

**LISTENING TO THE WORD**  
**HMS Richards Lectureship on Preaching**  
**Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, October 24-25, 2004**  
**by Dr. Derek Morris**  
**Senior Pastor, Forest Lake Church**

I am honored to be here as the presenter for the 2004 HMS Richards Lectureship on Preaching here at the SDA Theological Seminary. I am also a bit intimidated. Following great men and women of God like Henry Wright, whom I consider to be one of the finest Biblical preachers in the Adventist church today, and my esteemed colleague Hyveth Williams, who became a loved sister and fellow minister in Christ during our time pastoring in the Loma Linda area...following great men and women of God like Henry and Hyveth is like following Noah in a testimony meeting! You're not sure if there's much left to say!

But let me start by confessing that I do not consider myself to be a great preacher. I come here as a fellow student of preaching. A fellow practitioner. I've been a pastor for 14 years and I've been a teacher for 14 years. And I've discovered that it's a lot easier to teach preaching than it is to preach well. It's a lot easier to discuss homiletical method than it is to stand up and preach in the power of the Holy Spirit. I'm still learning. I have not yet attained, but I press toward the mark! I preached five sermons last week. And I'll preach four sermons this coming week. So pray for me! And I will pray for you, that we might be the powerful Biblical preachers that God has called us to be for His glory.

The individual who has had the greatest impact on my preaching ministry presented this HMS Richards Lectureship back in 1998. His name? Mentor, major professor, and friend

Haddon W. Robinson. Perhaps the most important single lesson that I learned from Haddon Robinson was this: a sermon should be a ....? BULLET, not.....” BUCKSHOT! If you remember that, and put it into practice, whatever sermon form you’re using, then your time here this morning has not been wasted.

The importance of presenting a single dominant thought in a sermon is certainly not original with Robinson, but he drove that idea home for me in a life-changing way. So much so that I am convinced that this lectureship should also have a single dominant idea if this series of lectures is to be a bullet rather than buckshot. So here it is! My single dominant idea: Reverent listening is essential for powerful Biblical preaching. Let me say that again. Reverent listening is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

In this first lecture, I want to emphasize the importance of listening to the Word. I boldly assert this morning that we have no right to speak the Word of God unless we have first listening to the Word ourselves.

It seems to me that one of the greatest challenges of being a preacher is ministry itself. We can become so preoccupied with the Lord’s work that we take no time listening to the Lord of the work. We can become so busy serving the Lord that we take no time to listen to Him. So of you know what I’m talking about, don’t you? And so we run the terrible risk of speaking for God when we have not first listening to Him.

Not long after I graduated from Seminary, a research team at the Alban Institute conducted a survey of 102 seminary graduates.<sup>1</sup> The research revealed a distressing picture:

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<sup>1</sup>Roy M. Oswald, Crossing the Boundary Between Seminary and Parish (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1980). The graduates came from ten different Protestant seminaries,

Sustaining and fostering personal integration and wholeness within a parish setting was a difficult task for these graduates. . . .

Only in retrospect did they realize that they had gone through (four) years of seminary education without once being asked about their personal life, their relationship with God, their experiences of Christ, the meaning of suffering in their lives, the ups and downs of their own spiritual journey, the ways in which they got centered and grounded, their personal discipline of meditation, prayer, and scriptural study....and the activities that fed them spiritually.<sup>2</sup>

My personal experience in the first few years after completing Seminary, and the testimony of fellow Seventh-day Adventist ministers confirmed that which the Alban Institute research team reported:

Many found themselves disillusioned by their failure to maintain their own sense of spiritual feeding and growth. Most were genuinely surprised as they had assumed that their spiritual life would be easily maintained or even grow by virtue of their work as pastors. Instead, they experienced a gradual decline or loss of spiritual awareness and wholeness during the two years following graduation. Even though they tried to find the time, place and opportunity for private prayer and reflection, they found their own attempts inadequate and the process very difficult. Some confessed feeling most depleted spiritually just when things were going well in the parish because they were not able to find the time or resources to nourish their own spirits.

In addition to feeling this personal vacuum, assumptions on the part of the congregation that the pastor is spiritually whole and healthy worked against their spiritual growth; the minister's needs were ignored or resisted. . . . As a total group they expressed feelings of inadequacy in the chief marks of their calling:

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representing eight different denominations, who had been engaged in parish ministry for one to three years.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 18, cited by Forster Freeman, Readiness for Ministry Through Spiritual Direction (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1986), pp. 7-8.

scripture, prayer, and worship.<sup>3</sup>

It is significant to note that many assumed their spiritual life would grow as a result of their work as pastors, but they were surprised to discover that the opposite was true.<sup>4</sup>

There is a story in the New Testament that illustrates the challenge that we face. You know the story well. Perhaps you have even preached a sermon on this passage. It's found in the Gospel of Luke. It's the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Martha and Mary.

The Gospel writer Luke begins his account in Luke 10:38. "....." John identifies this village in Jn 11:1 of his Gospel record as the village of Bethany. If you headed south east from Jerusalem, on the Jericho road, you would find Bethany nestled on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, north of the Jericho road. It was only about 3 kilometers from Jerusalem. It was here that Martha, Mary and Lazarus made their home. By the way, did you notice that Lazarus is never mentioned in this story? I wonder why? He was a beloved friend of Jesus, a faithful disciple. Perhaps he wasn't present at the time of this visit. But more likely, Luke has the specific intention of comparing the responses of the two sisters, and so he simply leaves Lazarus out of the picture.

It's Martha who welcomes Jesus to her home. She is a good woman. Generous. Hospitable. She is a woman of faith, according to John's record. Martha loves the Lord. At the time of her brother's death, Martha confessed to Jesus, "Yes Lord, I believe you are the Christ,

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<sup>3</sup>Oswald, p. 18 (emphasis supplied).

<sup>4</sup>Several other surprises in the area of spirituality were cited by Oswald: "Not knowing how to support my personal spiritual life; my spiritual life did not grow as expected--am not spending much time with it; lack of spirituality of clergy in the Diocese; my spiritual discipline fluctuates wildly; (ibid., p. 22).

the Son of God who is come into the world.” Martha is a remarkable woman of faith. But Martha has one big problem. She is too busy! No, she’s not busy doing bad things. Martha is too busy doing good things. She is entertaining the Lord. But she is so busy serving the Lord that she has no time to be with Him. She is like so many of us. Running on empty. Praying on the run. So busy doing good things that she omits the one thing that is needed.

Jesus gives us a unique glimpse inside Martha’s head. We can read Jesus’ words in Luke 10:41. “.....” Martha, Martha, Jesus says, expressing both His affection and his concern. You are ANXIOUS. The verb used here in the Greek is a strong one: merimao. It implies division of the mind. We find this same verb in Phil 4:6 where Paul exhorts the believers to “be anxious for nothing..” We find the noun, merimna, in 1 Pet 5:7 where Peter appeals to believers to cast all of their anxiety, all of their cares, upon the Lord. But Martha holding on to all of her anxieties. She is anxious. There is a division and distraction of her mind. She is full of inner turmoil.

But notice, in Luke 10:41, that Martha is not only anxious, she is troubled. This is a rare Greek verb, used only once in the NT, thorubadsomai, which implies external agitation. Some manuscripts have the synonym, turbadso, from which we get the English word turbulence. Martha is not only full of inner turmoil. She is also full of outward agitation. Can you see her there? Poor Martha. She is all bent out of shape! Full of inner turmoil and outward agitation.

And notice how this inner turmoil and outward agitation affects her. Look at Luke 10:40: “.....” Martha is distracted. The verb suggests to be drawn about in different directions.” Martha is all stretched out. She is spinning her wheels. So has so much good to do that she can’t do anything. Immobilized, as it were. Can you relate to Martha’s condition? You

feel so swamped, so overloaded that you can't do anything? That's just how Martha felt. And not only is she distracted. She is also clearly mad at Mary. But apparently Martha has learned from experience that it won't do any good to talk to Mary, so Martha dumps on Jesus. Notice her words in Luke 10:40: "....." Now it's not only Mary's fault. It's the Lord's fault too!

Oh, Martha. What has happened to you? You so much wanted to serve the Lord. You welcomed Him into your home. But you have become so busy serving the Lord that you have no time to be with Him. You're all messed up and all strung out.

Can you relate at all to Martha's experience? Look honestly into your own heart right now. How is it between you and the Lord? I taught a colloquium here in the early 90s and a doctoral student came to me with this startling testimony: "I've been a student here for the past five years and I don't remember the last time I opened my Bible just to listen to God." I wish I could tell you that a rare exception. But he is not. He had fallen into a trap of ministry. So busy serving the Lord, or preparing for service, that he took no time to listen to God personally.

How is it with you this morning. Honestly now. How are you ordering your priorities? Demands in your academic studies. Demands at work. Bills to pay. Families to take care of. Responsibilities at church. It isn't easy to get everything done, is it? Sometimes we feel just like Martha, right? Like we're being stretched out in ten different directions. We need 25 hours in a day, and eight days in a week, or maybe nine.

And what is it that so often suffers? Isn't it our personal time alone with the Lord, sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to His word? We end up praying on the run, serving on the run, preaching on the run, and we rationalize that maybe it will be better next week, or next month, or next year. But it's always the same. The tyranny of the urgent. And on and on it goes.

We all face the challenge that Martha faced. We all are inundated with good things that need to be done. But we all need to remember that our first priority is to take time at the feet of Jesus, sharing with Him in prayer and listening to His voice through His Word.

The challenge of staying focused increases as your preaching ministry develops. I want to turn your attention to another familiar passage of Scripture that has guided my thinking and my ministry for the past 18 years. It's found in the book of Acts, chapter 6.

Have you ever sat down and read the first few chapters of Acts at one sitting? It's a marvelous story of the power of God at work in the life of the fledgling Christian church! We read of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost...of sweet fellowship among the believers...of unprecedented growth...of courage in the midst of persecution.

And then we come to chapter 6. And here the apostles face an enormous challenge. It's a challenge that has the potential to derail their ministry, to cripple their effectiveness.

I want to suggest that the passage naturally divides into three sections:

Firstly, there is the challenge, in v 1.

Secondly, there is the consensus v 2-6.

Thirdly, there is the consequence in v.7.

Firstly, let's look at the challenge, in v. 1. What was the problem? v 1 "....." The challenge is concerning the fair distribution of a daily food allocation. The Grecian Jews were complaining that their widows were being overlooked. In the midst of all of the miracles and marvelous manifestations of God's power, we see the church is far from perfect! It seems that someone is always complaining about something. And things haven't changed much. There's at least one in every church! Right?

Notice in v.1. We read that the number of the disciples was increasing. And whenever that happens the great controversy rages. For just as the Lord does not desire that any be lost, the Devil does not desire that any be saved. We see it every time we go out on the front line, don't we?

You don't know what I'm talking about, don't you. There's a great controversy going on between the powers of light and the powers of darkness. And the Devil will do anything to prevent men and women from being saved in God's kingdom.

And so the Devil sows a seed of contention regarding the fairness of the daily distribution of food. Just consider for a moment the logistics of such a task! The core of the Christian church, we read in Acts 1:15 was about 120. Then as we know from Acts 2:41... about 3,000 were baptized on the day of Pentecost and added to the church. By the time Peter and John are arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin, in Ch 4 the membership has already mushroomed to 5000 men!, which would give a total membership of well over 10,000, plus children.

And do you remember how they handled their possessions? Acts 2:44-45. "....." It's a beautiful picture of unselfish fellowship, isn't it? Christian communism. In Ch 4: 32ff we read, "....." But just think for a moment. Over 10,000 members, and everything held in common. Can you imagine how difficult it would be to ensure that everyone received a fair allocation of the daily distribution? It's a perfect opportunity for the Adversary to sow seeds of doubt and dissention. He plays on a long standing rivalry and jealousy between the Hebraic Jews and the Grecian Jews. And he suggests to the Grecian Jews that their widows are being unfairly treated.

The Scripture record does not suggest that there was any validity to the accusation. It's

hard to believe that the apostles would deliberately discriminate against any person or group. It is far more likely that being foreigners, the Greek-speaking widows had difficulty making their wants known and getting them attended. Or it may simply have been a case of some people getting lost in the shuffle.

But whether the complaint was real or imaginary, the apostles realized that the challenge was a real one. It had to be dealt with. Problems seldom go away just by ignoring them. We need to have the courage to face them. And this was a serious accusation. An accusation of prejudice in the church of Jesus Christ. An accusation that had the potential of dividing the church.

But the apostles also realized that there was a bigger issue that needed to be settled. It related to the focus of their ministry as spiritual leaders. The work of caring for the day to day needs of the believers was becoming an all-consuming task. The apostles were in great danger of falling into the trap of ministry...becoming so busy serving the Lord that they had no time to be with Him.

And that brings us to the second section of this passage: the consensus, in v. 2-6. "....." Two vital decisions come out of the ensuing discussion. And notice that the process is not arbitrary or dictatorial. Rather there is a consensus. V. 2 records that the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and v 5 tells us that the proposal pleased the whole group.

The first decision was that there needed to be a delegation of responsibilities. Seven men should be set aside to care for the daily distribution of food and concerns relating to the daily operation of the church. These men were to be "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom." And the Scripture records that this decision was implemented ; v.5-6: "....."

The second decision is, in my mind, even more significant, though it is often passed over without mention. There is an affirmation of the God-ordained focus for the spiritual leaders. Notice in v.4 "....." We will devote ourselves to what?...prayer, and the ministry of the Word.

As we read through the preceding chapters of the Book of Acts we see that this was indeed the focus of their life and ministry. In Acts 1:14 we read, "....." Again in Acts 2:42 we read: "....." Listen to their powerful prayer after Peter and John were released from the Sanhedrin for the first time. Acts 4:24-30. "....."

That's a powerful prayer of faith, isn't it? And I don't want you to miss v.31. "After they had prayed...when? after they had prayed...the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

If you want God to accomplish great things through the ministry to which God has called you, I want to remind you this evening, it's going to happen after you pray. Prayer is the key. Where there is prayer, there is power.

In a very thought-provoking chapter at the end of Ministry of Healing entitled the Higher Experience, Ellen White has this to say about the privilege of prayer:

We must have times set apart for meditation and prayer and spiritual refreshing. We do not value the power and efficacy of prayer as we should. Prayer and faith will do what no power on earth can accomplish." MH p.509

That is why we are called to be men and women of prayer.

But back to v.4 of Acts 6. Prayer does not stand alone. What does the text say? "We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." First comes prayer...then

comes the ministry of the word. Would it be too bold of me to assert that we have no right to give our attention to the ministry of the word unless we have first devoted ourselves to prayer? We have no right to take the Word to peoples' homes if we have not first bathed ourselves in prayer. And would it be too bold of me to assert that we have no right to minister the word to others until we have first allowed the Word to minister to our own souls?

But if we are first and foremost men and women of prayer, and have allowed the Word of God to minister to our own souls, then we have something to say. Amen? Then our words will have power. Remember what we just read, in Acts 4:31: "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly."

Look back in the preceding chapters of the book of Acts. This had been their focus all along...prayer, and a ministry of the word of God. In chapter 1 they all pray. In chapter 2, the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in a marvelous way on the day of Pentecost. Listen to Peter's powerful ministry of the word in Acts 2:36-40. "....." That's powerful preaching!

And don't think that a ministry of the word is limited to preaching. In chapter 3 a crippled man cries out to Peter and John for alms. Notice v. 4-8: "....." Is that not also a ministry of the word? Yes indeed. For Jesus is that life giving word. And in His name they healed the sick and set the captives free. And as faithful ministers of the word, the Lord still calls us to a healing ministry.

Then Peter preaches another sermon in Solomon's colonnade. Talk about powerful ministry of the word. Acts 3:17-20. "....." As a result of that sermon, the membership of the church tripled!

And then in Acts 4:33 we read: "....." And after their flogging, having been called in a second time before the Sanhedrin we read, Acts 5:41-42: "....."

They were an unstoppable power for good. They were men of prayer and they were ministers of the word. And when this challenge arose over the daily distribution of food, the apostles re-evaluated their focus. They saw there was a real need to distribute the daily allocation of food in an equitable way...but it was becoming an overwhelming task. And so they delegated responsibility to the deacons. And in so doing they affirmed the God-ordained focus of their ministry as spiritual leaders. It would not be right for us to sidetracked...we must give devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

How often have we rationalized our lack of prayer by saying, "Oh well, the Lord understands. After all, I'm busy doing His work." My brothers and sisters, God is not impressed with that kind of logic. It was not right back then...and it's not right now. We need to keep our focus on track. We too must devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

But let's move on to the third section of this passage. We've taken a look at the challenge, and we examined the consensus. But what about the consequence? What was the outcome of their decision? We read in v.7 the marvelous result. v.7: "....." There was a three-fold consequence. Firstly, what? The word of God spread. Secondly, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. And thirdly, a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Isn't that what we all desire? That the word of God might spread? We're not in this work just to make a living, are we? We desire that the Word of God might be spread, Amen? And that the number of disciples in the area where God has called us to serve might increase rapidly.

And yes, that by the grace of God, even a large number of Christian ministers might become obedient to the faith. Isn't that what we all desire?

How does it happen? Some people say that the key is to get everyone involved through delegation of responsibility. And that's certainly an important part of the answer. But only a part. I believe that this passage identifies the primary key for success. It is resisting the temptation to become side-tracked and keeping our focus on track: like the apostles, we must devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. We must realize that our first work, our first priority, our primary responsibility is to listen to God in His Word. Only then can we speak the Word of God with holy boldness. Reverent listening is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of interviewing Chaplain Barry Black, chaplain of the United States Senate. Perhaps some of you read that interview in MINISTRY magazine. The interview was entitled "Preaching out of the Overflow." If anyone has a demanding ministry schedule, it's Chaplain Barry Black. It would so easy for him to say, "You have to understand. I'm so busy serving the Lord in a position of great responsibility, I don't have time for personal prayer. I'm too busy writing prayers to read before the Senate. I don't have time to listen to God in His Word. I'm too busy preparing sermons to preach before world leaders.

But the reason God has blessed Barry Black's ministry is clear to me. Barry Black is a modern Daniel. Barry Black has determined to be more than a man of the clergy. He has determined, by God's grace to be a man of God. And if we are to speak boldly in the name of God, we must first take time listening to God ourselves. Reverent listening is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

How does Barry Black take time to listen to the Lord in the midst of a demanding daily schedule? Listen to his testimony: “I get through the entire Bible three or four times a year. The way I do this is I listen to Scriptures. I have a forty-five minute to one hour commute to get to the Capital. That gives me an opportunity to listen to CDs of the Scriptures. Right now I’m listening to the New International Version. You can listen to the Bible in 70 hours—the complete Bible! When I’m commuting, or when I’m flying on an airplane, I always have the Word in my CD player. I keep a pad of paper on my passenger seat, and although I’m not listening to find sermons, sermons find me! Fifty lifetimes would not be enough to preach out of that amazing reservoir of Scripture. I get enough sermon material for five to six sermons a week easily. So I am constantly being fed from the Word. It’s an amazing experience. It’s something that I look forward to. I can’t wait to get in the car because I’m going to listen to the Word! You receive so much wonderful material when you expose yourself to the Word. Then, when you get up to preach you are literally preaching out of the overflow.”

What about his experience with prayer? Again, listen to his testimony: “I cannot preach without praying. I cannot study without praying. I cannot live without praying. I had a dramatic experience with the Lord fifteen or sixteen years ago which took my spiritual life to another level. It took me to the place where I began to be aware of the constant presence of God. And so I talk to Him! He is my companion. He is there. And He talks to me. That experience had a transforming impact on my personal life and on my preaching. When I get up in the morning, before my feet touch the floor, I swing out of my bed on my knees. From that moment on, there are not many seconds of the day that I am not aware of the blessed presence of my Companion. That’s what prayer is all about. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says “Pray without ceasing.” Each

morning when I open the United States Senate with prayer, I am praying while I am praying. And when I am preaching, I am praying while I am preaching. While I'm going along, I'm receiving instructions, I'm receiving guidance, I'm practicing the presence of God. That's what prayer is to me. Prayer is not just something that you do. It's something that permeates who you are."

My brothers and sister, if you would speak for God before kings, you must first kneel in reverence before the King of Kings. If you would preach in Jesus' name to the leaders of this world, you must first kneel humbly before the One who spoke the world into existence and learn of Him. Reverent listening is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

One way that I hold myself accountable is this: I am part of a men's group that meets every Sunday evening. They will be meeting without me this evening. But they will be praying for me. We have committed to listening to a chapter of the Gospel of John every day, not to amass more Bible knowledge, but in order to listen to God in His Word. We take one chapter per week, and listen to that same chapter every day during that week. It's amazing how the Lord can catch your attention. I decided to memorize the words of Jesus found in each chapter. Do you know the first words of Jesus recorded in the Book of John? They really caught my attention. Jesus says, "What do you want?" His next words, "Come and you will see." What a promise that is! Come and you will see." His next words? "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas." And then it hit me. The Lord Jesus knows everything about me, just like He knew everything about Simon. He knows my present. "You are Simon." He knows my past. "You are the son of John." He knows my future. "You will be called Cephas."

We see the same truth revealed in Jesus' encounter with Nathanael. He knows your past.

“Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” He knows your present. “Behold, an Israelite, in whom there is no guile.” He knows your future. “Most assuredly, I say to you, Hereafter you shall see heaven open, and angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

It is this Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, the One who knows your past, the One who knows your present, the One who knows your future, it is this Jesus who calls you to preach the good news of His life, death, resurrection, ascension, heavenly ministry and soon return as King of Kings and Lord of lords. And if you would be a faithful preacher for Jesus Christ, you must first take time to sit at His feet and listen to His Word. Only then will you speak the Word of God with holy boldness. Reverent listening to the Word is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

And so, one of the greatest needs in preaching today is the spiritual revival of preachers. Preachers need to be converted! Preachers need to be revived. John Stott, in his book *Between Two Worlds*, tells the story of a preacher in the south of England who was converted in the preaching of his own sermon. Rev. William Haslam had been ordained to the gospel ministry in the Church of England in 1842 and was serving in a parish in North Cornwall. By his own admission, he was dissatisfied and spiritually dry. One day in 1851, while preaching a sermon entitled “What think ye of Christ?” William Haslam began to listen to the Word himself. The change was so obvious that a local preacher visiting the church that day jumped up and shouted, “The parson is converted! Hallelujah! Three or four hundred members of the congregation broke out in spontaneous praise to God. Even Reverend Haslam joined in the symphony of praise to God. He then suggested that they all sing the doxology, which they did, over and over

again.

The news spread like wildfire through north Cornwall that “the parson was converted, and that by his own sermon, in his own pulpit!” And William Haslam’s conversion was the beginning of a great revival in his parish. And so it will be for each of us. When we realize that we are first called to be men and women of God, we are first called to reverent listen to Him, to sit at His feet, and learn of Him...that we will go out with Holy Spirit boldness to preach powerful Biblical sermons. Reverent listening to the Word is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

I have been deeply moved by the words of a song that Steve Green sings, entitled “Revive us, O Lord!” It expresses the prayer of my heart that the Lord would breathe His Spirit into me that I might know Him more deeply than ever before and listen more attentively to His Word than ever before.

## **Revive us, Oh Lord.**

Oh Holy God and King  
Hear your people as we sing  
Revive us , oh Lord  
Grant us this our one request  
That we may walk in holiness  
Revive us , oh Lord

Humbly Lord we now confess  
Wandering hearts and selfishness  
Revive us, oh Lord  
We recognize our desperate need  
For purity in thought and deed  
Revive us, oh Lord

Melt us...and break us...mold us...and remake us

Do, oh Lord what You must do  
To turn your people's heart to You  
Revive us oh Lord

Fill us, Lord, this very hour  
Infuse us with your sacred power  
Revive us, oh Lord  
That as your people we might be  
All that You would have us be  
Revive us, oh Lord

Melt us and break us  
Mold and remake us

Do, oh Lord, what you must do  
To turn your people's hearts to you  
Revive us, oh Lord  
Revive us, oh Lord

That's the prayer of my heart as a preacher this morning. Revive me, oh Lord. What about you? Revive us, oh Lord. Do, oh Lord what you must do to turn your people's hearts to you. We confess that nothing is too hard for you. Have mercy upon us, O Lord! Breathe out

Your Spirit upon us. Revive us, O Lord.

I am happy to take the remainder of our time for some questions.

**LISTENING TO THE COMMUNITY**  
**HMS Richards Lectureship on Preaching**  
**Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, October 24-25, 2004**  
**Dr. Derek Morris**  
**Senior Pastor, Forest Lake Church**

Let me begin this afternoon's presentation by repeating the single dominant thought of this lectureship. Can you remember the key idea that I shared with you this morning? Reverent listening is essential for powerful biblical preaching. In our first lecture we noted that we must always begin by reverently listening to the Word.

In this presentation, I want to emphasize the importance of listening to the community. I intend to make my case by sharing with you the findings of my research with the leadership teams of two key Christians churches: All Souls Church, London, and Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois. I invite you to note specific strategies that these leadership teams have implemented to listen to the community.

**All Souls Church**

At the head of Regent Street in downtown London is a thriving and vibrant evangelical Church of England congregation called All Souls Church. For more than fifty years, under the leadership and influence of John R. W. Stott, this congregation has been nourished and edified by relevant biblical preaching.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Timothy Dudley-Smith, "John Stott: An Introduction," in *The Gospel in the Modern World: A Tribute to John Stott*, eds. Martyn Eden and David F. Wells (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 11-26. In November, 1945, John Stott joined the All Souls leadership team as a junior curate. In April, 1950, he was appointed as rector. In 1975, he became Rector Emeritus, a

John Stott has demonstrated a consistent commitment to listening humbly and attentively, both to God and to the community. Stott notes that “we are called to double listening, listening both to the Word and to the world.”<sup>2</sup> While we do not listen with the same degree of reverence or deference to each, yet we still must listen to both. Stott emphasizes:

We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it. . . .

These voices will often contradict one another, but our purpose in listening to them both is to discover how they relate to each other. Double listening is indispensable to Christian discipleship and Christian mission.<sup>3</sup>

In this lecture I will focus specifically on ways in which John Stott, and the leadership team at All Souls Church, have sought to practice double listening, particularly when approaching the task of preaching relevant biblical sermons.

Stott introduces his book on preaching, *Between Two Worlds*, with the following exhortation: “In nearly every church closer and more cordial relations between pastors and people, preachers and listeners, would be beneficial. There is need for more cooperation

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position he continues to hold.

<sup>2</sup>John R. W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: An Urgent Plea for Double Listening* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 27. This volume was published in the United States under the title *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World*. In my opinion, the original title more accurately reflects Stott’s emphasis and appeal.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 28-29.

between them in the preparing of sermons, and more candour in evaluating them.”<sup>4</sup> Early in his ministry at All Souls Church, Stott began to put this conviction into practice. He chose two “lay critics” to provide listener feedback in response to his sermons.<sup>5</sup> Regarding the selection of individuals to provide post-sermon feedback, Stott notes:

You have to choose them carefully. I chose the medical students deliberately. I think they are trained in unbiased observation and I thought they would be in a position to be objective and detached in their evaluation. Of course, I made sure they were evangelical believers so that we should have the same gospel. But apart from that, I wanted them to be trained in their critical faculties.<sup>6</sup>

Stott gave these “lay critics” full permission to offer regular post-sermon feedback on any aspect of the preaching event and he asked them to put it in writing.<sup>7</sup> In addition to providing practical insights about gestures, voice, and demeanor in the pulpit, Stott encouraged these “lay critics” to “comment on how I handled the text, and whether they thought my hermeneutical principles were sound, and whether they agreed with the interpretation of the text.”<sup>8</sup>

The post-sermon feedback that Stott received was not always complimentary, but the

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<sup>4</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 11.

<sup>5</sup>Dr. Tony Waterson and Dr. David Trapnell.

<sup>6</sup>John R. W. Stott, interview by author, 12 August 1996, tape recording, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

process was helpful.<sup>9</sup> In his book, *Between Two Worlds*, he recalls: “Although I remember being devastated by some of the letters they wrote me, their criticisms were always salutary.”<sup>10</sup> Stott looks back on his interaction with his “lay critics” as a positive, growing, experience. He emphasizes that “a sympathetic listener and critic” is especially important for one who is beginning a preaching ministry.<sup>11</sup>

As his ministry progressed, Stott continued the process listening to the community by means of post-sermon dialogue with the leadership team at All Souls Church. He demonstrated a willingness to listen to his listeners as a resource for relevant biblical preaching, and he encouraged his colleagues to do the same. He notes:

A preacher who belongs to a team ministry should certainly ask his colleagues for their comments. Indeed, an occasional group evaluation, either by the staff team or by a specially convened group which includes lay people, has proved immensely valuable to preachers. The evaluation will then go beyond speech and gesture, manner and mannerisms, to the content of the sermon, including our use of Scripture, our dominant thought and aim, our structure, words and illustrations, and our introduction and conclusion.<sup>12</sup>

As part of an ongoing commitment to listening to his community, Stott also engaged resource groups in pre-sermon dialogue. When preaching a series of sermons entitled “Issues

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 272.

<sup>11</sup>Stott, Interview. Stott suggests that the preacher’s spouse may serve as an excellent lay critic.

<sup>12</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 272.

Facing Britain Today,” Stott met for pre-sermon discussions with groups of specialists.<sup>13</sup> He recognized that each participant brought different gifts and perspectives to the group:

I felt that I probably knew the Word more thoroughly and deeply than the congregation did because it is obviously my study, but I felt that the areas in which I was relating the Word to the world were in many cases areas in which I was ignorant and that there were professional members in the congregation who were much more knowledgeable than I. And that therefore to have an ad hoc group of experts in their field would be very valuable.<sup>14</sup>

In describing the impact of pre-sermon dialogue with the resource group discussing the topic of work and unemployment, Stott notes: “They helped me to feel what they felt--the shock, the rejection, the hurt, the humiliation and the sense of helplessness, which are all caused by unemployment.”<sup>15</sup>

I experimented with this process some years ago in a series of sermons entitled “Christianity in the Marketplace.” Perhaps some of you read the article in September, 2003, issue of MINISTRY magazine. The article was entitled “Start a Sermon Resource Group: Unleash Your Congregations’s Creativity.” If you are interested in reviewing that series, you can download sermon manuscripts and listen to the four sermons at [www.calimesasda.com](http://www.calimesasda.com).

Some of you might think that such a process for listening to the community could only

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<sup>13</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 197. Topics included “The Multi-Racial Dream,” “Work and Unemployment,” “Industrial Relations,” “The Arms Race,” and “The New International Economic Order.”

<sup>14</sup>Stott, Interview.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 199.

work in a larger congregation. But in reflecting upon this listening experience, Stott is convinced that a similar process could be implemented by preachers in other settings. He rejects the notion that the use of resource groups for pre-sermon dialogue can only function in large congregations:

I am very reluctant to concede that even the small inner city church and its hard-pressed pastor can manage nothing. If a carefully considered sermon on a current issue is impossible quarterly, is it really impossible annually? And if a congregation cannot produce from its own membership mature Christians who are specialists in their field, there must surely be some within reach who belong to other churches, but who would be willing to contribute their expertise to an occasional discussion group, and would even be surprised and gratified to be asked to do so?

In addition to ad-hoc resource groups, Stott also developed a reading group as a means of listening attentively to his listeners and to the culture in which they found themselves.<sup>16</sup> He notes: “I think wide reading is essential. We need to listen to modern men and women and read what they are writing.”<sup>17</sup> Stott explains that it was a desire for relevance that motivated him to form the reading group:

Well, it really was that in this business of relevance, I felt that I myself . . . studied the Word and theological books that helped them to understand the Word enough because I had been reading for years. My major weakness was in a lack of understanding of modernity, of what was going on around me. So the purpose of starting the reading group was very deliberately to oblige us to listen more attentively and intelligibly to the

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<sup>16</sup>Stott organized this reading group in 1974 and, though its composition and frequency of meeting has modified through the years, it still continues to this day.

<sup>17</sup>John R. W. Stott, “Creating the Bridge: An Interview with John R. W. Stott,” interview by R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Preaching* 4, no. 5 (March-April 1989): 3.

modern world.<sup>18</sup>

The original reading group was comprised of about a dozen young graduates and professional people, “all of whom were evangelical, all of whom were committed to the gospel, and all of whom were modern young men and women anxious to relate the gospel to the modern world.”<sup>19</sup>

The group would agree on a book to read prior to each session.<sup>20</sup> According to Stott, the reading group “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.”<sup>21</sup> For example, when considering the selection of a book on the New Age, Stott recalls: “We might go into the University book shop and study a number of New Age books. These are not Christian books about the New Age. These are actual New Age

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<sup>18</sup>Stott, Interview.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid. The original reading group included doctors, lawyers, teachers, a housing officer, an architect, a personnel manager, a BBC person, and some graduate students.

<sup>20</sup>This discussion generally happens at the conclusion of each reading group session.

<sup>21</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 195. Some books have included James Sire’s *The Universe Next Door*, R. M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motor-cycle Maintenance*, Charles Reich’s *The Greening of America*, Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock*, the *Koran*, Will Hutton’s *The State We’re In*, and Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene*. The reading group has also evaluated several films and plays.

books so as to understand what New Age is really saying and thinking.”<sup>22</sup>

Jay Adams affirms the importance of listening to the community, illustrating from the preaching ministry of the Apostle Paul:

Paul’s knowledge and use of Greek poetry exhibits a principle that cannot be stressed too strongly. Christian preachers must study the literature and learning of the “other side,” not only to stay abreast of changing currents of thought in their audiences, but also to enable them to communicate with contemporary society in terms of the literature that they are reading and the concepts they understand.<sup>23</sup>

Stott describes the group process at the reading group sessions as follows: “We tend to begin by going around the room and everybody is given maybe under 30 seconds to identify, pinpoint, the major issue they felt the book raises for Christian people. And then at the end of the evening, we ask ourselves the question, “What has the gospel to say to people who think like this? How does the gospel relate to people who think like this?”<sup>24</sup>

As with the resource groups, Stott is convinced that the reading group is also a valuable resource for relevant biblical preaching that can be implemented by other preachers. He notes: “There can hardly be a congregation in any culture, however small, which could not supply a few thoughtful people to meet with their pastor to discuss the engagement of the church with the

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<sup>22</sup>Stott, Interview.

<sup>23</sup>Adams, *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul*, 69.

<sup>24</sup>Stott, Interview. Stott observes that those questions are addressed more effectively at some of the reading group sessions than at others, but that is the stated purpose.

world, the Christian mind with the secular mind, Jesus Christ with his rivals.”<sup>25</sup> Stott makes the following suggestion to preachers: “If you haven’t got enough professional people or sufficient numbers in your congregation, then why don’t you share with two or three other congregations and that would include two or three ministers probably. I think it could be done almost anywhere.”<sup>26</sup>

Stott reflects on the value of a reading group in these words: “The experience of the reading group . . . has not only increased our understanding of the modern world, but excited our compassion for human beings in their lostness and despair, confirmed our Christian faith, and rekindled our sense of Christian mission.”<sup>27</sup> Would he have listened as carefully to the culture without the encouragement of the reading group? Probably not. Stott asserts:

The London group has given me the necessary stimulus to read at least some of the books I ought to be reading and has provided me with some sharp-witted, warm-hearted young people as a congenial context in which to discuss the issues raised. 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.<sup>28</sup>

The leadership team at All Souls Church has not only sought to involve listeners in the preparation and evaluation of sermons, but has also actively solicited input in the planning of the sermon calendar. The staff plans a retreat and invites several leading lay members of the

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<sup>25</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 196-97.

<sup>26</sup>Stott, Interview.

<sup>27</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 196.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 197.

congregation to attend. A key topic for discussion is this: “Where are we as a congregation in terms of spiritual development and pilgrimage and what is it that we need next?” Stott emphasizes the importance of lay involvement in this planning process. He suggests that the lay representatives help the staff to keep in touch with the needs of the congregation. In an attempt to solicit additional listener feedback in the planning of the sermon calendar, the staff has also placed a box at the back of the church, asking for sermon suggestions on various topics or books.

Following the development of the sermon calendar, those in attendance at All Souls Church are provided with a “Sermon Card” which notifies them of the sermon topics for the next four months. According to Stott, this sermon planning process sends a message to the congregation that “we are taking trouble to prepare and thinking about it and not going about it in a haphazard way.”<sup>29</sup>

It is apparent that the leadership team at All Souls Church has made a deliberate and consistent effort to listen to the community. Lay critics, resource groups, reading groups, and sermon calendar planning groups all involve the listeners in dialogue and provide a valuable resource for relevant biblical preaching.

Stott’s appeal for relevant biblical preaching should serve as a challenge to anyone who senses a call to proclaim of the Word of God:

We should be praying 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

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<sup>29</sup>Stott, Interview.

and pertinent to today.<sup>30</sup>

Stott would undoubtedly agree that reverent listening, both to the Word and to the community, is essential for powerful Biblical preaching.

### **Willow Creek Community Church**

I also learned some important lessons about listening to the community from my research at Willow Creek Community Church. Located in South Barrington, Illinois, on the outskirts of Chicago, Willow Creek Community Church is making an impact for Jesus Christ not only in the Chicago area, but throughout North America and around the world. At their first official meeting on October 12, 1975, approximately 125 people gathered in the Willow Creek Theater in Palatine, Illinois, for Sunday morning worship.<sup>31</sup> Twenty years later, on October 14, 1995, 20,000 people who consider Willow Creek Community Church to be their church home gathered in downtown Chicago at the United Center to praise God and celebrate all that God had done.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the history of Willow Creek Community Church, the leadership team, under

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<sup>30</sup>Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 144.

<sup>31</sup>Prior to the founding of Willow Creek Community Church, Bill Hybels was involved in a progressive youth ministry in Chicago called Son City.

<sup>32</sup>For a detailed account of the history of Willow Creek Community Church see Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

the direction of Senior Pastor Bill Hybels, has demonstrated an intentional and ongoing commitment to communicating the gospel in a relevant way. They demonstrate a marked commitment to listen to the community.

According to Lee Strobel, one of the teaching pastors at Willow Creek Community Church, feedback and evaluation is “part of the fabric of Willow Creek.”<sup>33</sup> Russ Robinson, another member of the leadership team, agrees that feedback and evaluation is “one of our stated values.”<sup>34</sup> Feedback is not viewed as an end in itself, but rather is recognized as an essential resource in the pursuit of excellence. Robinson emphasizes this point: “Excellence honors God and inspires people. . . . It is achieved by critiquing, evaluating people who are part of the team.”<sup>35</sup>

In the context of preaching, Bill Hybels maintains that evaluation happens whether a preacher likes it or not. “Every preacher is evaluated, one way or another, by every listener.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Lee Strobel, interviewed by author, 17 May 1996, South Barrington, Illinois, tape recording, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee.

<sup>34</sup>Russ Robinson, interviewed by author, 17 May 1996, South Barrington, Illinois, tape recording, Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee. Russ Robinson is an attorney who has served for many years as an elder at Willow Creek Community Church and is currently part of the management team as Director of Small Groups.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Bill Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” in *Mastering Contemporary Preaching*,

However, not all evaluation is helpful. Hybels states: “I want to get evaluation that will help me be most effective in reaching people with God’s truth. I consider getting accurate evaluation part of my job.”<sup>37</sup>

According to Hybels, a preacher must give careful attention to the source of post-sermon feedback. He notes:

Most of the reaction we get from our messages is unsolicited. We get people who stand in line to talk to us or who write us letters and I know from experience, some people can be devastating with their remarks after messages that you or I or other people give. And other people can be way too flattering. “Oh, that is the best message I have ever heard.” “Oh, you talk about a grand slam home run. That should be on the radio!” “I’m going to send that to my congressmen,” and all this kind of stuff. Well, what you learn over the years is that if you just listen to those who stand in line to tell you what they think about your preaching, you put yourself at risk because you might get worse feedback than is really warranted or more flattery, better feedback than is actually warranted.<sup>38</sup>

Strobel expresses a similar caution: “I would be suspicious of somebody that enthusiastically volunteers to critique your messages, because you wonder why.”<sup>39</sup>

How, then, does a preacher receive the kind of evaluation that will be helpful in the development and delivery of relevant biblical sermons? According to Hybels, “Constructive evaluation won’t happen, . . . no matter how willing I am to receive it, unless I’m asking the right

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Bill Hybels, Stuart Briscoe, and Haddon Robinson (Portland, Ore: Multnomah, 1989), 154.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 154-155

<sup>38</sup>Bill Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change* (Grand Rapids: Willow Creek Resources, 1996), sound cassette.

<sup>39</sup>Strobel, Interview.

people the right questions at the right time.”<sup>40</sup> The right people are defined by Hybels as “people with great discernment whom I have learned to trust. It will only distract, confuse, or harm me to get input from everyone. Instead, I want to go to wise counselors.”<sup>41</sup> According to Hybels, accurate evaluation given by the right people “has been the most formative part of my development as a teacher.”<sup>42</sup>

Hybels describes the process of identifying wise counselors who can provide constructive sermon evaluation on the cassette tape, *Preaching for Life-Change*:

What I have done over the years, with great thought and with some trial and error, I might add, is that I have identified about a half a dozen people in our congregation who I know to be very mature and very wise, very discerning, very balanced, astute in matters of Scripture and astute in matters of preaching, and astute in understanding who our congregation really is and what they need to hear. And I have invited them, that's key, I have asked them if they would serve me by giving me coaching every time I preach.<sup>43</sup>

Those individuals invited to be a part of the feedback loop include Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian, a charter elder at Willow Creek Community Church, who has provided sound theological feedback. Hybels notes: “When he is out of town, or when he is not there, I miss it because he has theological insights that are very impressive.”<sup>44</sup> Another significant member of the feedback

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<sup>40</sup>Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 155.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

<sup>43</sup>Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

loop is Russ Robinson, J.D., an attorney who has served both as an elder and as a member of the leadership team. According to Hybels, Robinson’s feedback “brings logic and balance and, I would say, a common-sense overview to whether or not it had integrity from a thought standpoint.”<sup>45</sup>

Hybels describes the functioning of the sermon feedback process at Willow Creek as follows:

It changes a little bit from year to year and I've been doing this for twenty years, but usually the way that it happens now is after my Saturday evening service or Wednesday night, the first time that I'm up, whenever it is in a multiple service context, I will get the feedback of about a half a dozen different people. They will do it on the front of our bulletin. Some people say, "Do you have a form, do you have a, you know, some kind of fancy piece of paper, with triplicate, carbon copies so that the elders get the yellow form?" It is not that formal! There is a lot of blank space on the front of our bulletins, so most of the time the people who evaluate my sermons just use the front of the bulletin, or a piece of paper that they've brought.<sup>46</sup>

According to Strobel, the post-sermon feedback may involve something as minor as a word, a movement, a gesture. He recalls a specific incident where post-sermon feedback was a valuable resource: “Once somebody noticed that when I made a point, I would step backwards

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid. In addition to these two key individuals, Hybels has requested feedback from a cross-section of the church elders.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

from the podium instead of stepping forwards, which is more powerful. I'm not trained as a speaker so I didn't know that. That was great feedback!"<sup>47</sup>

Feedback may vary from sermon to sermon. Hybels offers the following example:

Sometimes people who evaluate my messages say, "Bill, we needed more personal illustrations from you on that message. We needed to know how you put that into action in your own life. . . . So sometimes I'm asked by those who evaluate me to use more illustrations. Sometimes I'm warned not to use as many. So it's a matter of discernment on my part and the evaluations of those who are making discerning observations from the outside."<sup>48</sup>

When receiving post-sermon feedback and evaluation, Hybels cautions that "one thing pastors and preachers have to be very careful about is how the response to their message affects them both personally and professionally."<sup>49</sup> He freely admits, "I am extremely vulnerable about these evaluations in the first four minutes after I get down from the pulpit."<sup>50</sup> He found it overwhelming to hear feedback from seven or eight people. He observed that "the seven pats on the back when I preach well are nice, but the seven slaps when I blow it are excruciating."<sup>51</sup> Learning from experience, the decision was made to filter all the evaluations through one

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<sup>47</sup>Strobel, Interview.

<sup>48</sup>Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Hybels, "Keeping Ourselves on Target," 157.

<sup>51</sup>Hybels, "Keeping Ourselves on Target," 157.

person.<sup>52</sup> Hybels made the following request to the one delivering post-sermon evaluation: “ I would appreciate very much if whoever’s doing the evaluating would put a lot of time into thinking about how to present constructive criticisms to me.”<sup>53</sup>

Russ Robinson has discovered several important lessons about delivering post-sermon evaluation: “the only way accountability works is when it is invited. Accountability that is not invited turns into judgmentalism, legalism. Critiquing of messages that is not invited can get very dangerous . . . If it is not invited by the communicator, I don’t think it is going to happen effectively.”<sup>54</sup> Hybels noticed that the elders at Willow Creek Community Church were sensitive to this issue: “The elders at Willow Creek would always respond truthfully when I asked them about the accuracy or relevancy of my preaching. But unless I asked, they wouldn’t say anything. So over the course of time, we have formalized the process.”<sup>55</sup> In other words, Hybels has made himself accountable and invited certain individuals to provide accurate feedback on a regular basis.

Strobel has also consistently invited feedback and evaluation: “I’ve found that whatever

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>54</sup>Robinson, Interview.

<sup>55</sup>Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 156.

growth I've had as a speaker, that has been the source of it."<sup>56</sup> He emphasizes the value of feedback as a resource for relevant biblical preaching as follows:

I want the feedback because I know that is the only way I am going to grow. I think through the years if you are in an environment where for some reason the people feel the speaker is too fragile in his ego, or too insecure, or there is something wrong with the community that people feel reluctant to provide feedback, it doesn't mean they still don't have those opinions. People are walking around thinking "If only he would be more concise." I want to know that stuff. Tell me!<sup>57</sup>

When feedback is invited in this way, dialogue can be an effective and valuable resource in the preparation and delivery of relevant biblical sermons.

Robinson has also noticed that when some people offer a critique, their comments are limited to "you did this wrong," and "you did that wrong." In contrast, Robinson states: "I will rarely give a negative feedback without giving a positive suggestion on how to make it change."<sup>58</sup> He continues: "It's easy to spot problems; the hard part is to say, 'And here is how you change this.'"<sup>59</sup> In offering suggestions, Robinson notes that it is important to be specific, offering "constructive criticism that gives them a path to walk that is different than the path they did walk."<sup>60</sup> Strobel adds that it is not helpful to suggest radical changes that cannot possibly be

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<sup>56</sup>Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

<sup>57</sup>Strobel, Interview.

<sup>58</sup>Robinson, Interview.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

implemented in the brief time available between services. He notes:

If you come in on Saturday night (after the evening service) and say, “You know what I would have done,” and you give a whole different structure, there is no way that I could implement that overnight. It wouldn’t work for me. It is nice to get the ideas, but it doesn’t help me. Don’t tell me about a radical rewrite but tell me how I can work with what I have to make it better.<sup>61</sup>

How then should one deliver post-sermon evaluation if a solution to the problem is not apparent? Robinson shares his response to that question: “Most of the time I will withhold the criticism. Once in a while I will say, ‘I am really sorry; I don’t know what to tell you to do about this, but I think this is an important enough issue that you should think about it.’ . . . I try to be really careful to do that on a very selective basis.”<sup>62</sup>

Robinson emphasizes that in post-sermon feedback, it is also important to “catch people doing it right.”<sup>63</sup> With this in mind, when selecting an individual through whom to filter the post-sermon feedback, the leadership team at Willow Creek Community Church chose someone “who has a rare ability to affirm that which should be affirmed.”<sup>64</sup> Strobel agrees that accurate feedback also needs to include positive affirmations and not simply problems or suggestions for change. He recalls the encouragement he felt when one of the elders gave him a post-sermon

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<sup>61</sup>Strobel, Interview.

<sup>62</sup>Robinson, Interview.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 157.

evaluation note that simply said “Waverly Avenue.”<sup>65</sup>

According to Robinson, effective post-sermon evaluation can only happen “because we have a very community-based ministry.”<sup>66</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, a founding elder of Willow Creek Community Church, defines community as “the kind of oneness that is exemplified in the very being of God, because God is community.”<sup>67</sup> He suggests that “the pattern for the oneness among the disciples comes from the oneness that exists within the Trinity.”<sup>68</sup> According to Robinson, community is evident at Willow Creek Community Church in that “there is a lot of grace in the relationships around here.”<sup>69</sup> People are “open to hearing constructive criticism from others who build places of safety for them.”<sup>70</sup> Hybels agrees: “I confess that the primary reason this system of accountability and evaluation works in our setting is because of the

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<sup>65</sup>If the Chicago Cubs hit a home run out of the ball park at Wrigley Field, it lands on Waverly Avenue.

<sup>66</sup>Robinson, Interview.

<sup>67</sup>Gilbert Bilezikian, *The Church as a Community* (Grand Rapids: Willow Creek Resources, 1994), sound cassette.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Robinson, Interview.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

enormous trust and love that has been built between my elders and me.”<sup>71</sup>

Lee Strobel shares a specific situation, early in his preaching ministry, when he sensed the importance of community as a setting for receiving feedback and evaluation. He had just preached a sermon, and he “blew it big time.”<sup>72</sup> Strobel recognized that something was wrong with the sermon, but he couldn’t identify the problem. He describes his interaction with Hybels following that sermon:

Bill pulled me aside and talked to me for about two and a half hours after that message. . . . If I wasn’t in community with Bill, if I didn’t know that Bill really loved me and valued me, and if I wasn’t sure that Bill’s motivations were his love for me and for the congregation, for both of us, it would have been a devastating encounter. So I think it has to be in the context of community; to me, that is a really important element.<sup>73</sup>

Where community is absent, individuals do not feel free to engage in dialogue. According to Strobel, “It is almost a poisoned environment where people are going around with strongly held opinions but don’t feel free enough to express them in a positive way to help that person. They don’t enjoy a level of community where there is trust and love and a feeling of security.”<sup>74</sup>

In addition to post-sermon feedback, soliciting pre-sermon feedback is a regular practice

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<sup>71</sup>Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 157.

<sup>72</sup>Strobel, Interview.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

for Lee Strobel.<sup>75</sup> Strobel describes the process as follows:

I finish the first draft of my manuscript . . . by Thursday night. Usually by Friday morning, I will give it to one person, sometimes two. He reads it Friday morning, critiques it, we have lunch together and discuss it. . . . The pre-delivery evaluation is really important to me. . . . Mark Middleberg goes through and he feels the freedom to be very honest. Sometimes it is great! He just scrawls at the end, “This is tremendous and God is going to use this!” Other times he says, “I would make this change or that change.”<sup>76</sup>

Strobel does not implement every suggestion that is given in pre-sermon feedback. Like Hybels, he believes that in order for the evaluation process to be effective, there must be give and take.<sup>77</sup>

He implements about 80% of the suggestions given during pre-sermon dialogue, but reserves the right to say, “Thanks for the input, but I don’t agree with that.”<sup>78</sup> My most valuable resource for pre-sermon feedback is my beloved companion, Bodil. She is not a trained communicator. Bodil is a gifted nurse practitioner. But she knows what works. And she knows that “boring is bad!” So I give her my manuscript and let her give me pre-sermon feedback. In order to do that,

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<sup>75</sup>Occasionally, if Bill Hybels has a question about the appropriateness of a certain point, particularly a theological issue, he may talk it over with someone in the feedback loop prior to preaching the sermon.

<sup>76</sup>Strobel, Interview. Early in his preaching ministry, Strobel would give his manuscript to more than one individual for pre-sermon feedback. He tried to look for individuals who could give him feedback in different areas.

<sup>77</sup>Hybels, “Keeping Ourselves on Target,” 158.

<sup>78</sup>Strobel, Interview.

I can't start my sermon on Friday evening! I start on Sunday morning. I study on Monday and Tuesday. My goal is to have the sermon birthed by Wednesday. That means that I have completed a rough draft of the sermon manuscript. The manuscript typically goes through 4-6 revisions, and somewhere in that process, my wife gets to read the manuscript and provide pre-sermon feedback.

The leadership team at Willow Creek Community Church has also involved the listeners to varying degrees in the planning of the sermon calendar for the up-coming ministry season. This intentional planning of a sermon calendar is an attempt to avoid "direction-less preaching". Hybels defines "direction-less preaching" or "hit-and-miss preaching" as follows:

Week after week, there is no real logic for why he (the preacher) is preaching a certain kind of message. There is no graduated flow from week one to week two, to week three, to week four. The congregation feels like it's getting a smorgasbord of input from the Scriptures but not like they're a group of people being led from one place of a spiritual journey to a next place . . .<sup>79</sup>

In contrast, "directional preaching" involves "the establishment in the pastor's mind of where the congregation is currently and where, if there were some purposeful thought given to a preaching schedule, the congregation could go between now and three months from now, between now and six months from now, or from now through the rest of the year."<sup>80</sup>

In regards to involving members in the planning of the sermon calendar, Hybels notes: "I've moved in and out of that over the years, and a lot of that depends on how my own antenna are working and how my own sense of diagnosing the needs of the church would be

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<sup>79</sup>Hybels, *Preaching for Life-Change*.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

functioning.”<sup>81</sup> At certain times during his preaching ministry, listener input in the planning process has not only been helpful but essential. Hybels asserts: “Without the input of some congregational members that I sort of drafted for the purpose of helping me do sermon planning, sermon praying, sermon scheduling, sermon research, I never would have been able to continue to preach at the level that I was.”<sup>82</sup>

I took the lessons I learned at Willow Creek and implemented a sermon planning process at my churches in Calimesa, CA, and now at Forest Lake Church. I have spelled out that process in an article in the September, 2004, issue of MINISTRY magazine. The article, which some of you may have read, is entitled “From Panic to Purpose: the process and benefits of planning a preaching calendar.” There are 4 basic steps in the strategy for listening to the community:

**Step #1:**

Personally select a group of 12-15 members from your congregation to serve on a Sermon Planning Group. Look for individuals representative of the diversity of your congregation (age, gender, ethnicity, and religious heritage). Give this Sermon Planning Group a 30-day assignment. Ask each member to solicit feedback from family members, neighbors, and friends about topics that would interest them in the coming year. Encourage group members to develop specific recommendations of sermon series that would connect with the individuals that they have contacted. You will be surprised how seriously individuals take hold of this assignment!

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

Begin this process four months prior to the beginning of your preaching calendar. This allows adequate time to work through the process and still provide some lead time for the worship teams to plan services at the beginning of the preaching calendar.

It is helpful to change the composition of the Sermon Planning Group annually. This provides opportunity for a broad cross-section of the congregation to participate. It also avoids the criticism that a handful of members are controlling the preaching calendar of the church.

### **Step #2:**

Bring your Sermon Planning Group together for a brainstorming session. During this session, listen to reports from your Sermon Planning Group members. Take notes. Writing suggestions on a whiteboard or large notepad helps group members to see emerging patterns.

Several individuals may suggest a series of sermons on a similar theme, or on a particular book of the Bible. Decide together the best format and length for each series. Solicit group feedback regarding titles. By the end of this brainstorming session, you should have a collection of sermon series.

Allow a minimum of four hours for this brainstorming session. You may decide to take the Sermon Planning Group to a retreat center for the day or even for a weekend together. Either way, if you spend a minimum of a full day with your Sermon Planning Group, you should be able to complete a rough draft of your preaching calendar. Adequate time spent doing Step #2 will save time later in the process.

### **Step #3:**

Solicit feedback from other pastors on your staff or from key lay leaders. While these individuals may not have participated directly in the group work mentioned above, they are sensitive to the needs of the church family.

Give them an opportunity to review the rough draft of the calendar. Encourage them to make suggestions, either adding to, deleting, or modifying the recommendations of the Sermon Planning Group. During this third step, you may also determine who will be responsible for each preaching assignment.

#### **Step #4:**

Go to the mountain. This is a time for you to prayerfully reflect on your proposed preaching assignments. Take the revised draft of the preaching calendar with you, along with any notes from the brainstorming session. Consider the flow from one sermon series to another.

As you look at the bigger picture, you will begin to see what needs have not been addressed.<sup>1</sup> Make additions, deletions, and modifications, fitting into any liturgical or denominational plans you may need to observe. Then, take a calendar and assign a specific weekend for each sermon.

As part of the preaching calendar, include a proposed sermon title, preaching passage, and preaching idea.

#### **The benefits**

Planning a preaching calendar takes time but the benefits far exceed the cost.

*First*, as mentioned, having a preaching calendar helps you to avoid the weekly panic attack that comes from last-minute sermon planning. Beginning the sermon preparation process weeks or even months ahead provides incubation time for you to process ideas. Once your preaching

calendar is complete, you can create a file for each sermon. As you find relevant resources or ideas, drop them into the appropriate file. Then, as you begin your sermon preparation, you will not only know your basic direction but you will also have resources to work with.

*Second*, a carefully planned preaching calendar helps to ensure balance in the spiritual diet of your congregation, and more life in the delivery of the sermon. The apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that, during his extended time of ministry in Ephesus, he had declared to them “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27, NKJV). A balanced preaching calendar will include both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and will cover the broad themes of the Bible as well as issues of practical concern for everyday Christian living.

The one-sermon pastor who preaches the same sermon every week with a few minor variations bores the congregation and leaves them spiritually malnourished. A lack of prayerful, intentional planning can also result in myopic preaching preoccupied with chasing after immediate concerns while failing to declare the whole counsel of God. This unplanned preaching is often at the bottom of much of the mediocre preaching that we hear about.

*Third*, a preaching calendar also enables your worship teams to plan ahead. You may not actually begin to write a specific sermon until the first part of the week, but the worship team assigned to that weekend can plan weeks or even months ahead, designing a worship service around your preaching passage and preaching idea. Even though your preaching idea may be modified, the basic theme will remain the same.

*Fourth*, with advance notice regarding upcoming sermons, your communications team can provide articles for local newspapers and make postings on your church Web site. You can also encourage church members to plan ahead and invite family members, neighbors, and friends

to an upcoming sermon series.

There will inevitably be a few times during the year when your preaching calendar will need to be modified. Events like September 11, 2001, cannot be ignored. Unexpected transitions in the congregation might also necessitate the addition of a sermon not originally scheduled. At times like these, make prayerful adjustments to your preaching calendar. Such changes create a certain amount of disequilibrium, but they are the exception rather than the rule.

If you are experiencing weekly panic attacks as a result of last-minute sermon preparation, try planning a preaching calendar. It's a valuable tool which will help you to move from panic to purpose in your preaching.

Hybels admits that sometimes he is tempted to forget about the evaluation process. Why listen so attentively to the community? Why involve the listeners in pre-sermon, post-sermon, and sermon planning dialogue? This process requires a significant amount of time and energy. Hybels suggests two reasons: "Having elders or other trusted people evaluate each sermon sounds like work. It is. But this evaluation has saved me so many times from saying something I would regret later, that I have reached the point where I wouldn't want to preach without it."<sup>83</sup> But there is a second reason why Hybels, and the leadership team at Willow Creek Community Church, listens attentively: "It's because I preach, as every pastor does, before a righteous and holy God, and I know *he* evaluates my work."<sup>84</sup>

If we would be powerful Biblical preachers, we must remember that reverent listening is

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<sup>83</sup>Hybels, "Keeping Ourselves on Target," 160.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 166.

essential for powerful Biblical preaching. We must first listen to the Word, but we must also listen to the community. May God help us to develop this art of double-listening.

I am open to answer any questions about the process of reverently listening to the community.

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**LISTENING TO THE LISTENER**  
**Preaching as Dialogue**  
**HMS Richards Lectureship on Preaching**  
**Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, October 24-25, 2004**  
**Dr. Derek Morris**  
**Senior Pastor, Forest Lake Church**

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.”<sup>1</sup> “Preachers,” according to Harold Brack, “have been

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<sup>1</sup>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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup>

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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<sup>2</sup>Harold Brack, “Good Preachers Are Good Listeners,” *Quarterly Review* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 86.

<sup>3</sup>Howe, “Overcoming the Barriers to Communication,” 30.

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

teaching.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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.”<sup>8</sup>

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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<sup>5</sup>Howe, “Overcoming the Barriers to Communication,” 31.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>7</sup>Reuel L. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1963), 44.

<sup>8</sup>Reid, *The Empty Pulpit*, 97-98.

may be due to a lack of confidence in their personal communication skills.<sup>9</sup>

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.”<sup>10</sup>

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.”<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> If I say, “I love you,” what message is conveyed? But if I change my intonation and

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<sup>9</sup>Brack, “Good Preachers Are Good Listeners,” 89.

<sup>10</sup>Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue*, 32.

<sup>11</sup>Robinson, “Listening to the Listeners,” 69.

<sup>12</sup>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.”<sup>13</sup>

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.

<sup>13</sup>Brack, “Good Preachers Are Good Listeners,” 90.

recall. This process requires verbal feedback from a participating audience.<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>14</sup>Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 95.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>17</sup>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.”<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.’”<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup>

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

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

<sup>19</sup>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.”

<sup>20</sup>Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 167.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 97.

musical dialogue, sometimes with the aid of a skilled organist or pianist.”<sup>22</sup> As the process of call and response unfolds, “the language becomes rhythmically poetic; the tune becomes evident; and the speech fulfills itself in song.”<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup>

Mitchell is convinced that the vast majority of preachers who utilize call and response are convinced 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.”<sup>26</sup> However, such a process of call and response can be abused. Preachers may attempt to manipulate congregations,

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<sup>22</sup>Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 105.

<sup>23</sup>Charles G. Adams, “Some Aspects of Black Worship,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 11 (January 1971): 136.

<sup>24</sup>Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 234.

<sup>25</sup>Adams, “Some Aspects of Black Worship,” 136.

<sup>26</sup>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.<sup>27</sup>

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.’”<sup>28</sup>

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?”<sup>29</sup> Fosdick made the following assertion: “Every

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 106.

<sup>28</sup>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.

<sup>29</sup>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-- . . .”<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup>

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.”<sup>32</sup> 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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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>31</sup>Fosdick, “What is the matter with preaching,” 137.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 137.

appearance of being two-way--it is.”<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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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<sup>33</sup>Wagley, *Preaching with the Small Congregation*, 74.

<sup>34</sup>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.

<sup>35</sup>G. H. Jack Woodward, “Some Important Differences,” *The Pulpit* 35, no. 2 (February 1964): 25.

of dialogue in the preaching event.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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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<sup>36</sup>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.

<sup>37</sup>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.

<sup>38</sup>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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

Reflecting on the benefits of engaging the listeners in dialogue as part of the preaching event, Niebuhr 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.<sup>41</sup>

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

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<sup>39</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr 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.

<sup>40</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1930), 145.

<sup>41</sup>Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 145.

service into something like this evening discussion.”<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> 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.”<sup>44</sup> Holston suggests, however, that allowing the congregation to respond during the sermon “provides a means for audience participation which assists in understanding the message.”<sup>45</sup>

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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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>43</sup>James Holston, “Dialogue Preaching,” *Restoration Quarterly* 24, no.2 (1981): 92-93.

<sup>44</sup>Howe, *Partners in Preaching*, 86.

<sup>45</sup>Holston, “Dialogue Preaching,” 92.

inform a planned decision.”<sup>46</sup> 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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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.”<sup>49</sup>

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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<sup>46</sup>Dennis C. Kinlaw, “Communication Models For Innovative Preaching,” *Preaching Today* 6 (July-August 1972): 14.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>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.”<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>

For those who might be intimidated by a totally spontaneous interaction, Freeman suggests a “controlled dialogue.”<sup>52</sup> 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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<sup>50</sup>Holston, “Dialogue Preaching,” 92.

<sup>51</sup>Walter Hollenweger, “Preaching Dialogically,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (April 1971): 246-48.

<sup>52</sup>Freeman, *Variety in Biblical Preaching*, 109.

confirms that a firsthand testimony carries far more impact than 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.”<sup>53</sup>

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.”<sup>54</sup> It is still crucially

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<sup>53</sup>Thompson and Bennett, *Dialogue Preaching*, 68.

<sup>54</sup>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.”<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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.”<sup>57</sup>

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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<sup>55</sup>Perry, *Biblical Preaching for Today's World*, 100.

<sup>56</sup>Wagley, *Preaching with the Small Congregation*, 77.

<sup>57</sup>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.”<sup>58</sup> 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.”<sup>59</sup>

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

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

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

includes facial expressions, hand and arm gestures, postures, positions, and various movements of the body or the legs and feet.”<sup>60</sup> 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.”<sup>61</sup> 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.”<sup>62</sup> 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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<sup>60</sup>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.

<sup>61</sup>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.

<sup>62</sup>*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.<sup>63</sup>

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.”<sup>64</sup>

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.”<sup>65</sup> 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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<sup>63</sup>Calvin Miller, *The Empowered Communicator: Seven Keys to Unlocking an Audience* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 177.

<sup>64</sup>Miles L. Patterson, *Nonverbal Behavior: A Functional Perspective* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983), 3.

<sup>65</sup>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.”<sup>66</sup>

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.”<sup>67</sup> Miller notes that “body language tells you not only if you are heard, but whether you are being understood.”<sup>68</sup> 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.”<sup>69</sup> 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.”<sup>70</sup> 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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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>67</sup>Charles L. Bartow, *The Preaching Moment: A Guide to Sermon Delivery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 99.

<sup>68</sup>Miller, *The Empowered Communicator*, 184.

<sup>69</sup>Howe, *Partners in Preaching*, 87.

<sup>70</sup>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 treatise. 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.