and an adult member of the congregation, the preacher and a young person from the congregation. The preacher may invite a specialist, perhaps even of another religion, and function as a representative of the congregation, asking relevant questions.

A pastor in Texas, G. H. Jack Woodward, sought to engage his listeners in dialogue at the conclusion of his sermon on racism in the following way:

> Usually you have no real opportunity to reply to my sermons, but this time you do. The ushers will now pass out a questionnaire which will give you a chance to let me know what you think. Please do not sign it unless you want to, and if for any reason you should not want to fill one out, then I suggest you join me in silent prayer for the next five minutes while those who do want to reply work on their paper. Just leave the questionnaires in the pews when you leave the church, and I will appreciate it.[35]

Sixty-five percent of the adults in the congregation engaged in this written dialogue, a process that undoubtedly increased the overall impact of the sermon by introducing an important element

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[33]Wagley, *Preaching with the Small Congregation*, 74.

[34]Thompson and Bennett, *Dialogue Preaching*, 40-64. The authors suggest three basic patterns: the dialogue of support, the dialogue of inquiry, the dialogue of conflict, along with a fourth composite model which may contain elements of the first three.

[35]G. H. Jack Woodward, "Some Important Differences," *The Pulpit* 35, no. 2 (February 1964): 25.

of dialogue in the preaching event.[36] Ninety-five percent of the respondents agreed with the substance of the sermon and thirty-five percent requested a visit with the pastor to discuss the issue further.[37] This data clearly demonstrates a desire on the part of the listeners to enter into dialogue rather than simply sit as passive observers of a monologue.

A preacher in Glasgow, Scotland, sought to increase listener feedback by adding a discussion time at the conclusion of the dialogue.[38] The listeners were divided up into groups of approximately 15 with pre-assigned group leaders and each group then discussed questions arising out of the dialogue. Following 45 minutes of discussion time, in which almost every member of the group participated, the congregation gathered together again for group reports and a closing act of devotion.

Toward the end of his pastorate at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Reinhold

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[36]Ibid. Each respondent was given the opportunity to circle their response to four comments: I agree/disagree with the substance of today's sermon; I would like/do not need the pastor to come by and discuss it with me; our church is doing enough/not doing enough/doing too much work for racial understanding and justice; I want my senators and congressman to vote for/against the civil rights bill, with/without the section on public accommodations.

[37]Ibid. At the conclusion of the article, the author includes written comments given by the listeners. The preacher has clearly engaged the listeners in a meaningful process of dialogue.

[38]J. M. Orr, "Dialogue Preaching and the Discussion Service," *The Expository Times* 82 (October 1970): 10-11.

Niebuhr experimented with dialogue preaching at the Sunday evening services:[39]

> I give a short address or sermon upon a more or less controversial moral issue, or upon a perplexing religious question, and after closing the service we have a half-hour to forty-five minutes of discussion. The group attracted by this kind of program is not large. It is not the usual forum crowd. But it is a group of unusually thoughtful people, and the way they explore the fundamental themes and problems of life is worth more than many sermons.[40]

Reflecting on the benefits of engaging the listeners in dialogue as part of the preaching event, Neibuhr makes the following observation:

> I am absolutely convinced that such discussions come to grips with life's real problems much more thoroughly than any ex cathedra utterance from the pulpit. For one thing the people themselves make the application of general principles to specific experiences. Then, too, they inevitably explore the qualifications which life seems to make upon every seemingly absolute principle. The real principles of Christian living seems so much more real and also so much more practicable when a group of thoughtful people make an honest effort to fit them into the complexities of modern life.[41]

Neibuhr's experience with dialogue preaching led him to express the desire "to change every

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[39]Reinhold Neibuhr served as a pastor in Detroit for thirteen years prior to joining the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he taught from 1928-1960.

[40]Reinhold Neibuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1930), 145.

[41]Neibuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 145.

service into something like this evening discussion."[42]

As another option for involving the listeners in dialogue during the preaching event, the preacher may give permission for "time-out" to be called if a listener has a question or needs a point of clarification. The listener might register her intention by raising her hand. The preacher would then recognize the question or comment, address it, and then continue with the sermon.[43] This development in dialogue preaching takes the dialogue process one step beyond what Howe had originally envisioned. In *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue*, Howe asserted: "Verbal response from the congregation is not possible or desirable during the sermon, even though there have been some experiments in overt dialogue between preacher and congregation."[44] Holston suggests, however, that allowing the congregation to respond during the sermon "provides a means for audience participation which assists in understanding the message."[45]

Dennis Kinlaw has experimented with this approach in a modified form which he refers to as a "reaction team model." According to Kinlaw, "If one thinks of the sermon as a communication system, then it is necessary to provide a feedback loop for the preacher. Feedback, in order to be most effective, must be accurate and it must be immediately available to

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[42]Ibid., 146.

[43]James Holston, "Dialogue Preaching," *Restoration Quarterly* 24, no.2 (1981): 92-93.

[44]Howe, *Partners in Preaching*, 86.

[45]Holston, "Dialogue Preaching," 92.

inform a planned decision."[46] This listener feedback team functions as follows: "The reaction team is composed of four or five people who have the job of interrupting the preacher at any point at which he has become unclear. The team's function is to assist the pastor in saying as clearly as possible what he is intending. Their job is not to comment or elaborate but to request clarification of ideas, vocabulary, and development."[47] The prospect of instant feedback seems rather intimidating to some, but Kinlaw reports two major benefits: the pastor has become more sensitive to the need for oral clarity and the congregation has become more appreciative of their pastor's commitment to communicate effectively.[48]

Greet notes that "in dialogue preaching, each contributor should try not to speak for more than two minutes before his opposite number takes up the theme; and if members of the congregation are not obviously wanting to join in after, at most, ten to fifteen minutes, it is almost certain that the speakers are pontificating rather than engaging in genuine dialogue."[49]

The most interactive form of dialogue preaching would involve the free discussion between preacher and listeners of the meaning and implications of a given passage of Scripture or biblical theme. I have preached one such interactive sermon. It was both exhilarating and

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[46]Dennis C. Kinlaw, "Communication Models For Innovative Preaching," *Preaching Today* 6 (July-August 1972): 14.

[47]Ibid.

[48]Ibid.

[49]Brian A. Greet, "Dialogue Preaching," *Expository Times* 78 (February 1967): 150.

exhausting. I asked my hearers to prepare the previous week by studying Matthew 24:36-44. I asked them to come with any questions about the meaning of the text and its application to their lives today. We had only three guidelines. You could only ask one question. It had to be related to the theme under discussion. We would take approximately the first 15 minutes for exegesis and the second 15 minutes for application. After the service, a young adult came up to me and said, "I was really involved with that sermon." He told me that even though he didn't ask a question, he was really connected."

Holston affirms that this form of dialogue preaching not only encourages personal Bible study, but "also actually involves them in the act of preaching."[50] Hollenweger suggests a modified form of this interactive sermon where the preacher begins with a brief exegetical introduction of three to five minutes, poses a key question, and then invites interaction from the listeners.[51]

For those who might be intimidated by a totally spontaneous interaction, Freeman suggests a "controlled dialogue."[52] For example, an individual in the congregation might be asked to share an experience that illustrates the biblical concept under consideration. This could be prearranged so that the participants have had time for adequate preparation. Experience

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[50]Holston, "Dialogue Preaching," 92.

[51]Walter Hollenweger, "Preaching Dialogically," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (April 1971): 246-48.

[52]Freeman, *Variety in Biblical Preaching*, 109.

confirms that a firsthand testimony carries far more impact that a secondhand story. Individuals might also be invited (with advanced warning) to share how the biblical concept applies to their lives. By alerting the congregation in advance, with a comment such as "Bob had an experience last week that illustrates the importance of honesty. I've asked him to share it with us," the preacher can avoid disrupting the listeners with unnecessary surprises. If a listener simply stands up unannounced and begins to share an experience that relates to the sermon, the listeners may be so shocked that they will be preoccupied with the disruption rather than listening to the testimony of the individual.

Thompson and Bennett assert that these varied forms of dialogue preaching actively involve the listeners in the communication of ideas. "Whether the two persons are debating a contemporary issue from the pulpit or the pastor is fielding questions from the congregation following the initial presentation, the listeners are inevitably drawn into the process."[53] Elizabeth Achtemeier agrees: "The advantages of the congregational multilogue sermon are that it overcomes the spectator mentality, personalizes worship, emphasizes the importance of individual response to the gospel, and expresses the priesthood of all believers."

Interactive sermon forms such as the ones mentioned above require a preacher who is comfortable with dialogue. Achtemeier warns that preachers should not counteract the benefits of this preaching form "by insisting on their own positions in the discussion, or by preaching another sermon at the end--the discussion is intended to be the sermon."[54] It is still crucially

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[53]Thompson and Bennett, *Dialogue Preaching*, 68.

[54]Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching*, 81.

important, however, that the preacher guide the discussion in order to arrive at a clear understanding of biblical truth. I am convinced that any sermon, whatever form it takes, should be a bullet, not buckshot.

Dialogue preaching is not a quick option for a preacher who wants to save time in sermon preparation. Perry asserts: "Preparing for cooperative preaching demands more time and work than preparing for conventional preaching."[55] Wagley agrees: "The role of the preacher is not made easier or less important by lay participation. . . . People are encouraged to share, but it is the preacher who must enable this sharing. The preacher can anticipate some development, but will find it necessary to make preparation along several lines rather than for just one sequence.[56] However, the extra preparation time is well spent as a means of effecting meaningful dialogue between the preacher and the listeners. According to Perry, "Cooperative preaching or dialogical preaching will encourage the laymen in our churches to share their convictions and experiences with others. This type of presentation can be one in which feelings and concerns are shared and trust can emerge."[57]

Markquart suggests that experimenting with dialogue preaching may help preachers to improve their preaching skills. He notes from his experience with interns and associate pastors that involving them in dialogue preaching enabled them to find a greater freedom in their

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[55]Perry, *Biblical Preaching for Today's World*, 100.

[56]Wagley, *Preaching with the Small Congregation*, 77.

[57]Perry, *Biblical Preaching for Today's World*, 99-100.

delivery and develop a more conversational style. He offers the following observation in his book, *Quest for Better Preaching*: "Initially, all of them wanted to read their sermons, but when we got into a dialog sermon, they automatically began talking their sermons and not reading ideas off the page. They became more natural, more direct, more dialogical in those particular sermons, and it rubbed off on their other sermons as well."

We need to remember that reverent listening during the preaching of your sermon also involves attentiveness to the non-verbal responses of your listeners. Feedback is provided by every listener during the sermon. Communication is taking place between the listeners and the preacher even if the preacher is the only one speaking. The listeners will inevitably communicate nonverbally. Myers and Myers note that "we can refrain from communication with words but we cannot escape nonverbal communication."[58] Nonverbal feedback provided by listeners is generally more reliable than any verbal feedback offered. Remember Mehrabian's research? How much of communication is words? Only 7%. And if there is incongruence between the words, the tone, and the body language, believe the non-verbal communication. Mehrabian asserts that "a person's nonverbal behavior has more bearing than his words on communicating feelings or attitudes to others."[59]

Nonverbal feedback may be narrowly defined as "actions as distinct from speech. It thus

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[58]Gail E. Myers and Michele Tolela Myers, *The Dynamics of Human Communication: A Laboratory Approach* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), 179.

[59]Ibid., 44.

includes facial expressions, hand and arm gestures, postures, positions, and various movements of the body or the legs and feet."[60] The effective communicator will be attentive to the nonverbal feedback of the listeners during the sermon. Riggio refers to the ability to receive and decode the nonverbal messages of others as "decoding skill."[61] You may be interested to learn that there is a clear distinction between genders in the ability to decode nonverbal messages. Riggio notes that "women tend to pay greater attention to visual cues than do men, and they are particularly attentive to facial cues--the channel by which nonverbal emotional messages are most often and most clearly displayed."[62] Which, incidentally, is why some of my best preaching students through the years have been women.

Much of the nonverbal feedback from listeners will probably be unintentional and unconscious. For example, if the listeners are involved and interested, they may lean forward. Calvin Miller notes:

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[60]Albert Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Messages* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972), 1. The definition may be broadened to include "paralinguistic or vocal phenomena, such as fundamental frequency range and intensity range, speech errors or pauses, speech rate, and speech duration." See Mehrabian, *Nonverbal Messages*, 1.

[61]Ronald E. Riggio, "Social Interaction Skills and Nonverbal Behavior," *Applications of Nonverbal Behavior Theories and Research*, ed. Robert S. Feldman (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992), 5.

[62]Ibid., 9.

> But when they can hear, and when they like what they are hearing, people have a tendency to lean toward us. Look for this "audience lean." Its symbol is that listeners sit on the edge of their chairs, moving as close to the speaker as they can get. It's all a psychological act of which they are almost totally unaware. It's a symbolic affliction that they can't help. But it tells you how well your projection, diction, and your content are cooperating.[63]

Conversely, if the listeners are hostile or resistant, they may lean back. Eye contact, or lack of it, may be an indicator of the level of attentiveness. However, eye contact cannot be interpreted without attention to surrounding facial cues. Patterson notes that " if one is looking . . . with open eyes, unfurrowed brow, and a smile, it would appear to indicate a positive feeling, or perhaps even an invitation for interaction. In contrast, a squinting gaze with a stern expression is likely to indicate a rather negative assessment."[64]

Roger Ailes, author of *You Are The Message: Secrets of Master Communicators*, challenges those who desire to be effective communicators to "try to read other people's nonverbal signals in every situation."[65] He notes that "all communication is dialogue. You (the speaker) are selecting and sending symbols (words, facial expressions, etc.) to the audience. The audience may not be speaking back, but they're sending you symbols as well, e.g., facial

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[63]Calvin Miller, *The Empowered Communicator: Seven Keys to Unlocking an Audience* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 177.

[64]Miles L. Patterson, *Nonverbal Behavior: A Functional Perspective* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983), 3.

[65]Roger Ailes with Jon Kraushar, *You Are The Message: Secrets of the Master Communicators* (Homewood, IL: Dow Jones-Irwin, 1988), 3.

expressions and body language. Learn to read those symbols coming back to you."[66]

Recognizing the importance of nonverbal feedback, Charles Bartow encourages preachers to be attentive to the body language of their listeners. He states: "Their nonverbal feedback needs to be 'read,' taken to heart, allowed to have impact upon your sermons as they are being delivered."[67] Miller notes that "body language tells you not only if you are heard, but whether you are being understood."[68] Howe agrees: "The imperceptible nod or shake of the head, the smile, the puckered brow, the stillness of concentration, the restlessness of inattention are all meaningful statements about their participation in the act of preaching."[69] Howe even suggests that the listeners can be requested to provide clear nonverbal messages as a useful resource for the preacher during the preaching event. Speaking in this context, he notes: "Congregations can be helped to realize that they have a responsibility to help the preacher preach his sermon."[70] The effective preacher will listen attentively to the nonverbal feedback of the listeners during the preaching event, recognizing this preacher-listener dialogue as a valuable

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[66]Ibid., 26.

[67]Charles L. Bartow, *The Preaching Moment: A Guide to Sermon Delivery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 99.

[68]Miller, *The Empowered Communicator*, 184.

[69]Howe, *Partners in Preaching*, 87.

[70]Ibid.

resource for relevant biblical preaching.

All of this data on listening to the listener during the preaching of the sermon would hopefully help you to recognize the benefit of preaching without notes. I preached from a manuscript for the first 17 years of my preaching ministry. And I still believe that writing out a sermon manuscript is an essential discipline for powerful Biblical preaching. Make sure that you write the sermon manuscript in an oral style. Because a sermon is not a written treaties. A sermon is not an article, prepared for publication. So write your sermon manuscript in an oral style. But when you have finished your writing, remember that your work is not done. The next step is the preaching of your sermon. And I am convinced that you will connect most effectively with your hearers without the hindrance of a manuscript. Freedom from your sermon manuscript will enable you to listen more attentively to your listeners during the preaching of the sermon.

I write a sermon manuscript every week. In fact, that manuscript is available worldwide within a few days of preaching the sermon. And that's a humbling experience! The sermon is available through live video feed, and also on video archive. But it would be an interesting piece of research to download the manuscripts and then watch the videos and see how closely the two resemble each other. I used to feel terrible when I left material out my sermon that was part of my sermon manuscript. But then my mentor and friend, Haddon Robinson, reminded me that my hearers don't have my manuscript. They are listening to the sermon. And my goal is not to transmit 100% of my brilliant sermon manuscript. My goal is to connect with my hearers. And in order to do that effectively, a preacher needs to listen reverently to both the verbal and non-verbal feedback of the listeners during the preaching of the sermon.

It is my prayer that you will always remember this single dominant thought: reverent

listening is essential for powerful Biblical preaching. Reverent listening to the Word, reverent listening to the community, reverent listening to the verbal and non-verbal feedback of the listeners during the preaching of the sermon. If you will cultivate the discipline of reverent listening, you will have taken an important step on the journey as powerful Biblical preachers.

And now, I have a few minutes for some questions.