

Christ Church Communiqué



The Monthly Newsletter of Christ Church

May 2006

The Art of Listening to a Sermon

There is no shortage of opinions on how preachers ought to preach today. The overwhelming majority hold that preachers ought to address practical felt needs and be relevant in their style and content. “Helpful Tips on Christian Living” is what most believe makes for good preaching. A smaller, though significant, number wish for “messages” or “talks” (one rarely hears reference to “sermons” anymore) that are “biblically-based.” Precisely what this means is anyone’s guess, as scarcely any Christian preacher would deny that his (or her) sermons are “biblically-based.” Indeed, one could well justify delivering a well-mannered civics lesson and describing it as “biblically based” these days.

Much smaller still are the number of those who believe that a sermon ought to be expositional; that is, effectively capturing and communicating the originally intended meaning of a scriptural passage and moving the congregation from such an understanding to the faithful application of its contemporary significance. Nevertheless, most believe that they know what makes for good preaching.

Curiously, few appear to understand what makes for good listening. To be sure, communication involves more than a speaker. There must also be a receiver (the listener) and a medium (that which is being communicated). But only scant attention has been given to the role of the listener in preaching, and few today know how to listen to a sermon.

Listening, like preaching, is a developed art. And like effective preaching, effective listening is hard work—it is an active process that requires tremendous concentration and effort. Too often we think that only the speaker and the medium are in need of honing, and that since we were born with two ears, listening comes naturally. But this is not so. And when this fallacy is linked to the prevailing “What’s-in-it-for-me?” attitude that characterizes most attending churches today, the results are tragic.

The Anatomy of a Sermon

Expositional preaching is not merely an extended commentary on a passage of Scripture. Rather, expositional preaching is setting out the originally intended meaning of the text in such a way as to make the main point of the passage the main point of the sermon. This is much easier said than done. Indeed, it is exceedingly difficult for most preachers to control their assumptions and biases and allow the text to speak for itself.

Too often, preachers decide what they want to communicate before making a study of the biblical text. Once the topic is selected, a passage (or passages) is found that seems to support what it is that the preacher wishes to communicate and his study of the passage is then controlled by what it is that he has predetermined to say. Not surprisingly, through selective study and personal interpretations, the text ends up “supporting” the preacher’s views on a given topic. I call this the “confirmatory bias.” In other words, the preacher finds that the text says what the preacher predetermined it would say in order to support what it is that he had predetermined to say.

But sound expositional preaching does not proceed like this. Rather, the competent preacher employs a variety of tools and processes designed to control his private interpretations and curb his biases in order to allow the text to speak for itself. Though not exhaustive, these tools and processes include: 1) working from the original languages, 2) making a study of the original grammar, culture, history, context, and setting of a text, 3) affording priority to the plain meaning of a text, 4) allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, and 5) suspending the designated aim of a sermon until after completing a careful, unbiased study of the biblical text(s) involved.

A good sermon is one that has been crafted with controlling principles and tools in place so that the originally intended meaning of the text is rendered clear, along with instruction on how to apply the significance of the same to life. In other words, a good sermon moves from an exactness of understanding to an exactness of application. Faithful preachers desire that their congregants understand what the main point of the text meant “then and there” before applying its significance “here and now.”

The Art of Listening to a Sermon

With that background on the nature of communication and the preacher’s task, I draw our attention to the listener’s task. Again, effective listening, like effective preaching, is a developed art and requires tremendous effort on the part of the listener. The following elements are a part of effective listening. This list is not exhaustive, but it is useful.

1. *Good listening begins with good hearing.* Adjacent noises can mask the speech of the preacher and interfere with hearing. Traffic, airplanes, trains, and air conditioner/heater sounds can be at frequencies that alter and interfere with the reception of human speech. And as a general rule, as noise increases, retention of content decreases rather dramatically. Side conversations, cell phones, pagers, and people moving in and out of the service are frequent competitors in church settings, and each significantly reduces the ability of congregants to hear and retain what is being said.

Auditory fatigue also plays a significant role in limiting hearing. When the human ear is exposed to sounds of constant frequency, our ability to hear those frequencies is gradually diminished resulting in fatigue and eventual inattention. This is why preachers who preach in a monotone or droning voice are not only boring, but are literally boring their congregations to sleep! The task of effectively listening to a sermon is made all the more difficult when the listener is already tired.

As such, preaching is more effective in quiet settings, free from competing and distracting noises, with well-rested parishioners, and when delivered with varying tone and volume.

2. *Good listening involves active listening.* Sadly, most congregants attend church with tremendous expectations of their preachers, but few, if any, expectations of themselves. After all, congregants are paying the piper...they feel justified in expecting their preachers to “perform” or “provide” for them. As such, most parishioners dutifully file into church week after week and informally “grade” the sermon on the basis of what they got out of it. Indeed, it not uncommon to hear people leave a worship service and say things like:

“Wow! He sure knocked that one out of the park!”

“I didn’t get anything out of that.”

“Man, that sermon was a home run.”

“I sure hate lectures...I just need to be encouraged.”

Of course, these kinds of evaluative statements are naïve and sorely misguided, and fail to appreciate what sermons are about and what the listener’s responsibility is in the process of preaching. The more mature and appropriate response to a sermon is to ask, “Do I understand the originally intended meaning of the passage and what it teaches me about God, my neighbor and myself, and what God would have me be and do as a result of this?”

Let me offer several specific suggestions that will encourage effective listening:

- a. *Come prepared.* During the week, repeatedly read through and pray about the passage that will serve as the preacher's text the following Sunday. Familiarize yourself with the author, setting, and circumstances of the text so that you arrive with a mental stage on which the drama of the passage may be played out.
- b. *Invest in a personal library.* At a minimum, every home should have a sturdy Bible dictionary, and an introductory commentary on both the Old and New Testaments. If the preacher will be preaching from a particular book or letter for some time, individual commentaries specific to that book or letter will be very helpful. For a list of recommended commentaries, see Tremper Longman III Old Testament Commentary Survey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003) and D.A. Carson New Testament Commentary Survey (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001). A good Bible atlas will also be useful. Use your resources in examining the passage *prior* to the sermon, so that you have a good working knowledge of what the main theme is about when you arrive at church.
- c. *Take notes.* Many of the salient points of Christ Church sermons are provided for you on our sermon outlines. However, I would encourage you to be making marginal notes during the sermon. You might find it helpful to think in terms of 1) meaning, 2) significance, and 3) application while writing your notes and, perhaps, developing a personal code system in which to write your notes so that you can be mindful of *actively interacting* with the text as the preacher is preaching.
- d. *Review your notes.* I would advise that you retain your notes in a binder or file and make a practice of reviewing these outlines to reinforce what you have learned and the application points that the Holy Spirit has impressed upon your heart and mind while actively interacting with the sermon. Of course, our Neighborhood Small Group Fellowships are specifically designed with this in mind.
- e. *Keep a journal.* Consider purchasing an empty notebook or journal in which you can summarize: 1) the main point of the sermon, 2) your specific response(s) to the sermon, and 3) your journal of prayer as you actively and humbly seek, with the Holy Spirit's assistance, to apply the significance of God's Word to your life in practical ways (James 2:22-25).
- f. *Pray in advance for the lost who will be listening to the sermon.* Paul wrote to the Romans: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Pray that God might open the ears of those who do not know Him that they might hear His voice through the effective preaching of His Word. And then model the transforming truth of the Gospel before their eyes so that it might be faithfully commended; so that Christ might be exalted; and so that our God might be glorified.

See you Sunday...with open Bibles and eager ears.

Grace, peace, and joy,

Robert W. Evans



© Christ Church of the Tri-Valley
All rights reserved by the author(s).
Mailing Address: P.O. Box 1077, Pleasanton, CA 94566
Meeting Address: Pleasanton Middle School, Pleasanton, CA
925.846.0665 www.christchurch-trivalley.org