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**TOWARD BETTER HEARING OF THE WORD
IN THE SERMON**

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CONCORDIA SEMINARY

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**TOWARD BETTER HEARING OF THE WORD
IN THE SERMON**

A MAJOR APPLIED PROJECT SUBMITTED

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

DARRELL W. ZIMMERMAN

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

MARCH, 2005

To Carol, my wife,
for tirelessly listening
and for hearing

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to equip some members of the congregation to be discerning receivers of the sermon by improving their active and intentional listening capabilities. The methodology of the project included the development and teaching of a course of instruction on the theology and practice of preaching, a period of participant implementation, and interviews of participants in the study toward an evaluation of the project. Participant response showed a greater or lesser benefit depending on willingness and ability to apply the learnings. Recommendations for enhanced future effectiveness of the course are included.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHALLENGE OF HEARING: A PROPOSAL TO ASSIST LISTENERS TO SERMONS

The Problem with Listening

"Listeners are active participants in preaching.... Whether one's theology of preaching locates the Word of God at the speaker's mouth or the listener's ear, the fact is, it takes two to communicate."¹ With these words Fred Craddock opens up a whole new area of effort for parish pastors: helping the listeners in the congregation with their weekly task of hearing the word of God delivered in the sermon. And most listeners to sermons in our congregations need their pastor's help.

The listener has been greatly neglected in homiletical education. My recent study in current trends in homiletics has been enlightening and has helped me improve my sermon preparation and delivery. I have benefited by studying the works of some of the nation's outstanding homileticians.² I've become a better preacher. One of those writers, Dr. Ronald Allen, recently noted, "The Church is full of dedicated preachers who work very hard, who hear regularly from other preachers and who read books on preaching written by preachers. I wonder what preachers might learn by listening to listeners."³ I'm concerned that the members of our congregation have not been listened to and have not

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 25.

² Course work for the Doctor of Ministry degree has included "Current Trends in Homiletics" (DM-925), "Preaching and Sermon Structures" (DM-929), and "Theology of Preaching" (DM-989). Homiletics texts and sermons from the current generation studied include selected works of Walter Brueggemann, David Buttrick, Craddock, Richard Lischer, Thomas Long, Eugene Lowry, Thomas Troeger and William Willimon.

³ Ronald J. Allen, "Points of Entry" (paper presented at "Listening to Listeners of Sermons," a conference presented by faculty of Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, September 27, 2003).

been helped in their task of weekly listening to sermons through an intentional educational effort.

For most members of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church in Brentwood, Missouri, the Sunday sermon is the primary mode of formal, ongoing nurture in the Christian faith. A typical week in our parish will see considerably fewer than half the number of our worship attendance in our Sunday and weekday Bible classes. While an increasing number of our members are frequent participants in church sponsored Bible classes, many more rarely or never attend. From year to year, most of the members of our congregation are fed God's word almost exclusively through the sermon.

Sermons at Mount Calvary are grounded in the word of God using the time tested and biblically guided hermeneutical principles of the Reformation. Sermons at Mount Calvary are also prepared in a variety of different formats reflecting the latest trends in homiletical studies.⁴ All this is done for the congregation so that the efficacious word of God will be clearly heard and received. God the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearing of the word and alone is responsible for its fruitfulness. The preacher endeavors to make his best use of the orders of creation in sermon preparation for the sake of the weekly preaching and hearing.⁵

Little, however, has been done to help the members of the congregation grow in their skills in sermon listening. The sermon experience on Sunday involves not only the delivery by the preacher, but also the reception by the hearers. Many of our listeners find

⁴ In recent weeks, sermons have been prepared in expository verse by verse, narrative, question answered, paradox maintained, process, comparison/contrast, law then gospel, and imagistic structures, for example.

⁵ The horizontal dimension of the preacher's work, *de jure humano*, is contrasted with the work of the Holy Spirit in preaching, *de jure divino*, in Charles P. Arand, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Lutheran Quarterly* (Winter 2001): 417-439.

listening a difficult task, a task for which they are ill prepared. Graham Johnston in *Preaching to a Post-Modern World* says, "Preachers must think not only on the message, but also on the nature of the hearers. Our times beg the question, 'Is the message of Christ being heard, not just preached?'"⁶ Like most preachers, my observation is that far too often the word is not being heard.

I frankly have little or no idea about how the preached word has impacted a large portion of our membership. We do not have a formalized method of feedback in place and informal feedback that is constructive and insightful is offered only rarely. Richard Caemmerer's comment applies to Mount Calvary, "In many congregations the accepted decorum is that the hearer during the sermon look passive and barely conscious."⁷ My concern is that there are some in the congregation who have very low expectations of the Sunday sermon and after decades of worship attendance and hundreds of sermons, they have effectively tuned out the voice of the preacher and are not mentally or emotionally engaged. I'm fearful that the sermon hymn triggers an automatic response of settling in for twenty minutes of endurance until the music starts again and heavy eyelids and legs are stretched for the sprint toward the benediction.

Informal feedback from others in the congregation indicates that some in worship come to the sermon with the best of intentions and try their hardest to focus and concentrate on the sermon, but being unaccustomed to extended verbal presentations, their minds wander and the sermon is heard in sporadic and incomplete fashion. Some

⁶ Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 9.

⁷ Richard Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church: Theology and Technique of the Christian Sermon* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 238.

blame our media oriented culture for this difficulty. "Television makes it harder for people to listen attentively and responsively, and therefore for preachers to hold a congregation's attention, let alone secure an appropriate response."⁸ Our congregation is no exception, particularly as we reach an increasingly younger audience.

Many of our members do listen attentively, as best they are able, and participate actively in the sermon experience. I receive their heart felt, "Good sermon, Pastor" with respect and appreciation. But I also know from years of conversation with members that only a minority are satisfied with their sermon listening skills.

Maybe most frustrating are the spiritually mature of the congregation who remember the sermon, but are at a loss to offer constructive criticism. They might remember lessons learned from the sermon for many weeks or months, and comment on what a difference it has made in their Christian walk. That is encouraging, but when pressed to offer what it was specifically about the sermon's construction or presentation that made it easier to remember or helpful in relaying the truths of God's word, they can't exactly say. The word in the sermon has its impact, but their inability to discern what makes one sermon more readily hearable than another and to offer feedback so that I might grow in my preaching is discouraging.

Some research has been done on the ability of listeners to remember and apply the word presented in sermons. One such survey showed that only twelve percent of worshipers say that they usually remember the message of the sermon. As many as eighty seven percent say that their mind wanders during the sermon. More than one in three, thirty five percent, say that the sermons they hear are too long. And only "eleven

⁸ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 70.

percent of women and five percent of men credit sermons as their primary source of knowledge about God."⁹ And yet this same survey indicates that seventy four percent of church members rate their pastor as an "above average" speaker.¹⁰ Listening to sermons can be a difficult undertaking. The common experience of preachers and research like this indicate that there is a need to help people listen to the weekly sermon.

The Purpose of the Project

"But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."¹¹ God the Holy Spirit, through the words of Jesus and the writings of the prophets and apostles, still brings to the Church the life giving word that brings the gifts of God to those who hear. The Church today is the assembly of the blessed ones who still by faith see and hear the words and the works of the Savior, Jesus.

The purpose of this project entitled, "Toward Better Hearing of the Word in the Sermon" is to equip some members of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church, Brentwood, Missouri, to be discerning receivers of the sermon by improving their active and intentional listening capabilities.

While better prepared and delivered sermons is the first step in better listening, greater effort and skill from the pulpit is only part of the solution. "[I]t would be naive to think that appetite for and confidence in preaching can be achieved simply by introducing

⁹ Thom Schultz and Joani Schultz, *Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church: and How to Fix It* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1993), 189.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹¹ Matt. 13:16-17 (ESV). All scripture references are from *The English Standard Version* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003).

and mastering new techniques for sermon delivery. Indeed, focusing exclusively on such techniques tends to treat sermon listeners as though they were passive and manipulable, as though they were simply buying a bill of goods."¹² Travelers to foreign lands often mistakenly believe that speaking louder and slower will bridge the language gap. What truly helps communication is a common language, a shared understanding of what kinds of communication are being attempted. This project seeks to improve the weekly preaching/experiencing process by enhancing the ability of the people to be better listeners.

In this study, better listening involves a number of different aspects. It begins with an increased ability to pay attention to the sermon. An understanding of the place of preaching in the liturgy of the church and the power of the expounded word of God in the sermon increases active participation in the sermon. When expectations are heightened, listening is more attentive.

But better listening includes more than just hearing the words. A good listener to the sermon is also able to discern the dynamics of the sermon, the interplay of law and gospel, for example, or the unfolding of a particular sermon structure from its beginning through its end. A discerning listener is one who can identify what it is about a sermon, or a particular component of a sermon, that made it an effective piece of communication. Identifying and even anticipating the workings of a sermon enhance the listening experience.

When this kind of active, engaged listening is happening, a hearer is more likely to remember certain specifics of the sermon. The textual basis of the sermon, the main

¹² David J. Schlafer, *Surviving the Sermon: A Guide to Preaching for Those Who Have to Listen* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1992), 8.

points and illustrative material are more likely to come to mind at a later date. Even more importantly, with better listening the goals of the sermon will be more readily remembered.

Upon completion of educational experiences outlined in the next section, the project will be evaluated by measuring participants' perception of their increased ability to:

- * prepare in advance for the sermon listening experience;
- * listen actively and attentively to the sermon intellectually, emotionally and relationally;
- * remember the sermon's textual basis and key aspects of the presented sermon;
- * mentally "dialog" with the preacher during the sermon; and
- * recognize daily opportunities to apply the word in daily living.

The project has a significant potential side benefit. Constructive critical feedback on sermons is rare in the parish setting. Discerning listeners, who are better equipped to recognize patterns and emphases in the sermon (for example, the interplay between law and gospel, variety in sermon structure, or creative use of narrative technique), will naturally be able to offer the preacher helpful suggestions and comments that will aid in the preparation and delivery of sermons. It is hoped that this ongoing dialog will have the side benefit of enhancing the preaching abilities of the pastor. When congregation members can indicate to the pastor those aspects of the sermon that are most effective, such as variety in formats or balance between law and gospel portions of the sermon, he can respond with better prepared sermons. The Sunday morning "dialog" that is

happening between a well-prepared preacher and actively engaged listeners can potentially lead to dialog outside of worship that will benefit the entire congregation.

The Project Outlined

A basic understanding of musical theory enhances appreciation for a symphony, just as knowledge of the rules of ice hockey increases enjoyment of the game. This project was designed to inform some congregation members about the dynamics of preaching in the Christian congregation so that they can participate in the listening experience more fully.

The methodology of the project, in brief, included the development and teaching of a course of instruction on the theology and practice of preaching, a period of participant implementation, and interviews of participants in the study toward an evaluation of the project.

Preliminary Focus Groups

The project began with two focus groups of four members of the congregation in each. I discussed with the groups the challenges they face in listening to the sermon for understanding. The purpose of the focus groups was to help me better understand the common experience of those who listen to sermons at Mount Calvary. The information and insights gained from the focus groups helped make the content of the course responsive to the needs of the congregation. Participants in the focus groups were different from participants in the formal part of the study, but were representative of a cross section of the congregation according to age, tenure as members, and background in the Lutheran Church.

Course Development

After receiving input from the focus groups, I developed a course of instruction for those who participated in the study.

The final shape of the course was shaped by what was discovered in the focus groups. These topics comprise the substance of the course that was taught:

- * advance preparation by worshippers for Sunday worship and preaching;
- * the distinction between and relationship of law and gospel;
- * goal, malady and means as touch points in sermon preparation;
- * the theology of the cross and the theology of glory in preaching;
- * variety in sermon structures;
- * the place of the pericopal system in the Lutheran liturgy and its impact on preaching;
- * different learning styles among members of the congregation;
- * active listening and note taking as aids to concentration and memory;
- * an individual and/or group method for reflecting and meditating on the message of the sermon following worship;
- * recognizing opportunities for applying the truths of the word of God in daily Christian living; and
- * methods of offering constructive feedback to the preacher.

Course Offered

The focus of the project was limited to eight participants who are members of the congregation. The course was completed in three sessions of about one and one half hour each and was offered at a time that was found to be amenable to the participants.

Implementation of Learnings

Upon completion of the course of study, participants were instructed to utilize, to the best of their ability, the learnings and skills acquired as they listened to and applied the message of sermons in the eight weeks following the course. Participants were instructed to reflect upon the difference that the course made in their abilities to prepare for Sunday worship and sermon listening, listen actively, remember key aspects of the sermon and recognize how the lessons of the sermon might be applicable to their daily Christian living. Participants were told that they would be interviewed at a later date to help evaluate the effectiveness of their course of study.

Evaluation

After the interviews were completed, the responses of participants were studied and evaluated to see what conclusions could be drawn and to see if the objectives of the study had been achieved.

Verification

Once a draft of the findings and conclusions of the study was prepared, they were tested and verified by distributing copies to the participants in the study. The participants were asked to consider if the conclusions were in line with their experience.

Project Parameters

Certain assumptions informed this project and were outlined in the project, but will not be fully investigated. Those assumptions are as follows.

Theological Assumptions

This study is grounded in the theology of the Third Article and the work of God the Holy Spirit to create and strengthen the faith of believers through the means of grace.

We believe in the power of the gospel for salvation¹³ and the authority of the Word of God in the life of the Church.¹⁴ We also affirm the perspicuity of the Scriptures and the ability of believers to hear, receive, and believe the Word the way that the Lord intends it, and to apply that Word to their lives.

It is our confession that God the Holy Spirit does not work immediately, but through the means of grace. In the case of the word, proclaimed for the salvation of all people,¹⁵ the Spirit is at work when the word is presented winsomely so that it is heard and understood by the listeners.¹⁶ Our gracious Lord works both justification and sanctification in the lives of his people through the word, as the Formula of Concord declares, "for the preaching and the hearing of God's word are the Holy Spirit's instrument in, with, and through which he wills to act efficaciously, to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to achieve."¹⁷

Word and Sacrament ministry happens in a community of believers and is performed on behalf of the congregation by a pastor duly called according to the custom of the Church and conducted according to the biblical teaching of the office of the ministry (AC 5, AC 14).¹⁸ This relationship, established by God and lived out in the local congregational setting, is the context for the weekly preaching/hearing event.

¹³ Rom. 1:16-17.

¹⁴ 2 Tim. 3:14-16.

¹⁵ Rom. 1:17.

¹⁶ Ac. 2:7-11.

¹⁷ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., trans., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 531.

¹⁸ Tappert, 31, 36.

Broader Historical Assumptions

Since the days following Christ's resurrection, the regular, frequent gathering of the saints to hear the Apostles' teaching has been central to the life of the Church. Early on, this gathering gravitated to the Sunday anniversary of the resurrection and that tradition continues today at Mount Calvary Lutheran Church. The authoritative exposition of the regular reading of Scripture has likewise had a long history in the liturgy of the Church, and our congregation has a seventy year history of sermons at virtually every weekly gathering and at the special celebrations and occasional services conducted throughout the year.

Local Historical Assumptions

When I joined the congregation in 1994, I followed three long tenured pastorates. My preaching style, informed by recent study in the Doctor of Ministry program, is considerably different than my immediate predecessor of twenty-eight years. I tend to preach in a more relational style, often utilizing forms suggested by the current generation of preachers.¹⁹ The vast majority of our members receive God's Word primarily through the weekly sermon without having had any formal instruction in listening to sermons. At Mount Calvary there exists a rather typical lack of regular, constructive, insightful feedback from the congregation about the preaching ministry.

Sociological/Psychological Assumptions

People in twenty-first century America receive and process information differently than did the people of a previous generation. Outside of the classroom, few have a regular experience of acquiring information through the spoken word in a lecture

¹⁹ See footnote 2.

format. The influence of electronic media on the way modern Americans listen is still being studied, but it is clear that such matters will have to be taken into account in a project that intends to improve listening to sermons for understanding and application. Much of the current work in homiletics considers and seeks to address these changes.

Conceptual Assumptions

The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing the word of God to life in the heart of a believer through the spoken word is mysterious and hard to define. In this study various terms will be used to describe different aspects of the preaching/hearing event including "hear," "experience," "understand," "receive," and "listen." These terms are not intended to be interchangeable or synonymous. Collectively they contribute to an understanding of what happens as the word is proclaimed and finally put into practice in the life of a Christian.

The Holy Spirit "wills to be efficacious in us by giving and working true repentance, faith and new spiritual power for good in our hearts."²⁰ "Apply" and "application" will be used in this study to refer to the ways in which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the justified members of the body of Christ are led to live out their calling to produce the fruit of Christian living²¹ and to exemplify the fruit of the Holy Spirit²² in their words and actions.

"Feedback" refers to the insights offered to the preacher about those practices that are beneficial to the experience of the congregation members. Feedback might address

²⁰ Tappert, 530.

²¹ Jn. 15:1-17.

²² Gal. 5:22-23.

topics or texts of interest or stylistic approaches that would be more helpful for listeners. It communicates to the preacher some of the experience of the listener and recommends growth and change in the preacher.

Project Limitations

Eight participants were chosen for the study. As the study will utilize a qualitative methodology, the eight were not a random sample from the congregation, but rather a group I selected based on their willingness to participate, their perceived ability to offer constructive feedback during the process, and their representation of a cross section of the congregation. The eight participants represented frequent attendees at worship with a minimum average attendance of two times per month over the most recent twelve months. They were also chosen to as nearly as possible equally represent both male and female members, those with long standing Lutheran background and those of more recent membership in a Lutheran congregation, and those who have been members at Mount Calvary longer than and less than four years.

An appropriate introduction to the nature of the study was given at the time of recruitment and appropriate forms seeking consent to participate were collected.

The scope of the investigation in the project was limited to the growth of the participants in the study. The course was offered and the learnings were implemented in the late fall of 2004.

Data Collection

The project is a qualitative study of the impact on a course of study upon the participants' perceived increased ability to listen to sermons. Data was gathered through

individual interviews with the participants after their implementation of learnings in the weeks following the course.

The interviews took place after a minimum of eight weeks of implementation. The purpose of these interviews was to gather the final data that was used to draw conclusions about the project and its effectiveness toward the primary and secondary objectives. The interviews pursued with the participants their experiences in receiving and reflecting upon the message of the sermons heard and examined whether the course of study had increased their confidence and enthusiasm to do so.

Permission was sought at the beginning of the study to audio tape record the interviews and use the participant responses in a confidential manner. The interviews each lasted less than one hour. After the Major Applied Project has received final approval, the tapes will be destroyed.

Project Implications

The preaching and listening experience that is at the heart of the life of the Church has continued for centuries and is repeated weekly in thousands of congregations worldwide. It is the preacher's responsibility to prayerfully prepare for the preaching task to the best of his ability, using all the resources available. It is hoped that this project will also demonstrate the desirability of preparing members of the congregation for their role in receiving the proclaimed word of God by enhancing their skills in listening. The lessons learned and the methods employed, if fruitful, will be made available for application by other parish preachers.

CHAPTER TWO

PROCLAMATION OF THE HEARABLE WORD OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

The research in this chapter will lay the biblical and confessional foundation for the Major Applied Project. A look at Martin Luther's sermon, "Two Kinds of Righteousness" will frame the study in the horizontal dimension of God's work among us. In the scripture study, we will examine the proclamation of the word to those who hear and believe and to those who do not hear. We'll also see how the biblical writers themselves held a concern for the listeners to the word. We'll show that under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they worked diligently so that the message of truth would be conveyed in hearable, persuasive fashion. The study of the Lutheran Confessions will include a brief survey of the doctrine of the word and the preaching office as well as the confessional understanding of the role of sanctified listeners in hearing the word.

Two Kinds of Righteousness

This project, "Toward Better Hearing of the Word in the Sermon," is located in the area of the sanctified life of believers in Christ. It is grounded in the understanding that there is, to some limited degree, an active participation by the hearer in receiving the word of God as preached in the sermon.

In his sermon from 1519, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," Martin Luther says, "There are two kinds of Christian righteousness, just as man's sin is of two kinds. The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith."²³ In this

²³ Martin Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer: I*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, trans. Lowel J. Satre (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 297.

righteousness, as the scriptures clearly state, man has no participation, but is given faith to receive it and to believe it by the gracious work of God.²⁴

"The second kind of righteousness," Luther continues, "is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness."²⁵ This righteousness is worked out in the life of a Christian in a variety of ways. Luther mentions three. It is seen first in the daily crucifying of the old nature and the desires of the flesh, and second, in the good deeds of a life of love toward neighbor. Then Luther identifies the third, the Christian's role in coming humbly and openly before the Lord to hear his word. This righteousness is seen "in meekness and fear toward God."²⁶ These three themes can be found throughout the writings of Paul, says Luther, but are all three summarized in Titus 2:12, "In this world let us live soberly (pertaining to crucifying one's own flesh), justly (referring to one's neighbor), and devoutly (relating to God)."²⁷ The sermon text is Philippians 2:5-6, and the rest of the sermon deals primarily with the second point, love toward neighbor, but in other writings he elaborates on the third, particularly where the life of devotion is at work in hearing the word in preaching.

Luther's "Treatise on Good Works" from 1520 is a commentary on how, under the gospel, a Christian might use the ten commandments as a guide for sanctified living. For our study, we turn immediately to his discussion of the third commandment. "The third tells us how we should relate ourselves to God in works," he writes. "The first works of

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:30; Romans 1:17; Romans 3:28; Ephesians 3:14-17.

²⁵ Luther, 299.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., quoting Titus 2:12.

this commandment are plain and perceptible. We generally call them divine service, such as hearing mass, praying, and hearing a sermon on holy days."²⁸ As might be expected, Luther encourages faithful, evangelical preaching and laments that it is too rarely found. But he then addresses listeners to sermons. "But where this [gospel] is rightly preached, it must be diligently heard, grasped, retained, pondered often, and faith must be strengthened against every temptation of sin."²⁹ The Reformer says the listener has a role to play when the sermon is preached. The hearer is active, carefully listening and seriously pondering the word that is preached.

This admonition is incorporated into the Small Catechism's positive encouragement on the third commandment, "but deem it holy and gladly hear and learn it."³⁰ It is the duty of all believers to be engaged in the study of the word by use of every available faculty given by God. Likewise in the Large Catechism, "How does this sanctifying take place? Not when we sit behind the stove and refrain from external work, or deck ourselves with garlands and dress up in our best clothes, but, as has been said, when we occupy ourselves with God's Word and exercise ourselves in it."³¹ This "exercise," the believer's cooperative effort in the second kind of righteousness, is what is addressed in the project.

More recent authors have wrestled with the confessional implications of the "two kinds of righteousness," and their views have implications for the project. Charles Arand

²⁸ Luther, "Treatise on Good Works," *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, *The Christian in Society, I*, ed. James Atkinson, trans. W. A. Lambert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 54-55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁰ Tappert, 342.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 377.

applies the two kinds of righteousness concept to congregational life and notes that there are a variety of applications for pastoral practice.³² Arand keeps the horizontal dimension of pastoral work subservient to the vertical dimension, but suggests that the vertical does, as Luther pointed out, serve the horizontal. God establishes my Christian identity as his child purely by an act of his gracious love in Christ. My identity in Christ also establishes my relationship with the things of this world. Who I am is not determined by my relationship with the things of this world (idolatry) and so I am free to use the things of creation in service to the kingdom of grace. According to Arand, my vertical relationship with God grants freedom in my horizontal relationship with the world.

He goes on to point out how the active, horizontal righteousness that works itself out in creation can serve the righteousness of faith in at least two ways. "First, it provides structure within which the righteousness of faith occurs... Developing the habit of going to church places my children into a setting within which the Word of God breaks in and transforms them."³³ As a believer's active obedience in response to God's call, the rising, attending, and listening set up the opportunity for the vertical dimension of God's work by the Holy Spirit. Arand continues, "Second, it accuses us and shows us our limitations and boundaries.... This prepares the way for the righteousness of faith."³⁴ When preacher and listener realize that their efforts to prepare and deliver and also to receive and ponder the word of God in the sermon are worked out on this horizontal plane, both preacher and listener will readily turn to the grace of Christ for healing of our

³² Charles P. Arand, "Moving Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Church and Ministry in the 21st Century" (unpublished paper, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, December 2001).

³³ Ibid., 2.

³⁴ Ibid.

inadequacies. And newly restored after the week's imperfect delivery and imperfect reception of the word, we will be energized for another effort on the horizontal level in the week ahead. We will gather again anticipating the unblemished work of the Spirit among us. We will be refreshed in the word of truth, and we will continue on until we stand in the presence of the Word in glory.

Arand gives us a helpful example when he discusses the place of reason in pastoral work. Here again the first article and third work together. We reject, he says, a "Gnostic disparagement" of the use of reason as a first article gift, but rather celebrate its use as God intended. Reason can have a ministerial use in the third article work of the Spirit. Grammar and vocables are tools for biblical study, for example, but not the power to help us understand what can only be spiritually discerned. "Similarly, rhetoric can serve the proclamation of the Gospel and render an audience willing to hear it, but rhetoric cannot create faith."³⁵ The active work of preacher and listener, to prepare and receive the sermon, are in the area of first article activity. They serve the reception of the gospel, but do not give it authority.

At some points in church history the use of rhetoric has been vehemently disavowed. The history of preaching from Augustine onward, however, has been a history of developing an understanding of how communication skills facilitate the proclamation and reception of the spoken word.³⁶ Arand concludes that this is entirely appropriate and should be expected in good Lutheran pastoral practice. "At their best, pastors will develop and utilize their first article gifts to serve the third article

³⁵ Ibid., 3.

³⁶ For a helpful summary of this history, see Glenn Nielsen, "No Longer Dinosaurs: Relating Lutheran Homiletics and Communication Practice," *Concordia Journal* 25:1, (January 1999): 15-17.

proclamation of the Gospel.... [L]earning the first article gift of rhetoric or communication can assist in the construction of a sermon that effectively conveys the Gospel into the lives of people."³⁷

Arand describes what Glenn Nielsen calls "the essential distinction: the means of grace and the use of the means of grace.... The preaching task includes the stewardship of Word and Sacraments for the congregation. And it is in the *use* of the means that communication theory and practice have a place."³⁸ The guiding principles that Nielsen offers for consideration are worthy of further study, for they offer preachers an appropriate balance and distinction between the efficacy of the means of grace and the usefulness of communication skills. For example, proposition #2, "Efficacy in matters spiritual is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, not communication skills,"³⁹ and proposition #5, "While ultimate responsibility for spiritual change is through the Gospel by the Holy Spirit, the preacher has penultimate responsibility for the use of the means of grace so that the sermon is heard, experienced and remembered."⁴⁰ When understood properly, our service in the realm of human righteousness, in response to God's imputed righteousness, can assist the listeners in their task.

The preacher's dual weekly challenge is on the one hand, faithfulness to the truth of the word of God so that it will be heard correctly and without error or confusion, and on the other hand, concern for the listeners, that the sermon be presented in a manner that

³⁷ Arand, 9.

³⁸ Nielsen, 18-19, author's emphasis.

³⁹ Ibid., 22

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27.

will be heard at all. In a related article, Nielsen ponders how contemporary Lutheran preachers might balance these two. While it is true, he says, that the power to work spiritual change is God's alone, and is worked through the means of grace,

At the same time, God has given those means to human agents to use for bringing Jesus to others. We are stewards of God's mysteries, and as such are to be effective in our communication processes so that the Gospel reaches people who are listening, meditating, inwardly digesting it rather than falling asleep or checking out the bulletin announcements for the third time.⁴¹

This is not a simple task. The preacher is well acquainted with the difficulties of communicating with the members of the congregation both by an awareness of his own weaknesses, and his awareness of theirs. As Nielsen puts it, "It is essential to pay attention to the anthropology of our hearers as both created (and therefore products of a culture) and redeemed (and therefore sinner and saint at the same time)."⁴²

The challenge of communicating clearly so listeners can engage in their task was a concern for the reformers. Contemporary homileticians have picked up that challenge. But the difficulty inherent to hearing the word is described first in the Old and New Testaments. The scriptures offer insight into the challenge of listening.

Scripture Study

Those Who Cannot Hear

Jesus and his disciples discussed the problem of hearing the word of God. On the great day of parables recorded in Matthew 13, they asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"⁴³ Jesus explained to them that only God himself by his special

⁴¹ Nielsen, "Identifying Authorities: Reaching Out to American Evangelicalism," (an unpublished symposium presentation, Concordia Seminary, 2003), 1.

⁴² Ibid., 9.

⁴³ Matt. 13:10.

revelation can make known the mysteries of his working in the human heart. Natural man cannot know the things of God. "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said, "but to them it has not been given."⁴⁴ The disciples should have expected this. Jesus explained that the unbelieving crowds had fulfilled the words of the prophet, quoting Isaiah 6:9-10:

You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes have been closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them."⁴⁵

The history of God's self-revelation is a history of those who hear and believe and of those who will not. Any study of the workings of the word of God in the lives of sinful humanity is grounded in the biblical understanding of the inability of humanity to know and understand truths about God and his kingdom without the working of the Holy Spirit.

While the preacher's task is clear proclamation of the revealed word, and the hearer's task is attentive listening, the impact of that word on the listener is the work of God. St. Paul wrote that he would never compromise or change the word,

but by open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.⁴⁶

Natural man in the unconverted state cannot know or understand the things of God. To the Jews Jesus said, "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot

⁴⁴ Matt. 13:11.

⁴⁵ Matt. 13:14-15.

⁴⁶ 2 Cor. 4:2-4.

bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil.... Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not of God."⁴⁷

Tragically, there will always be those among us do not hear the word and receive saving faith.

Faith to Hear: The Gift of God

And yet there are those who do hear and understand, for God has given the gift of open hearts and minds through the gift of faith. Paul had this prayer for the unbelieving Jews in Romans 10, desiring that they also would hear and believe. God alone can work such faith, as Paul affirms from the preaching of Isaiah: "I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me."⁴⁸ The listeners to sermons in the Christian congregation are those who have been called "out of darkness into his marvelous light"⁴⁹ and who by the grace of God "have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God."⁵⁰ It is the work of God in the conversion of the human heart that enables a sinful human being to hear and understand the word of the Lord.

The Believer's Struggle to Hear: Old Testament

Yet even where there is faith, the saints of God wrestle with the weakness of their sinful human nature that still clouds the communication of God in his word. The prophets of the old covenant fought an ongoing battle against the false prophets because the people were so easily led astray. Ezekiel charged that the false sense of security that

⁴⁷ Jn. 8:43-44, 47.

⁴⁸ Is. 65:1, quoted in Rom. 10:20.

⁴⁹ 1 Pt. 2:9.

⁵⁰ 1 Cor. 2:12.

had grown up among the people, for whom exile loomed large, was due to the false prophets. "[T]hey have misled my people, saying, 'Peace,' when there is no peace, and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear it with whitewash."⁵¹ The pitiable prophet Jeremiah labored with great anguish (and drama!) against Hananiah, the epitome of the false prophet Moses warned about in Deuteronomy 18. Jeremiah declared, "'Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie."⁵² The false prophets offered what sounded to the people like good preaching. They failed to discern the difference between truth and error, and the people of God under the old covenant, subject as they were to human frailty, were far too often and far too easily led astray from the truth.

The Believer's Struggle to Hear: Gospels

The New Testament writers were certainly aware of how hard it was for even the faithful to hear with understanding the word of the Lord. Peter's confession of faith in Mark 8 serves as the turning point for Mark's Gospel. The subsequent narrative illustrates the disciples' difficulty in hearing God's word for understanding. After hearing the apostle's profession of faith (a confession revealed by the Father, according to Jesus⁵³), Jesus announced his Passion, and directed the disciples toward Jerusalem and the cross. This confession and Jesus' subsequent predictions of the Passion are framed, very interestingly, by two healings of blind men. Each passion prediction by Jesus is followed by a narrative depicting the confusion among the disciples, evidence of the

⁵¹ Ezek. 13:10.

⁵² Jer. 28:15.

⁵³ Matt. 16:17.

difficulty they had in hearing Jesus' words with understanding. A closer examination of this journey narrative shows just how hard it was.

The sequence in Mark 8-10 makes a strong point about the disciples' inability to fully understand. At Bethsaida, Jesus healed a man of blindness, but the blind man is slow to see. The healing is granted in two stages, with the man describing his clouded vision before the second, complete healing.⁵⁴ Jesus then took the disciples to a remote place, asked them who the populace said that he was, and then who they themselves considered him to be. Peter made his profession of faith, speaking for the twelve.⁵⁵ Jesus immediately predicted his death, and was rebuked by a confused Peter, unable himself to hear and understand the words of Jesus clearly. Jesus then rebuked Peter.⁵⁶ In the subsequent narrative, the same sequence of prediction, confusion, and correction is repeated two more times.⁵⁷ The narrative of this journey to Jerusalem then concludes with the account of the healing of blind Bartimaeus in Jericho, and the words, "And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way."⁵⁸ The two healings demonstrate the followers' inability to hear, their "blindness," and the Lord's gracious gift of understanding. The disciples are slow to hear and understand, like the man healed in stages, but the Lord gives eyes to see.

Mark's Gospel continues with the passion narrative, but the response of the first disciples indicates once again how hard it was for even the faithful to hear the word with

⁵⁴ Mk. 8:22-26.

⁵⁵ Mk. 8:27-30.

⁵⁶ Mk. 8:31-38.

⁵⁷ Mk. 9:30-37 and 10:32-45.

⁵⁸ Mk. 10:52.

understanding. The most reliable manuscripts⁵⁹ indicate that the Gospel itself concludes with a statement of the disciples' continued confusion at the angels' reports of the Lord's resurrection. When they left the tomb, "trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."⁶⁰ Even the disciples of the Lord, having professed faith in Jesus as the Christ, were slow to understand the words of Jesus.

The Believer's Struggle to Hear: Paul's Epistles

God the Holy Spirit established Christian congregations through the preaching of the missionaries and the Apostle Paul. In the Acts accounts, it is sometimes mentioned that the new believers rejoiced especially for the gift of the word of God the master teacher had planted among them and that the churches continued to grow and flourish.⁶¹ It was not long, however, before Paul was forced to confront the way some of the churches had left the orthodox teaching upon which their faith had been established. To the Colossians he wrote, "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head."⁶² Similar warnings are found in most of Paul's letters,⁶³ but nowhere more forcefully than in the letter to the Galatians.

The apostle is horrified that the believers in Christ in the Galatian churches would so quickly be led astray because of their undiscerning listening to preaching in the

⁵⁹ See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1975), 122-126.

⁶⁰ Mk. 16:8.

⁶¹ See, for example, Ac. 13:48; 17:11; 19:10; 19:20.

⁶² Col. 2:18-19.

⁶³ See for example Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Th. 5:20-21; 2 Th. 2:2; 1 Tim. 1:3f; 2 Tim. 4:3f; Tit. 1:14.

church. Paul's first words after the opening salutation show his great dismay over their error. False teachers had arisen in their midst, and the Galatians deserted the gospel of Christ for "a different gospel," a message that is "contrary to the one [they] received."⁶⁴ The rest of the letter can be read as an instruction by the apostle on how the Christians of the Galatian churches can guard their faith and receive the powerful working of the Holy Spirit through their discerning, perceptive listening to the word of God, preached in its truth and purity.

Paul begins his instruction with a defense of his call as an apostle to preach the gospel of Christ, a call and a gospel that were not from men but from God.⁶⁵ Chapter two continues with a further defense of his authority and a clear articulation of the gospel of the cross of Christ.⁶⁶ In chapter three the apostle addresses the matter of the inadequate listening of the Galatians.

As with his predecessors who preached the covenant love of God before Christ, the teaching of the false prophets who had invaded the community of faith clouded Paul's delivery of the truth of the gospel. "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"⁶⁷ As in days of old, the error of reliance upon the works of the flesh had gained a popular hearing among the people, and this, even in the light of the clear proclamation of the grace of Christ displayed on the cross.⁶⁸ By use of a strongly worded rhetorical question, Paul challenges the Galatians to remember how it was that they first came to faith: "Let

⁶⁴ Gal. 1:6, 9.

⁶⁵ Gal. 5:12, 15-16.

⁶⁶ Gal. 2:1-21.

⁶⁷ Gal. 3:1. See also Paul's curse upon the false prophets in 5:7-12.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?"⁶⁹ Their own original profession of faith was a testimony to the work of the Spirit that comes not by their own efforts, but by the preaching of the word, heard by the gift of faith.

Paul is terribly dismayed that after such a wonderful beginning to their life with God in Christ, they would so quickly be led astray. How could they fall into the trap set by preachers among them who spoke a different gospel? Their conversion was a work of God the Holy Spirit. Would not also their sanctification be the work of God? And would not that work be accomplished through the preaching of the word? "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?... Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith - just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'?"⁷⁰ The Galatians wandered from the truth of the gospel to a righteousness by works of the flesh simply because they failed to be careful listeners to the word that was preached among them.

The apostle's response lays a foundation for the major emphasis of this project. Having so clearly outlined the enormity of their need, Paul uses the rest of the epistle to instruct the Galatians in how to listen to the word of God when it is proclaimed among them, whether by himself or any other preacher in their midst. The teaching section at 3:7 begins with the imperative, *ginoskete ara*, "know then..." It is critical to Paul that the listeners in these Christian congregations know how God is at work in the ministry of the

⁶⁹ Gal. 3:2.

⁷⁰ Gal. 3:3, 5-6.

word and that they understand how to listen carefully to the word, weeding out error from truth. How could they become such discerning listeners to the word? In this case, Paul recognizes that the solution for the Galatians is instruction on the proper distinction between law and gospel.

His course of instruction continues through the rest of chapter three and on through the end of the epistle. It includes exposition of specific texts from the Old Testament scriptures,⁷¹ the example given from biblical narratives,⁷² an appeal to their own relationship to the apostle,⁷³ and clear and forceful pastoral admonition to stay true to the gospel.⁷⁴ His final warning, written in his own hand, is one last appeal and instruction to test everything they have heard and will continue to hear by the only measure and standard of the faith that matters, the cross of Christ.⁷⁵

This letter to the Galatians gives to the Church an example of solid teaching by a minister of the gospel to counteract the natural tendency of even the redeemed saints of the Lord to wander from the truth and to be "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."⁷⁶ That same effort remains a priority for all ministers of the word to this day.

⁷¹ Dt. 27:26, Hab. 2:4, Lev. 18:5 and Dt. 21:23 are all discussed in Gal. 3:10-13.

⁷² The promise to Abraham in Gen. 13 and 17 (Gal. 3:15f.), and the conflict between Hagar and Sarah in Gen. 16 and 21 (Gal. 4:21f) are examples.

⁷³ Gal. 4:8-20.

⁷⁴ Gal. 5:1-26.

⁷⁵ Gal. 6:11-16.

⁷⁶ Eph. 4:14.

The Importance of Hearing

The scriptures clearly teach the importance of hearing the word, first of all for conversion. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."⁷⁷ Life with God by faith comes only by the work of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. It is impossible to know God through faith in Christ except by the saving message of the life, death and resurrection of Christ the Son of God.

Hearing in the Christian Life

The Christian after his or her conversion also needs daily and weekly renewal in grace and nourishment in the word of God. Our Lord concluded his Sermon on the Mount with a clear admonition to faithful hearing and response. "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock."⁷⁸ Hearing and keeping the word results in preservation from every danger, wind, and flood that would beset a believer. For this reason Paul encouraged Timothy saying, "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching,"⁷⁹ which ultimately would save both Timothy "and your hearers."⁸⁰

The word of God in the life of a Christian is so important because it is in the daily renewal of God's grace that we live the fullness of the Christian life. As sinners under the judgment of God, Christians need continual reminders of their need for the Lord's grace that is found in the message of the law. And since the law can never save or grant remission of sins, the word of the gospel of Christ must be placed perpetually before

⁷⁷ Rom. 1:16. See also 1 Cor. 1: 18, 24.

⁷⁸ Matt. 7:24.

⁷⁹ 1 Tim. 4:13.

⁸⁰ 1 Tim. 4:16.

believers. The scriptures bring Christ because, as Jesus said, "it is they that bear witness to me."⁸¹ In the proclaimed word of grace, the Church is daily renewed for, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."⁸²

The Berean converts set an example for the entire Christian Church. "[T]hey received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."⁸³ Christians are people of the word, for by the hearing of the word, they are transformed, filled by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁴ The ministry of the word in the world is not just for the salvation of the unconverted, but also for the ongoing work of God in the lives of the saints. This work of God is broad and deep, touching every part of the sanctified life in Christ.

A complete analysis of the working of God's word in a believer is beyond the scope of this project, but the goals of preaching in a Christian congregation certainly include the imparting of wisdom,⁸⁵ the strengthening of faith,⁸⁶ growth toward maturity in faith,⁸⁷ and preparation for spiritual warfare.⁸⁸ Sermons in the local congregation attempt to meet these objectives by proclaiming the word in ways the people can readily hear and attend to.

⁸¹ Jn. 5:39.

⁸² Rom. 10:17.

⁸³ Ac. 17:11.

⁸⁴ Gal. 3:5.

⁸⁵ Ps. 19:7.

⁸⁶ Rom. 16:25.

⁸⁷ Col. 1:28.

⁸⁸ Eph. 6:17.

The Hearable Word of God: God Who Speaks

The Living God is one who communicates to humanity, his special creation, made in his own image with the capacity to hear with understanding.⁸⁹ The history of God's people is, to a great extent, the history of his communication to them. The prologue to Hebrews, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,"⁹⁰ is a brief summary of God's saving work through the covenant people leading to his self-revelation in his Son, Jesus the Christ.⁹¹ The holy scriptures of the Church are the written record of a portion of that communication, given by God⁹² for the benefit of his people.⁹³ It is not always clear what the phrase, "The word of the Lord came to [the prophet]" means precisely, or how that word came, but the fact that God does indeed speak in rational, hearable fashion is evident from the biblical narrative. At the Mount of Transfiguration, "a voice came out of the cloud, 'This is my beloved Son; listen to him.'"⁹⁴ When Paul recounted his conversion on the Damascus road to King Agrippa, he made it clear that the God of heaven and earth spoke to him in clear, understandable language: "And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me *in the Hebrew language*..."⁹⁵ God's word to humans, spoken directly to his

⁸⁹ The creation narrative in Genesis is explicitly clear in describing the communication between Yahweh, the Creator, and Adam and Eve, his creation. See Gen. 1:28; 2:16; 3:9-13; 3:16; 3:17f.

⁹⁰ Heb. 1:1.

⁹¹ Heb. 1:2.

⁹² 2 Pt. 1:21.

⁹³ 2 Tim. 3:16-17.

⁹⁴ Mk. 9:7. See also Matt. 17:5; Lk. 9:35.

⁹⁵ Ac. 26:14, emphasis added.

prophets and apostles, and written in the scriptures, is a hearable, understandable word, as Paul's epistles repeatedly affirm.

Forms of Communication: Old Testament

The scriptures are a library of written communication, given by God the Holy Spirit through the inspired writers, and delivered to God's people over the course of many centuries. The biblical writings were offered in a wide variety of forms, using the depth and richness of God's gift of language, all for the sake of good hearing.⁹⁶ The books of Exodus and Jonah represent narrative forms, where the message is contained in the story itself, as the people of God walk sometimes by faith, sometimes by the leading of their sinful flesh, always under the providence and grace of Yahweh. The Lord reveals his working in the world as the story is told, as the narrative with its many twists and turns unfold. The literary frameworks and patterns of the Genesis creation narrative offer an aid to memory for the many generations of those who would hear and understand what it teaches about their Creator God.

The Law codes of the Old Testament, particularly in the Pentateuch, are a special form of God making himself accessible to the people, establishing the patterns of behavior that are the appropriate response to his grace, "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."⁹⁷ Moses is the mediator of this word, and it is given in simple and direct fashion for the newly formed free nation of Israel to hear and to understand.

⁹⁶ The division of Old Testament forms in this section is taken from a course of study at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, DM-927, July 2002, by Dr. Paul Raabe.

⁹⁷ Ex. 20:2.

Imagery is a use of language that "talks of reality 'A' in terms of reality 'B'."⁹⁸ As much as forty percent of the Old Testament is poetic in form, and heavily draws on metaphor and simile. The parable of two eagles and a vine in Ezekiel 17 is an example of an extended use of imagery. Shorter uses of images to strike the imaginations of the hearers for clarity and deeper understanding are found throughout the Old Testament. When the prophet Amos begins his oracle, "The Lord roars from Zion... the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers,"⁹⁹ he speaks a whole story in one verse, and with great passion. The repeated use of such imagery is for the benefit of the hearing of the community.

The Psalms are a collection of the faith speech of the covenant people, given in a variety of forms, including intercession and lament. Wisdom literature that teaches God's people skill in everyday living is written in different voices so that the hearers will gain a fuller understanding of life in the kingdom of God. Derek Kidner in *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job*¹⁰⁰ uses the biblically based analogy of a house to describe the differences. In his view, Proverbs presents an ideal, a kind of seven-pillared mansion of how life works when all goes according to plan. Job is a house blown over, explaining to the audience that while the Proverbs are true, life is often more complex than simple. Ecclesiastes is a house slowly decaying. Its harsh and realistic message is set against that of the Proverbs, so that, as iron sharpens iron, those who wrestle with the whole message

⁹⁸ Raabe, course notes.

⁹⁹ Am. 1:2.

¹⁰⁰ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985).

of the wisdom literature will find a complete revelation from God about life in the kingdom during the age of suffering and cross.¹⁰¹

Prophetic Patterns of Speech

In the prophetic writings we find some of the most creative forms of communication in the scriptures. Some of the forms follow established formulas, such as that of the "*rib*" or "covenant lawsuit" used, for example, in Isaiah 1. The "messenger speech" delivered against either an individual or the nation also follows a set pattern of an initial vocative, the speech of reproach, the messenger formula "Thus says Yahweh," and the proclamation of doom.¹⁰² Isaiah also gives us examples of a love song, a funeral dirge, and a taunt.¹⁰³

The prophets' uses of the visual and the dramatic also give evidence of the Lord's desire that the people see and hear his message with understanding. There seems almost no limit to which the Lord would direct their behaviors to communicate the message. Jeremiah's yoke, worn before the false prophet Hananiah,¹⁰⁴ and Ezekiel's outlandish behavior depicting the coming doom of Jerusalem¹⁰⁵ are good examples. The Old Testament is presented in a wide variety of forms for the sake of the reception of the message by those who hear.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰² Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 1979), 170.

¹⁰³ Is. 4, 14 and 47, noted in Hummel.

¹⁰⁴ Jer. 28.

¹⁰⁵ See Ezek. 4 and 5.

Forms of Communication: New Testament

The apostolic writings of the New Testament also represent a wide variety of forms of communication. Once again, the Holy Spirit, working through the chosen writers, speaks to the Church in literature presented for the clear hearing and understanding of the audience, both Church and world.

The Gospel form itself is a unique kind of writing, presenting more than just historical narrative. The four Gospels do indeed present the historical facts of the life and passion of Jesus the Christ, "But their interest and intent are not merely historical; they do not aim merely at reconstructing a piece of the past. For them history is the dress in which the Messiah of God is clothed in order that He may be revealed and may enter men's lives as the present and potent Christ."¹⁰⁶ John specifically tells his audience, "these [signs of Jesus] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."¹⁰⁷ A Gospel account of the Master's saving work is written with the clear intent that people would hear and believe.

Jesus himself, the *logos* of God, the "word made flesh,"¹⁰⁸ spoke and taught with the listeners in mind. While sometimes in his perfect wisdom Jesus spoke the secrets of the kingdom only to the elect, keeping them hidden from the hard of heart,¹⁰⁹ he spoke so people would understand. Jesus entered into the life situation of the hearers and spoke clearly and directly. To the paralytic and the attending crowd at Capernaum he said, "But

¹⁰⁶ Martin H. Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 171.

¹⁰⁷ Jn. 20:31.

¹⁰⁸ Jn. 1:14.

¹⁰⁹ See Matt. 13:10f.

that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins... I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home."¹¹⁰ The word of God is spoken into a real life situation with clarity and intent. Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman in a conversation that not only caught her attention, but also revealed her hunger for the message of the kingdom. She said, "I know that Messiah is coming.... When he comes, he will tell us all things" to which Jesus responded, "I who speak to you am he."¹¹¹ Jesus' concern to be heard is a continual theme of the Gospels, and he utilizes many different ways of communicating, among them extended dialog,¹¹² leading questions,¹¹³ teaching discourse¹¹⁴ and of course, the parables.¹¹⁵ Our Lord wanted the good news of the kingdom to be heard and understood, and to that end he spoke so that, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."¹¹⁶

New Testament Writings

While it would be most helpful to study the preaching of the apostles, only small portions or summaries of their preaching are found in the New Testament. The apostolic writers did, however, carry the Lord's same passion to be heard and understood into their

¹¹⁰ Mk. 2:10-11.

¹¹¹ Jn. 4:25-26.

¹¹² The rich young man in Mk. 10 and Nicodemus in Jn. 3.

¹¹³ To the Pharisees, "Which of you, having a son or an ox..." Lk. 14:5.

¹¹⁴ Matt. 5-7; Jn. 14-16.

¹¹⁵ For example, Matt. 13.

¹¹⁶ Matt. 7:28-29.

written messages to the Church. Luke's prologue to the Gospel exemplifies this. He wanted Theophilus to "have certainty concerning the things" he was taught.¹¹⁷

The writers of the New Testament epistles were also creative in their passionate communication of the word of the Lord. The writers often modified the accepted format of letters in the ancient world. Thomas Long observes, "Such changes were often due to the fact that these letters were shaped by the content and character of the Christian faith."¹¹⁸ These were more than letters, and the writers had more to communicate than just information, so this distinctive form developed for the sake of the hearing of the word and influenced Christian communication for centuries.¹¹⁹

St. Paul showed a tremendous diversity in his style and tone of writing, depending upon the need of the hearers and the nature of the message being communicated. When relaying doctrinal truth, he was organized, sequential and dogmatic, as in the Epistle to the Romans, frequently using rhetorical questions¹²⁰ and climactic transitions.¹²¹ At times, Paul's writing was lyrical and poetic, as when he wrote to the Corinthians about the love of God, *agape*, in 1 Corinthians 13. And in his very brief, but deeply personal letter to Philemon, Paul pours out his heart using every creative argument at his disposal to

¹¹⁷ Lk. 1:4.

¹¹⁸ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 110-111.

¹¹⁹ Long quotes William Doty, "[The epistles] were the model for early Christian literature in ways that the gospels and histories could not be, and the line of generic contact continued from Paul down through the encyclicals and papal letters of subsequent generations." William H. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 19.

¹²⁰ For example, Rom. 2:17:20; 3:1; 4:1; 6:1; 8:31.

¹²¹ See the use of *ouv*, "Therefore..." in Rom. 2:1; 5:1; 5:12; 8:1.

convince his friend to do the right thing. The letter was written to be heard and taken to heart.¹²²

The Work of the Word in the Lutheran Confessions

The focus of this project is the work of the word in the listeners to sermons within the context of a local congregation. The Lutheran Confessions and other theological writings will help lay the foundation for this work.

Preachers who proclaim the scriptures want listeners to "hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them."¹²³ This next section will consider what insights the confessional writings offer on the work of the Holy Spirit when the word is proclaimed, and what role, if any, the listener plays in the sanctified life of hearing the word. Eugene Peterson summarized the challenge that faces the preacher when he wrote,

Soon or late, we realize that it is not enough to get the nouns and verbs right, to explain the articles of the Creed adequately, to present God revealed in Jesus truly and well. We also have to deal with ears and eyes, hearts and minds, kidneys and feet - all these organs of human receptivity and response, most of which seem to be malfunctioning in some way or other most of the time. We find ourselves in the thick of what our ancestors were apt to designate *ascetical* theology, the wisdom/knowledge in preparing, cultivating, correcting our human condition for an adequate response to the revelation of God.¹²⁴

Lutheran theology places this work of the preacher within the context of the work of the Spirit that happens whenever the word is taught in the Church.

¹²² For a more detailed study of Philemon see Appendix A.

¹²³ "Collect for the Word" *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 14.

¹²⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Subversive Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 81.

Preaching and the Church

"It is also taught among us that the one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."¹²⁵ As a member congregation of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, Mount Calvary Lutheran has identified itself with Christian congregations throughout the ages who are committed to faithfully displaying the outward signs of orthodoxy, including faithful proclamation of the word. The congregation has, according to the custom of the church, called me to fill the office of Pastor and to rightly administer the word and sacraments that God might work in us and in all people so that we receive the gift of saving faith in Jesus Christ. This is also spoken of in the Augsburg Confession. "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel."¹²⁶ The gift of faith is accredited to the Spirit, and not the preacher.

This clear biblical teaching is repeatedly affirmed in the Confessions, as is the doctrine that the preaching office has been established for the imparting of these gifts. "These gifts cannot be obtained except through the office of preaching and of administering the holy sacraments, for St. Paul says, 'The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith'."¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Tappert, 32.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 82, quoting Rom. 1.16.

The preaching office is essential to the work of the Church for, as the Smalcald Articles state, "we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts."¹²⁸ In this matter of imparting saving faith, God works through means, through a word that is spoken and also heard. Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile who awaited the coming Messiah but as yet had no saving faith, is given as an example: "he could not have believed and been justified if the Word and his hearing of it had not preceded... Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament."¹²⁹ There is a hearing by the unregenerate, but the work of faith that is God's alone is performed through a ministry of word and sacrament.

The whole evangelical church in the 1580 Formula of Concord affirmed what Luther presented in these articles in 1537. In the Solid Declaration discussion of Free Will, the error of the enthusiasts who reject the necessity of hearing the external word is refuted. The Formula soundly decries the teaching that "God converts man through the Holy Spirit without any means or created instruments (that is, without the external preaching and hearing of the Word of God)."¹³⁰ Fallen man remains lost, "until by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the Word which is preached and heard, purely out of grace and without any cooperation on his part, he is converted."¹³¹ Through the word

¹²⁸ Ibid., 312.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 313.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 520.

¹³¹ Ibid., 521.

proclaimed (and notice how the confessors emphasize the word “heard”), God is at work in human hearts.

When, however, the Confessions speak of the continued strengthening of faith in the life of the converted, there is an enabling participation by the people of God in availing themselves of the word of God so that the Spirit might do his work. In this same section of the Solid Declaration we read,

And after God, through the Holy Spirit in Baptism, has kindled and wrought a beginning of true knowledge of God and faith, we ought to petition him incessantly that by the same Spirit and grace, through daily exercise in reading his Word and putting it into practice, he would preserve faith and his heavenly gifts in us and strengthen us daily until our end.¹³²

There is a "daily exercise" of the people of God, an activity on their part that, in and of itself works nothing, but by exposure to the word, invites the Spirit's work.

Luther had this in mind when he commanded such daily exercise in his exposition of the third commandment in the Large Catechism.

Remember, then, that you must be concerned not only about hearing the Word but also about learning and retaining it. Do not regard it as an optional or unimportant matter.... In the same way, those conceited fellows should be chastised who, after hearing a sermon or two, become sick and tired of it and feel that they know it all.... Therefore you must continually keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit.¹³³

It is this call to "seriously ponder" the word as preached in the Sunday sermon that this project has attempted to enable among the people at Mount Calvary.

¹³² Ibid., 523.

¹³³ Ibid., 378-379.

Only the Holy Spirit works the wonders of maturity in the faith, or sanctification, but the saints play a part, although it is a part never equated to the work of God. Francis Pieper explains it this way: "[I]n this work of sanctification the Christian also plays a part. In conversion man merely experiences the working of God (*pure passive se habet*), but in sanctification the Christian plays an active role; he co-operates (*active se habet sive co-operatur*)" in a work that is "always and fully subordinated to God's activity."¹³⁴ Pieper also quotes the Formula which states: "[I]t is certain that we can and must cooperate by the power of the Holy Spirit, even though we do so in great weakness."¹³⁵ As weak as it may be, this cooperation is part of the life of good works that result in benefits to the Christian. The Lutheran Confessions repeatedly and consistently affirm the exclusive working of the Holy Spirit in making the word efficacious. They also teach and affirm the enabling cooperation of the saints as they turn heart and mind to the word.

¹³⁴ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 14.

¹³⁵ Tappert, 534.

CHAPTER THREE

CONSIDERING THE LISTENER TO SERMONS: CURRENT TRENDS IN HOMILETICS

The Challenge of Listening

Ronald Allen said that most of the literature on homiletics is preachers talking to other preachers about preaching.¹³⁶ Outside of the obligatory chapter, or less, on the listener, the great bulk of work in homiletics gives little attention to the challenges of listening to sermons.

Some writers, however, do recognize that listening to sermons is becoming increasingly difficult. David Mulder, in *Narrative Preaching*, relates the common experience of preachers who realize one day that the congregation is listening, but not hearing. Words are spoken, but are listeners able to relate back to the preacher what they have heard or the difference it has made?¹³⁷ Mulder believes that the obstacles to preaching that results in good hearing are numerous: "the familiarity of the Gospel; the strangeness of the biblical worldview; the distance between the pulpit and the pew; the emphasis on rational argument; and an oral medium in a visual context."¹³⁸ This list and others that could be developed show that the art of listening is challenged from many fronts. Listeners to sermons have a difficult task.

David Schlafer digs a little deeper into the culture of our churches that may have contributed to the challenge. He suggests that the problem lies within the listeners who have not been prepared to hear, or even worse, have been conditioned not to hear.

¹³⁶ See Chapter 1, note 3.

¹³⁷ David Mulder, *Narrative Preaching* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 26.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 28. Mulder credits the work of Bruce Salmon, *Storytelling in Preaching: A Guide to the Theory and Practice* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 16-21.

Perhaps responsibility for dissatisfaction with preaching lies as much with those who sit in the pew as it does with those who mount the pulpit. Many listeners are as poorly prepared to hear sermons, as many preachers are to preach them. The effects of a 'Sesame Street,' sound-byte video culture are pervasive. Attention spans are short, critical reasoning skills are limited. The level of biblical and ecclesiastical illiteracy is decreasing among those to whom preaching is addressed. Older church members may have been raised on Bible stories, rigorous confirmation classes, and a regular rhythm of church-related activities; the learning environments of many younger members are both less regimented, and less graced.¹³⁹

The forces that contribute to the challenges in listening are forces from without and from within. Schlafer helps identify the problem, but sadly, his book offers little useful remedy.

Fred Craddock also puts the responsibility to hear on the listener, but blames the preaching that has conditioned them to be desensitized to the gospel. In *Overhearing the Gospel*, he draws the parallel between the contemporary challenge and the challenge Jesus faced.

[I]n a context of long tradition, common assumptions, and high predictability in messages, there is large room for the illusion of participation where little or none exists. Many who say, 'Here we go again' have not in fact ever gone before... And the task of any communicator who would seek to shatter this illusion is made doubly difficult by the fact that victims of an illusion do not realize they are victims.¹⁴⁰

Great numbers of our listeners have the same long traditions and bring their expectations of predictability into the pew on Sunday. Craddock says that when they look to the pulpit, having already agreed in advance of hearing, "they do not hear... [T]hey too are victims, not of darkness, but of constant exposure to the same kind of light. They too have a right to hear what they have not heard, see what they have not

¹³⁹ Schlafer, 6-7.

¹⁴⁰ Fred B Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel: Preaching and Teaching the Faith to Those Who Have Already Heard* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 26.

seen, understand what they have not known."¹⁴¹ The listeners do face challenges and the preacher is in the best position to address those challenges. Craddock suggests that the preacher's intention must be to draw the listener in, by one means or another, to the active listening process.¹⁴² The preaching and the listening is a cooperative effort. All involved have one intention, that the word proclaimed is truly heard.

Communication Theory

Social scientists are continually at work in search of an answer to the question, "What is communication?" The area of study is vast and a detailed reflection is beyond the scope of this project, but a cursory understanding of communication theory would be helpful for preachers. In contemporary society, issues such as meaning, authority and truth are debated and different opinions are offered which can lead to confusion by speakers and listeners about just what is happening.

One helpful analysis of communication looks at behaviors from the source of the information transmitted (for the purpose of our study, the preacher), and the behaviors of the receivers, the listeners to sermons.¹⁴³ Sources of information (e.g. preachers) deliver messages in both verbal and non-verbal fashion. Non-verbal messages may be given intentionally or non-intentionally; a "pregnant pause" or a hand gesture may be intentional, while a facial expression reflecting deep emotion may be unintentional, but a

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁴² In the cited work, Craddock suggests preaching not directly at the listener, but telling stories that are at some "distance" from the listener and letting them "overhear" what is happening. As a listener, he wants you to recognize that, "You are sitting in on something that is of such significance that it could have gone on without you" *ibid.*, 122. The listener is then engaged in an active participation by reaching to overcome the distance, to bridge the gap between what has applied to someone else and how it might impact his own life.

¹⁴³ This analysis of communication is outlined in Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999), 7-9.

message nonetheless. So a sender of information delivers it in three ways, unintentional behavior, intentional non-verbals and intentional verbal messages.

From the receiver's end, there are likewise three responses. A listener might not receive the information at all. He or she might receive it incidentally, that is, hear or recognize the behavior without giving it conscious thought or recognition. He or she might receive the message and attend to it in an active way. The matrix of sender's and receiver's behaviors shows the behaviors between sender and receiver that might potentially be called communication.¹⁴⁴ The listener might not ever receive the words spoken by the preacher. An inadequate sound system, noisy children, or the preacher's own poor diction might be the cause. The words spoken are just not heard. The words spoken might be received incidentally, that is, the listener physically hears the words, but they are not recognized or attended to because his or her mind may have wandered off to other thoughts. Ideally, the words spoken are actually heard and attended to.

The same applies to intentional non-verbals. Gestures, pauses, facial expressions might not be seen or heard at all, they may be seen but not attended to, or they may be received with the full impact with which they were given. And the unintentional messages sent, the twinkle of an eye, the cracking of a voice with emotion, might also be missed completely, received but not noticed, or fully attended to.

While communication theorists debate which of these nine possible behaviors between senders and receivers do or do not constitute real communication, those who proclaim the gospel desire that those who are listening truly hear and attend to the

¹⁴⁴ See Appendix A.

message, its verbals, its non-verbals, and the passion and spirit with which the message is delivered.

The study of communication recognizes that both sender and receiver of messages are involved in making communication happen. This principle applies also to the interpretation of biblical texts, and by extension, to the interpretation of the exposition of those texts. When outlining the principles of biblical interpretation, James Voelz makes a point of discussing the role of the hearer as a kind of "second text."

The most basic interpretation of a text, what Voelz calls "Level 1," is the sense of a text based upon the clearest understanding of the words given, the simple meaning of the signifiers on the written page. But a deeper level of understanding comes from an interpretation of other signifiers that go deeper than the words on the page, the nonverbal indicators, "things, actions, situations, attitudes, etc." that are also communicated. He uses an example from Luke 9:1, "And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases." Beyond the simple fact of the imparting of these gifts, this verse also tells us of the nature of the kingdom of God present in the ministry and person of Jesus. The apostles were participants in that kingdom and power. These matters, while not stated, are to be understood by the reader.¹⁴⁵ This is a work of active participation by the reader, bringing all of his or her uniqueness as a person to bear on the task.

"A reader/receptor is herself a complex of beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, ideas, experiences, etc. When she interprets, these are brought into connection with the text as interpretation takes place and proceeds... **She is, as it were, a 'text' herself - a complementary 'second text,'** which is always a factor in textual interpretation. Therefore - and this is the basic point - **the interpretation of any**

¹⁴⁵ James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean?: Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 156-157.

given text involves, in actual fact, two texts - the given or 'target' text (e.g., the book of Galatians), and, a part of the matrix for understanding the target text... the so-called 'second text' of the interpreter.¹⁴⁶

The essence of communication involves both sender and receiver of information, the intent of the sender and the manner in which the receiver filters the message through personal knowledge, ideas, and experiences.

Theology of the Spoken Word

Those in the church with a high regard for the inspiration and efficacy of the word of God are always interested in current study and reflection on the working of the proclaimed word in worship. One such study recently published is *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation*, by Charles Bartow.¹⁴⁷ The author addresses several fundamental questions about the public proclamation of God's word. What can the assembled body of Christ expect when gathered as a community around the proclamation of the word of God? In the reading and exposition of scripture, what forces are at play? How can hearers of the word recognize and be attentive to the authoritative word when proclaimed?

From the first page, Bartow firmly establishes the authority of the proclaimed word in the operation of God himself, active and speaking among his people. The call of the prophets of old, "Hear the Word of God!" says Bartow, is not some vague encouragement to listen to see if God is speaking. It is the call of God to his people who have always listened because they have always known that he speaks. And when he speaks, his word is an active, creative force. "So we speak [the call to hear] not simply to

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 208-209, (author's emphasis).

¹⁴⁷ Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).

urge people to do their best to make something of what we are about to say. More importantly, we speak it to alert people to the fact that, with what we are about to say, God is about to make something of them."¹⁴⁸ The power of the word to change those who hear is the creative power of the Creator himself. We should, by the way, keep this foundational premise of Bartow's theology of the word in mind when we later examine his understanding of the role of the listener in bringing meaning to the sermon.

After an extended discussion of the reading of scripture in the congregation, Bartow discusses the nature of preaching. First of all, preaching is narrational, that is, it reflects the encounter that the preacher has had with the world of the text during his preparatory study. Preaching is also discursive and expository. It offers an explanation of the significance of that encounter of text and preacher in the context of the confessional, creedal tradition of the Christian church. But there is more. For Bartow, preaching is also dialogical. "It sustains awareness throughout of the presence of God in Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, with preachers and their congregants... For God is truly present in preaching, whether preachers and their congregants in fact take cognizance of God's presence or not."¹⁴⁹ When the word is expounded in the church, according to the biblical witness and the doctrine of the church, God is addressing human listeners in their own human speech. Preaching is the work of God among and in his people.

How does God speak? Bartow does an analysis of God's use of language forms, such as oxymoron, metaphor, and metonymy, in order to communicate the mysteries of

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 108.

the kingdom to us. God is hidden, and his self-revelation is never exhaustive, but it is understandable.¹⁵⁰ God speaks intelligible speech, and yet his communication strangely begins in silence. The psalms of lament cry, "How long?" As Jesus was silent before Pilate, so also the Lord of heaven is sometimes silent before all of humanity. In that silence we recognize our despair and our great need for a word, a word of comfort and hope, but we are confronted with "the terrifying silence of Calvary when everybody except God seems to have something to say."¹⁵¹ Passersby deride Christ on the cross. The chief priests and scribes mock him and even those crucified with him join in the taunts,¹⁵² and God is silent. But the silence is only the pause before God speaks, like the tomb before the resurrection, and the silence brings the ears of humanity to attention. God will speak. He speaks into the silence caused by our despair, or as a Lutheran might express it, the silence brought by the condemnation of the law.

This silence sets the stage for the human encounter with the divine. "Dialogue in preaching consequently requires not a multiplication of speakers, but a multiplication of listeners. Preachers themselves are listeners who speak to facilitate the listening of other people's listening."¹⁵³ To the painful and piercing questions of our existence, known naturally and by revelation of God's law, God speaks a word of gospel healing and hope. Bartow reminds us that crucifixion always precedes resurrection, and it is crucifixion that makes humans into attentive listeners.

¹⁵⁰ The full discussion is found in Bartow, Chapter 1, "Hear the Word of God!," 9-24.

¹⁵¹ Bartow, 110.

¹⁵² Mark 15:29-34.

¹⁵³ Bartow, 111-112.

And so preaching is the work of God. It is the risen Christ among the people. "[Preaching] is not a 'real absence' as a wag once spoke of Zwingli's doctrine of Christ in the sacrament, but a real presence."¹⁵⁴ And real human speech is the manner in which God has chosen to reveal himself and be truly present among us.

[R]evelation is a felt action upon and within us mediated by human speech. It is a statement made. It is a story told. It is a poem sung. God in Christ, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, with the words of Scripture, and by means of duly called and installed ministers of word and sacrament, gives the church something to believe and to do and to say.¹⁵⁵

God made us people of language and he brings himself to us in that language, in human speech we can hear and understand and to which we can respond.

God's revelation of himself reaches its pinnacle in the Incarnation. Christ Jesus is the heart of both God's revelatory activity and all human endeavors to make him known. As Bartow says, "Jesus Christ is therefore not only the definitive locus of *actio divina*. He is also the locus of *homo performans*."¹⁵⁶ It is in keeping with God's will that his self-revelation would be made known among all people by the actions of his called ambassadors. "Where *homo performans* meets *actio divina* there is a conflagration of love. We call it preaching."¹⁵⁷ Thus Bartow gives the preaching of the word and the listening to and hearing of that word, an exalted position in the affairs of the world. The chapter on the human effort of preaching is entitled, "A Conflagration of Love." Preaching is God at work in the strivings of the called preachers of the church for the benefit of those who long to hear.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 95, author's italics.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 96.

Because preaching speaks into the longing silence experienced by the listeners, preaching is a pastoral act. Since preaching is an act of love, the love of God and preacher for the people, it finds ways to communicate that will be heard by even the simplest of listeners. As Bartow says with a brilliant turn of phrase, pastoral preaching "knows how to call a spade a shovel."¹⁵⁸ This call to make the word hearable should not be surprising to preachers. It's what God has done in his own revelation, accommodating himself to our modes of hearing and understanding. Bartow cautions preachers, "To accommodate one's preaching to one's congregants therefore is not a betrayal of the gospel. It is instead a mark of fidelity to the gospel. Sermon design, diction, and delivery are undertaken to facilitate congregants' hearing of God's word. Consequently, they cannot be undertaken without sensitivity to how congregants actually listen."¹⁵⁹ This understanding naturally leads to Bartow's discussion of the role of the listener in hearing the sermon and being actively involved in the sermon experience.

Anyone who has listened to a sermon knows that when the preacher stirs the hearts and imaginations of listeners with a particularly moving insight, one that runs closely parallel with their previous experience or need, the hearers will engage in thoughtful reflection that causes them to disengage from the sermon itself. Wise preachers recognize this kind of dialog between preacher and listener, and will attempt to

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 107.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 116. Bartow here makes reference to the work of Nora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). Tisdale addresses the often unrecognized "gap between the pew and the pulpit" (xii) and encourages what she calls congregational "exegesis," an effort by the preacher to become acquainted with the subcultures to which the listeners belong. The hoped for result is a sermon that takes into account both text and context, scripture and congregation, and blends them into a "dance" by the efforts of the preacher's imagination (121). The preacher is not just dancer, in her analogy, but also choreographer, inviting the congregation to encounter text and context and to imaginatively bring the two together. While her practical suggestions are not always helpful, her imagery and concept are worthy of consideration.

draw the listener back into the flow of the sermon again. "Appropriate sermon delivery can aid and abet that reestablishment so that congregants 'hang in there' from initiating action or thought, to climax, to resolution."¹⁶⁰ We would certainly recognize that this is the working of the Spirit, when listeners are drawn to reflect upon the impact the word makes in their life, even while the sermon continues. At this point, however, Bartow pushes the limits of the appropriate understanding of the role of the listener to bring meaning to the sermon based on their own insights and knowledge.

He continues, "Also, since the sermon is suasory but not manipulative, directing attention but not dictating response, congregants finally will assess what preachers have to say on the basis of their own 'insight and sense of truth'."¹⁶¹ Many of us refuse to give authority for assessing the significance of the sermon to the "insight and sense of truth" of the listener, as formed by the gospel as it may be. Remembering Bartow's earlier establishment of the authority and work of God in the proclamation of the word, this might be interpreted as a balanced suggestion of the interplay of word and listener, but succeeding suggestions push his view a bit too far. "To realize something approximating the full range of significations and effects of a sermon requires the connotative input not only of preachers but of their congregants, for the world of the sermon unfolds through the collaborative effort of author (that is, preacher), text (sermon manuscript or outline), and audience (congregation)."¹⁶² There is indeed a role played by the listener to bring the word to bear on their own situation, to make application to their own life and

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., quoting H. H. Farmer, *The Servant of the Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 49.

¹⁶² Ibid., 121.

circumstances, but to suggest that the fullness of the meaning of the text is not realized until the listener has performed this or any other effort is to detract from the authority of the word. Bartow defends his position by saying that, "The rule of *sola scriptura*, that is to say, is exercised among the people who listen to preaching, not only among those who preach."¹⁶³ That rule may be given to the whole body of Christ as the church establishes over time and through Spirit-guided study and reflection the interpretation of texts, but it is not given to individuals to determine by their own insights and understandings.

With this one caution, Bartow's thorough and thoughtful study renews a long established tradition of an authoritative word as proclaimed among the people of God. He takes a high view of the activity of God in self-revelation, but offers constructive insight into the role of the hearer as a participant in sermon listening. The "conflagration of love" where God is at work through the efforts of his called servants of the word, always takes to heart those who return week after week to "Hear the Word of the Lord!"

New Homiletic: Focus on the Hearer

At the turn of the twentieth century, homiletical instruction and theory was characterized by an ideational approach. The preacher's task was to mine the text for those nuggets of truth that could be communicated to a modern listening audience for their cognitive recognition and consent. The 1870 John Broadus text, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* is representative of its time. The preface to the 1898-revised edition notes that when first published, "it was a great success. It became the most

¹⁶³ Ibid., 144.

popular and widely-read text-book on Homiletics in this country."¹⁶⁴ It is a classic example of a preacher talking to preachers about preaching and is devoid of anything more than an incidental reference to the listener.

In this modern era style of ideational preaching, as chapter topics indicate, the focus is on explanation, argument, and illustration. Broadus lists the parts of a sermon as the introduction, the discussion, and the conclusion. According to the author, the main body of the sermon, the discussion, is often called the "proof," but he hesitates to use the word. "The treatment frequently consists of proof, in whole or in part, but frequently also of explanation, or the impressive exhibition of a theme."¹⁶⁵ The view throughout is that there is material to be presented and the preacher's task is to do so in clear, rational exposition. Suggestions for sermon structures are all in the propositional form¹⁶⁶ and any consideration of style pertains primarily to the use of language as a means of communicating clearly and accurately.¹⁶⁷

Toward the middle of the last century, the beginnings of a change toward a more hearer oriented approach began to appear. The publication of H. Grady Davis' *Design for Preaching* is often noted as the beginning of a new era in homiletics.¹⁶⁸ In his opening chapter, he reminds the preacher to consider, "the exceedingly complex nature of the

¹⁶⁴ John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, with a preface by Edwin C. Dargan, ed. (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1898), v.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Part II, Ch. III, 308f.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Part III, 339f.

¹⁶⁸ Eugene Lowry, for example, says that the beginning of a new era in North American homiletics "could be dated with an earlier publication: *Design for Preaching* (1958), by H. Grady Davis." Eugene Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 12.

people who hear the Word of God."¹⁶⁹ The development of thoughts, the selection of forms, the choice of language, must, therefore, be hearer sensitive. The "hearing situation," as Davis calls it, is quite different from reading, for it is an event in time that moves quickly from beginning to end and relies heavily on the hearer's participation in the moment and memory of the sermon later.¹⁷⁰ His recommendations in "writing for the ear"¹⁷¹ are not too revolutionary, but the concern for the hearer of sermons, not just for the content, is a step forward. He does not suggest anything resembling the emphasis of this project, aiding the listeners in their task.

Richard Caemmerer in his 1959 work, *Preaching for the Church* shows an even greater interest in the listener's role in the sermon. He suggests that an approach like that of Broadus is errant. He recommends writing out the sermon, but warns that a sermon is more than a manuscript. His focus is on the hearer. More than just noting ideas on paper, the preacher has been asking since his first study of the text,

What's here for my hearer? In the second stage of preparation he said it more acutely: How can I move my hearer God's way? Even under the drudgery of outlining he was saying: How can I get my hearer to assimilate this message most easily? And now the preacher is still saying: How can I say this so that he will understand me, pay attention to me, hang on to me paragraph by paragraph, and take it along to try out in the days ahead?¹⁷²

We preach for the sake of the hearer, and every step in preparation and delivery is focused on bringing the word to the hearer in such a way that those who listen can do their work, listen attentively, inwardly digest, and take it home.

¹⁶⁹ H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 5.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 265f.

¹⁷² Caemmerer, 100.

The listener needs the preacher's assistance in his task, and Caemmerer offers suggestions. An important part of his homiletical work is that preaching is to an end, "God's goal," so he suggests that, "Preaching to God's goal implies that the hearers know what the goal is."¹⁷³ Christian education and pastoral preaching are concerned that listeners do indeed understand what it is that God is up to in their lives when the word is proclaimed. God is at work in the word calling Christians to live out their calling in Christ. Caemmerer reminds the preacher that "he is there to help his hearers do the hard thing"¹⁷⁴ of picking up the cross and following in repentance, and in battling the sinful nature. Hearing is active and calls for an active response.

Caemmerer has a clear understanding of the vertical and the horizontal axes in preaching. God is at work. If there is change in the lives of the listeners, it is evidence of the working of the Spirit through the word. Likewise, the effectiveness of a sermon is not credited to the preacher and his skill, but to the author of the word. However, this is not license to "bungle" the task of preaching. The preacher has the responsibility to clearly set God's intention before the listeners "as one that they can actually reach out for and begin to achieve with the help of God that is theirs to use."¹⁷⁵ Listeners are active participants in the sermon event and in the response that follows. Caemmerer keeps that before his students continually. It is the preacher's task "to find the approach to the hearer and the ways by which he opens his ears and listens. The Word of God does things in the human heart that no other word can do. But it reaches through the same

¹⁷³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 38.

channels of hearing and attention that any word must use."¹⁷⁶ To that end he suggests that preachers be familiar with mechanisms of learning with which the Creator has endowed his creation and use them to His glory and the service of the gospel.¹⁷⁷

When Caemmerer teaches preaching "to the Church," he is heightening our awareness that we speak a word to real flesh and blood people. Our listeners can hear. It is our task to preach in a way that better facilitates that hearing and the struggle that ensues in response. He stops short, however, of suggesting that the preacher deliberately train listeners for attentive listening.

The trend toward a focus on what happens in the hearing of sermons continued through the end of the twentieth century. In 1967 Reuel Howe published *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue*, in reaction to the classical practice of preaching. His definition of this old style of preaching is that, "The preacher speaks, the people listen. He is active; they are passive. The preaching is usually didactic and impersonal."¹⁷⁸ Based on recent study of communication theory, Howe argues for an active participation of the people in the preaching life of the church. And he supports his suggestion by arguing that listeners to sermons are the people of God and that the word belongs to the whole Church. They are called to be active in witness, so they also have a part in preaching and hearing. In the life experiences of listeners, God is at work and those experiences help shape how the word proclaimed is heard. And if the impact of preaching is changed lives, lives that also impact the world and others around them, then

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷⁸ Reuel Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), 35.

the hearers have a role in receiving the word.¹⁷⁹ Commenting on the task of the listener, another writer, Roger Van Harn said it this way, "We strain to comprehend, but fail to understand. But if hearing the word of God is the purpose of preaching and the means by which we come to believe, then we in the pew have a responsibility to make an effort to listen in order that we might hear."¹⁸⁰ This leads us to what Fred Craddock calls, "inductive preaching."

In a 1998 interview, Craddock argued against a purely deductive pattern of preaching that left the listeners only to agree or disagree with what was presented. Inductive preaching, he argues, is inviting the people of the community into the text to join in the effort with all who have gone before them in discerning God's intended meaning. "In inductive preaching," Craddock says, "you unroll your idea in such a way that listeners have to work to get it themselves."¹⁸¹ A review of the literature on the hearer's role in listening to sermons must include a deeper look at Craddock.

In his 1985 textbook, *Preaching*, Craddock is careful to ground his ideas in a doctrine of the word that credits God with the authority and power of the word. That doesn't prevent him, however, from challenging the preacher to do his part in bringing the hearable word of God to the listeners. He writes,

All of us know it is God who awakens the ear and loosens the tongue. Having expressed that conviction, it is important to say clearly that on the practical level, the task of preaching cannot be divided into the Spirit's work and our work. That is, believing in the Spirit does not cut our work in half. God's activity in the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸⁰ Roger Van Harn, *Pew Rights* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 14.

¹⁸¹ Derek J. Morris, "Inductive Preaching: An Interview with Fred B. Craddock" *Ministry*, July 1998, 16. Craddock's inductive method is more fully developed in *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971).

world does not reduce ours one iota. Any doctrine of the Holy Spirit that relieves me of my work and its responsibility is plainly false.¹⁸²

The preacher has work to do, and, says Craddock, so does the listener.

Sermons always happen in a context. A sermon is always an event within a community of people, and a disregard for those people and what they bring to the sermon event would be foolishness. "And yet" Craddock notices, "one seldom hears the inquiry, Who heard this sermon? Almost always the question is, Who preached this sermon? in spite of the fact that a sermon has many ears but only one mouth."¹⁸³ Attention should be given, therefore, to the many contexts of the sermon.

Craddock suggests that the oral communication of sermons does not happen in a vacuum, but it is socially owned. The four contexts of a sermon define the nature of that social ownership and how the community influences the sermon event. There is an historical context. Every preacher and every listener has memories of sermons past, of experiences with other preachers, either good or bad, and churches also have histories of preaching.¹⁸⁴ Everyone who preaches or listens brings those histories with him or her.

There are also liturgical and theological contexts of preaching. Sermons happen within (or occasionally without!) the worship services of the church, and within a confessional framework. Craddock points out a number of ways that the shape and impact of the sermon will be influenced by these contexts.¹⁸⁵ For our purposes, however, his discussion of the pastoral context is most fitting.

¹⁸² Craddock, *Preaching*, 30.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-35.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 41-50.

Since in the vast majority of local situations the pastor and the preacher are the same person, the relationships developed outside of the setting of preaching influence what is said and also what is heard in the sermon. Preaching, he argues, is not separate and distinct from pastoral care, but when both are understood as the ministry of both law and gospel to the needs of the whole person in Christ, they are mutually inclusive. Therefore, "Study and preparation involve careful listening to the congregation as well as the text."¹⁸⁶ The well-prepared preacher is not only thoroughly acquainted with the message of the text, but also with those who will hear it, who hunger and thirst for the word God has provided, and whose specific personal, economic, and domestic situations help to create the message that is delivered. The sermon speaks to people.

Craddock calls this role of the listener in hearing the sermon part of the priestly calling of all Christians. "The form and movement of the sermons represent a conscious effort to implement the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers; that is, listeners are given room to accept the responsibility for their own believing and doing."¹⁸⁷ Properly understood in the context of the Holy Spirit's exclusive role of creating faith, Craddock's point is that the word is understandable to Christians and their God-given gifts are utilized when the word is presented for their inductive listening.

And so, when he comes to the heart of his text, Craddock devotes three chapters to the task of interpretation. Chapter Six, "Interpretation: The Text," is preceded by Chapter Five, "Interpretation: The Listeners," and followed by Chapter Seven, "Interpretation: Between Text and Listeners." He begins and ends with a focus on the

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

listener. Once again, in contrast to the traditional text oriented focus of sermon preparation, Craddock suggests that both text and listeners must be studied so that they might finally be appropriately introduced to one another. There is work for the preacher on both fronts, and discoveries to be made in both. As Craddock puts it, "Unless the minister has two eureka's, it is not likely the listeners will have one."¹⁸⁸ The very real issues of life and death, of tragedy and hope, are present in both text and people. Preaching is textual. And preaching is contextual, oriented toward the listener.

Inductive preaching is Craddock's effort to treat with high regard the listener's participation. He says, "sermons should proceed or move in such a way as to give the listener something to think, feel, decide, and do during the preaching. It is a poor division of labor that assigns the sermon totally to the preacher and the post-sermon 'go and do' to the listener."¹⁸⁹ Craddock instead calls for an intimate connection between the people and the text, a connection that is made in preaching.

He offers some biblical examples. When Jesus visited Nazareth,¹⁹⁰ he read the text from Isaiah 61, but apparently the people did not hear it, so Jesus gave an interpretation. The people responded. Paul did likewise with the Corinthians who had written him for guidance with real community issues. Beyond giving them the Lord's directives about marriage and the Lord's Supper,¹⁹¹ he added clear interpretation for their own context and community situations. Building this connection between listener and text is what Craddock calls interpretation. "Christian leadership sometimes demands

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 85.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

¹⁹⁰ Lk. 4:16-30.

¹⁹¹ 1 Cor. 7:10-16; 11:17-34.

more than introducing the text and the listeners to each other; sometimes one has to get a conversation started. Interpretation seeks to do just that."¹⁹² This regard that Craddock shows for the role of the listener, led by the Holy Spirit, in interpreting text and sermon for his or her own life situation is what places him as a pioneer in the new focus on the listener in preaching. His guidance for preachers at every step of preparation and delivery is extremely beneficial. But like Caemmerer and Davis before him, he suggests no practical guidance for training hearers as they engage in their task, listening.

This movement in homiletical theory toward the listener is to a large degree influenced by trends in society. In *Preaching to a Postmodern World*, Graham Johnston gives both an analysis of the changing culture in which the never changing gospel is preached, and insights into how contemporary preachers might communicate with the people who think and listen in a new fashion.

There are a variety of works available for preachers that analyze the contemporary shift from modernity to postmodernity.¹⁹³ Johnston's contribution is the set of practical guidelines he offers preachers. His foundation for the practical suggestions is solid. The "Rules of Engagement" in Chapter Three begin with a defense of the timelessness of the gospel message in any changing age. The call to the preacher to speak that word to real people in a real historical context with real questions about life and its meaning come in the context of the proclamation of the word.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Ibid., 150.

¹⁹³ See for example, Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996). For a survey of the impact of postmodern thought on the field of homiletics, see Ronald J. Allen et. al. *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

¹⁹⁴ Johnston, 61-75.

Johnston's "Practices for Engagement" in Chapter Seven are indeed practical, reasonable and rooted in his pastoral ministry in Australia. He is hearer oriented. He concurs with Haddon Robinson that the age of the preacher must give way to the age of the communicator. "After all, communicators are about a process of imparting information that involves both message and listener."¹⁹⁵ And so he offers guidance to contemporary preachers, suggesting the use of multi-media, drama and art in preaching, as well as storytelling and a Socratic dialog method of structuring sermons. He encourages the use of humor as a way of lending insight and holding interest and of helping people see an insight from a new, asymmetrical point of view.¹⁹⁶ And he encourages inductive preaching.

There are a number of reasons Johnston believes that inductive preaching is an appropriate approach for the times. First, it involves the listener in the learning that takes place. "When a preacher actively engages the minds of listeners, not only is their attention captured, but they receive more through the joy of discovery as opposed to having ideas merely handed to them."¹⁹⁷ Listeners are active participants in the sermon. The double effort of preaching with the hearer in mind and training the congregation in the skills of participatory listening will enhance communication, an event that, as Johnston reminds us, takes two. Because of its insight into contemporary culture and its practical nature, *Preaching to a Postmodern World* is the kind of resource that will prove more and more valuable to those who speak the unchanging word in a changing

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 149-150.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 167.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 152.

environment. But once again, while sensitive to the hearer's task, Johnston focuses on sermon preparation and delivery. He does not suggest helping listeners prepare and listen actively.

"Channels of Listening"

A research effort is underway that promises to shed light on the challenges of listeners to sermons. Under the direction of Ronald Allen from Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, a group of homiletics professors¹⁹⁸ asked over 260 laypeople from twenty-eight congregations to reflect on their listening to sermons. The result of the research will be published in four volumes, the first of which, *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*¹⁹⁹ was released in the summer of 2004.

While the first volume is not the most applicable to this study, an overview of the research conducted suggests that the future volumes will be very helpful. The research is based on the premise that most preachers get very little constructive and insightful feedback on their sermons, and those who intentionally and consistently seek it are quite rare. In an effort to shed light on the matter and to let the listeners become the teachers, they asked a series of questions to individuals and small groups from the congregations. Using the classical rhetorical categories of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*, the researchers sought

¹⁹⁸ Ronald J. Allen, Christian Theological Seminary; Dale P. Andrews, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Jon L. Berquist, Chalice Press; L. Susan Bond, the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University; John S. McClure, The Divinity School of Vanderbilt University; Dan P. Moseley, Christian Theological Seminary; Mary Alice Mulligan, Christian Theological Seminary; G. Lee Ramsey Jr., Memphis Theological Seminary; Diane Turner-Sharazz, Methodist Theological Seminary, Delaware, Ohio; and Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Bethany Theological Seminary, Richmond, IN.

¹⁹⁹ John S. McClure et. al. *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

to determine, in the particular context of a given congregation, what happens when listeners listen to a sermon.²⁰⁰

The first volume of case studies is intended to illustrate some of the basic findings of the research. *Ethos* is the listener's personal "perception of the character, personality, and trustworthiness of the preacher"²⁰¹ in the public performance of preaching. *Logos* is that aspect of the sermon that appeals to the reason of the listener by the selection and organization of the words. *Pathos* refers to the role of feeling and emotion in the listening event. The research showed that *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*

are nearly all at work in each listener and community during a sermon. The study further showed that different categories are more forceful for some congregants than others. For instance, one listener perceives the content of the sermon as more important than relationship with the preacher or feeling, while another listener may think that the sermon has been inconsequential unless that person is moved to tears.²⁰²

The case studies present examples of how listeners with different preferences, or modes of listening, are affected by different aspects of the sermon and its delivery. The volume concludes with some suggestions for parish pastors for interviewing listeners with the intention of gaining greater understanding of the listening task.

²⁰⁰ An earlier effort to utilize the classical rhetorical model to enhance listeners ability to hear the sermon is found in William R. Roen, *The Inward Ear: A Sermon Evaluation Method for Preachers and Hearers of the Word* (Washington D.C.: Alban Institute, 1989). Roen offers useful definitions of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, their place in a theology of preaching, and suggestions for sermon evaluation based on the rhetorical categories. His work is grounded in a theoretical model, not in field research. Johnston also uses the categories to suggest that, "For modern listeners, preaching was the age of the *logos*, the word. For twenty-first-century listeners, preaching must value the *ethos* and *pathos* as well" 66.

²⁰¹ McClure, 7.

²⁰² Ibid.

The second volume in the series, *Hearing the Sermon: Relationships, Content, Feeling*, by Allen²⁰³ was recently published. It provides resources to help members of the congregation understand the nature of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* in their own listening experience. When an individual recognizes his or her own personal inclination toward one or the other, an intentional effort to be a more balanced and open listener will result. According to the previously referenced presentation on the research in the fall of 2003, the study showed that about 40% of listeners incline toward an *ethos* window of listening, about 40% are more naturally *logos* listeners, and about 20% are most affected by the *pathos* of a sermon.²⁰⁴ This will be briefly discussed in the course of study developed more fully in Chapter 3 of the project, but this research shows potential for offering preachers and listeners great assistance.

Volume three of the research results, *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons*, by Mary Alice Mulligan²⁰⁵ will attempt to analyze the trends of the data, how listeners respond to a wide variety of questions about what exactly is happening in a sermon. It will examine, for example, how listeners to sermons think God is active and at work in the sermon. In a congregational setting where preacher and listeners are actively engaged in dialog about preaching, this data could be fruitful ground for discussion, instruction and gaining greater understanding of the doctrine of the word of God.

²⁰³ Ronald Allen, *Hearing the Sermon: Relationships, Content, Feeling* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).

²⁰⁴ From notes of oral presentation by Ronald Allen, "Results of Study of Listeners to Sermons," Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, IN, September 27, 2003.

²⁰⁵ Publication expected in spring of 2005 by Chalice Press.

Conclusion

Lutheran preaching is grounded in the doctrine of the word. It also recognizes that the work of sermon preparation and delivery is an effort that is done for the sake of the hearer. God's gifts of language and speech are tools for bringing the message to listeners in hearable fashion. We also recognize that the people of God participate in the sermon event through their active participation, listening attentively, discerningly, and making application of the word proclaimed to their life in Christ.

Preaching is dialog between preacher and listener. Anything the preacher can do to send the message more clearly and anything the listener can do to receive the message in a more meaningful way contributes to the effective dialog. Can the preacher in a local congregation help the congregation prepare to listen? This project tested the belief that he can.

CHAPTER FOUR

“HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD!” A STUDY FOR LISTENERS

Initial Considerations: Analysis of the Problem of Listening

Sermons in weekly worship go back many centuries in Christian history.²⁰⁶ That tradition continues today in contemporary America. At Mount Calvary, the weekly liturgy has two high points, the exposition of the word and the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. Through these divinely given means of grace, God operates in Christian lives for faith, renewal, and encouragement by the forgiveness of sins.

From month to month, our Christian ministry has contact with hundreds of people. The gospel of Christ is shared in many ways. The ministries of our Christian Day School, our preschool, and our youth program have regular contact with children and youth. Our home study and fellowship groups and our various ministries of study, nurture, and care reach individuals and small groups with the love of Christ. But nowhere in our weekly or monthly calendar do we have the significant contact with as many people as we do in our Sunday worship. As our most accessible open door to congregational life, Sunday morning is where we make most of our first time contacts with neighbors, either those brought by our members to hear God's word, or those coming to us on their own. Sunday is evangelistic.

Sunday morning is also a time of pastoral care. The pastor has more opportunity to offer encouragement and the comfort of God's gospel promises on Sunday than in a whole week's visitation. Most of our members receive their instruction in God's word on

²⁰⁶ For a comprehensive study of the history of preaching, see Hughes Oliphant Old, “The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church,” 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998-2004).

Sunday. The Sunday sermon at Mount Calvary is a critically important part of our ongoing ministry of the word.

Many forces, however, are at work against this vital ministry. The media culture in which our members live has changed the way they receive information.²⁰⁷ A strictly oral/aural presentation that extends past a few quick sound bytes is becoming more and more of a rarity for our listeners, and they are less and less accustomed to sitting quietly while someone speaks for their edification. As our educational systems are adapting to the times, even college-aged students are less familiar with a lecture style presentation.

In church culture itself, the sermon has a bad reputation. Cartoons in church publications abound with cobweb covered skeletons in the pews addressed by the endlessly droning preacher, or the pizza delivery man walking the center aisle of the church looking for the cell phone customer who ordered lunch. Certainly some of the blame is deserved. Preachers in general could do a much better job of communicating. Many congregations still receive a steady diet of pedantic, repetitively structured, boringly delivered sermons given with the intent of merely relaying information. It's no wonder that many who gather in the pew on Sunday have rather low expectations of the sermon.

Listeners to sermons are thrust into a situation for which they are given little or no preparation. Some of our younger members have had to complete sermon summary reports as a confirmation requirement, but I have offered them only a cursory instruction in sermon listening. Our new member instruction includes our teaching of the basics of our theology of the word, scripture as the inspired and inerrant norm of our faith, but we

²⁰⁷ See Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 11-20.

do not deal with the specifics of hearing the sermon for edification. In recent years, I have begun to preach in a much wider variety of styles and formats, but the variation in sermon formats are offered to the congregation hoping that the change in format itself will make the sermon more hearable. Rarely do I have a chance to discuss with a small group of our members the difference, for example, between a narrative structure and an imagistic structure and why I chose one over the other. The listening congregation may recognize that the sermon is different in its presentation, but not be able to identify the difference or intentionally engage in the way the format unfolds from beginning through middle to end.

Our firm conviction is that the sermon is an important part of the life of Christian discipleship, but we have not explicitly invited the congregation to become involved in the dialog that happens when the word intersects the congregation through the preacher. And so the congregation comes in many ways unprepared for the sermon experience, with lowered expectations and minimal or only incidentally acquired skills in sermon listening. It's no wonder that so many report that within a few days (or a few hours!) of hearing the sermon they have the sense that the sermon was good, but have little remembrance of the text, the topic, the specific goals of the sermon or how they considered, at the time of hearing, that the sermon might make a difference throughout the week. If pressed to share with someone on Thursday what the sermon was about on Sunday, the response would far too commonly be an embarrassed smile and a shrug of the shoulders.

I credit listeners to sermons at Mount Calvary with an enthusiasm for sermons and patience with listening that goes beyond the assistance they've been given. But

listeners to sermons at Mount Calvary are thrust into a situation for which they are inadequately prepared.

Theological Bases

Certain theological bases shape the formation of the project.

1. The holy scriptures are a gift of God to the Church, the people of God. They were given for the edification and instruction of the people, and are understandable. A greater understanding of how God the Holy Spirit works through the word in the lives of the people will help listeners appreciate and anticipate sermons in the context of the liturgy of the Church. This appreciation and anticipation will encourage more attentive and active listening.

2. Listening is a human activity on the horizontal level of righteousness²⁰⁸ and is therefore a skill that can be taught to the members of the body of Christ. While the gift of faith is the work of God alone, the eager response of the faithful includes disciplines like listening, remembering, and meditating. Those who gather to hear the word can apply their God-given gifts of intellect and reason to hear, learn, and inwardly digest the word. Instruction and practice can help sharpen the use of those gifts.

3. Sermons are dialogical. Preachers in their preparation dialog with the Lord who speaks in the text, and with the human authors who spoke to a particular people in a particular life setting. They bring the results of their encounter with God and text to the pulpit for another dialog between God and people, through text and preacher. And just as the preacher entered intentionally into the dialog earlier during preparation, the listeners are invited to join the discussion. Ideally, they are seeking, exploring, questioning,

²⁰⁸ See Chapter 2, 16-22.

testing, and anticipating while they are listening, just as the preacher was when he was preparing. And just as preachers can be trained in the skills of better preaching, listeners can be trained in skills of better listening.

4. Those who hear sermons in faith and who are properly equipped and motivated will perceive in themselves a greater ability to listen to sermons for understanding, remember the lessons learned and recognize opportunities for applying the lessons in their Christian walk. Growth toward maturity in Christ includes the increased capacity to hear the word of God and to faithfully and obediently apply those learnings in service and love toward God and others.

The project is intended to be a practical application of these theological principles.

Preliminary Focus Groups

In order to help ensure that the course of study developed addressed the real needs of listeners, two small focus groups were gathered to poll a sampling of the congregation about the issues that challenge them during the sermon. Interview questions were designed to help the groups speak frankly and openly about their experiences as representatives of the congregation.

The same criteria were used in selecting the focus groups that were later used in selecting the study participants. The participants represented frequent attendees at worship with a minimum average attendance of two times per month over the most recent twelve months. They were also chosen as nearly as possible to represent equally both male and female members, those with long standing Lutheran background and those of

more recent membership in a Lutheran congregation, and those who have been members at Mount Calvary longer than and less than four years.

The questions posed to the focus groups began with the following and were supplemented with questions dictated by the flow of the conversations:

1. "Just to help me get an idea of the background of the group, give me your best estimate of the number of sermons you've listened to so far in your life."

This question was introductory, required only a simple "guesstimate" answer and served as an icebreaker for the focus groups. It also indicated to the group and the interviewer the scope of the problem that the project hoped to address, the large number of sermons listened to by Christians. It also sought to elicit a positive response that those invited to the group do indeed listen to sermons.

2. "In your view, what are the most significant purposes of a Christian sermon?"

This question was also introductory in nature, helping to set the stage for questions that follow. It also invited a positive response, putting the best construction on the ideal intentions of Christian preaching. It indicated to the interviewer some of the expectations that listeners have for sermons and also their level of understanding of the purposes behind a ministry of the word in the Christian congregation.

3. "Tell me about a sermon that was particularly memorable to you. What made it so memorable?"

At this early part of the interview, the questions were still intended to build trust and openness within the preliminary focus group and here again the question was directed toward a positive response. It also introduced the subject of the hearer's participation in listening to the sermon and active engagement with the word proclaimed.

The interviewer hoped to gain insight into the process of remembering and the significance of that remembering for the listeners who shared their stories.

4. "What's the hardest part about listening to sermons?" (Participants were asked to write up to three responses to question #4 on index cards. The interviewer explained in advance that the cards would be collected and then read aloud to the group).

With this question, the discussion invited critical remarks, hoping that enough trust had been established earlier to encourage open sharing. Anonymous written responses also helped foster honesty and openness. The researcher wanted to gain insight into the weekly struggle that happens in the pew. It was intentionally broad in its scope so as not to influence the responses of the participants. The responses to this question were a central part of the learning from the focus groups to help sharpen the focus of the project.

5. "Many people have gotten lost during a sermon and quit listening entirely. What causes that to happen for you?"

It was hoped that the phrasing of this question would invite a few initial humorous responses as a way of introducing one of the most difficult aspects of the subject under discussion, the inability to stay with a sermon. The interviewer hoped to better understand the process of disengaging from the sermon and drifting away. He wanted to discover some of the frustrations that listeners experience with this all too common phenomenon.

6. "How satisfied are you with your ability to listen to a sermon with understanding and to recognize how it might apply to your life?"

This question pursued the matter of self-awareness. It required the participants to reflect upon their role as a listener to sermons. It also gave some indication of the level of interest in participating in a course of instruction to aid listeners.

7. "Finally, what advice would you give to preachers?"

The final question also required a high level of trust, as respondents were invited to actually give advice to their preacher! It was phrased in such a way as to indicate that the focus group session was concluding and to invite any concerns or comments that may have been generated, but so far had been unspoken in the group. The interviewer hoped to invite the most honest and insightful responses about listeners' expectations and the challenges they face in listening to sermons.

As the need of the researcher and the inspiration of the flow of the conversation dictated, other questions were included in the focus group sessions. Responses helped shape the course subject matter as developed below.

Results of Preliminary Focus Groups

The focus group discussions were completed before the purposes of the project were finalized. Since the reaction of the participants in the focus groups were sought to inform the project development and are not part of the research itself, a summary of the focus group discussions is included here, out of sequence.

The first preliminary focus group met on September 23, 2004. Of four invited, three people attended: a high school aged male, and two middle-aged women. In response to the first question, the number of sermons listened to, they estimated approximately 900, 1500 and 2500 sermons in their respective lifetimes. The second group met just a few days later on September 25. Four people participated: a middle-

aged woman, an older adult woman, and two young adult men. They estimated their total sermons heard at about 800 each for the young men, 2,000 for the middle-aged woman and over 3,000 for the retirement age member.

The focus groups yielded some very insightful comments that proved helpful in confirming the purposes of the project. The assembled listeners to sermons bring high expectations to worship on Sunday morning. When asked about the purposes of a Christian sermon, (question #2), responders talked about their own personal experiences and expectations. These listeners want to know and understand God's word. They want to learn what God's word teaches for a purpose: application to daily living. These listeners hope to hear what they "should do and not do," and receive practical guidance for daily decisions. Especially important to some of the group was preparation for witness to the world, help to know how to "let the light of Jesus shine through me."

Someone in each group also mentioned that the sermon should be an instrument of the Holy Spirit's working among the people of the congregation. There is an expectation that God has work to do in the lives of his people and when the sermon faithfully proclaims God's truth, the Spirit will be at work. Both groups emphasized the hearer's need for encouragement for the week ahead that comes from God's forgiving grace through Christ.

The participants, after some reflection, were able to identify particularly memorable sermons (question #3). Analysis of the responses identified three clusters of memorable characteristics in sermons. First, a memorable sermon impacts the hearer's life. One participant mentioned "Aha! moments" when the message connects with real life situations. Others specifically mentioned the application of grace and the blessing of

forgiveness as memorable. Second, visuals and objects used as illustrations helped memory. Among others, a sermon on David's six smooth stones and the rock who is Christ where the congregation received a smooth stone to take home was mentioned. And third, structural issues contribute to memory of sermons. Use of repeated refrains or a structure that flows together toward a conclusion were identified as important. A loosely organized sermon once heard at another congregation, a sermon that was "not going anywhere" was referred to as memorable because of the anger stirred in the listener!

The discussion of the hardest part about listening to sermons (question #4) where participants noted their comments anonymously on note cards was particularly helpful. Four main categories were identified.

The first group of challenges to listening (nine responses) relates to issues of delivery. The cards noted matters of diction, such as "hollering," "not being talked to, but instead being preached at," and "listening to a pastor that speaks monotonously." Other distracting delivery matters mentioned had to do with the preacher's physical presence, such as gestures or use of Mount Calvary's pulpit that is generally perceived as physically too high in relation to the pews.

The second set of distractions had to do with sermon content (eight responses). A sermon that is not biblical, or as one participant mentioned in the accompanying discussion, "from God," could be a distraction. A difficult passage that is not adequately explained can make a sermon hard to hear. A sermon was identified as hard to hear if there is no readily accessible life application, or if the sermon's logic and sequence are hard to follow.

Group participants also mentioned distractions internal to the listener, like a wandering mind, or external to the hearer, such as crying babies and cell phones (five responses). Lastly, the sermon listener's lack of preparation was identified as a factor three times. Specifically mentioned twice was hurrying to church and arriving late or just in time.

When asked if they had ever "gotten lost" while listening to a sermon (question #5), the group reaffirmed some of the comments from the previous question. Poor structure and delivery can cause a wandering mind, as can physical noises and distractions. This problem was, surprisingly, not identified as a major concern by the focus group members.

These two groups of sermon listeners rated their capacity for listening quite high (question #6). There was recognition in both groups of the dialogical nature of sermons. "If the pastor does his part, I feel pretty competent in listening," was a comment affirmed by the group. Another said that the preacher's teaching style helped him "focus on listening."

The last question (question #7) asked for advice to preachers. Interestingly, the comments fell along the lines of the rhetorical categories of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. A concern for the content and structure of the sermon was expressed with words like "simple," and "focused" and a concern that the sermon be "the truth," and "delivered well." Listeners also want to be touched in an intimate and emotional way, *pathos*. They advised the preacher to consider, "Why do people come to church?" Everyday life examples and application that "relates to us" were encouraged.

However, in these groups most of the suggestions for the preacher related to *ethos*, the connection between preacher and congregation. Included in the comments were such phrases as, “Be human,” “Know how vulnerable we are,” “Be transparent,” and “Don’t worry about offending us.” Preaching in a way that communicated a sense that the Holy Spirit was driving the message was also mentioned.

The high expectations of these focus group listeners and the challenges they identified as inherent to sermon listening helped to affirm the purposes identified for the project. The researcher left the group discussions with a renewed conviction that members of the congregation are willing to learn to be active participants in sermon listening. God’s people are hungry for the word and the encouragement and guidance for living that it offers. They come not as perfect listeners, but with a desire to hear, learn, and “inwardly digest” the proclaimed word. It was communicated to the interviewer that any assistance offered them in their task would be greatly appreciated.

Purposes of the Project

Informed by intentional conversation with the congregation, the course of study for project participants was designed to achieve the following purposes:

1. *Project participants will show an increased ability to prepare in advance for the sermon listening experience.* They will have a greater appreciation for the power and efficacy of the word of God in the life of a Christian. They will show an increased anticipation for the work of God the Holy Spirit in their lives through the life-changing word. Behavioral changes will include a personal or group study of the sermon text during the week in advance of the Sunday sermon. This study will enable them to bring questions about the text into the sermon listening experience and aid them in their

participatory listening dialog with the preacher. A desire to prepare for sermon listening in advance will be a major step in the participants' understanding of their role as active listeners to the sermon.

2. *Project participants will show an increased ability to listen actively and attentively to the sermon intellectually, emotionally, and relationally.* Through a greater understanding of the *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* patterns of communication, they will become more aware of the dynamics of the sermon. They will identify their own dominant mode of listening, *logos* (intellectual), *pathos* (emotional), or *ethos* (relational). They will also recognize the validity of other patterns of communication. Understanding their own preferred entry point into the sermon, the participants will be better prepared to intentionally listen in different ways to other kinds of communication. Intellectually oriented participants, for example, will not "tune out" the emotional, but will "change gears" to their emotional side and hear those parts of the sermon for what they are.

An understanding of different sermon formats with different intentions will help participants engage in the flow and movement of the sermon. For instance, by recognizing that a narrative format builds tension toward a final resolution, they will work with the preacher in the complicating portion of the plot, and anticipate the final unwinding and new status quo. Or in a question/answer format, the listeners will be ready to wrestle with various inadequate answers and finally apply the gospel to solve the puzzle.

3. *Project participants will show an increased ability to remember the sermon's textual basis and key aspects of the presented sermon.* Passive endurance of the sermon does little to engage the memory. By training sermon listeners to be more involved

before, during and after the sermon, memory will be enhanced. Lessons learned by active effort, like cooking or woodworking, are often remembered for a lifetime. Actively cooperating in the sermon by advance study of the text, active listening and post-sermon reflection will help ingrain the text and lessons of the sermon into the participants' memories.

4. *Project participants will show an increased ability to mentally "dialog" with the preacher during the sermon.* By assuming their responsibility to learn from the sermon, participants will learn to listen actively, that is, personally ponder the questions that are raised and anticipate how the questions will be resolved. Recognizing that the preacher will lead them through a series of moves, the participants will learn to go along for the ride. They will not simply watch as the preacher goes through the ups and downs of the sermon, but will accept the invitation to ask in mind and heart the same questions that the preacher asked throughout the week. Participants will grow more able to understand why the preacher is taking them on the twists and turns that the text presents and take the journey together through the mental dialog that is happening between conductor and passenger.

5. *Project participants will show an increased ability to recognize daily opportunities to apply the word in daily living.* The accumulation of the results listed above will enable the participants to carry the word of God presented in the sermon in heart and mind into daily life. Having intentionally considered what the text means through preparation, active listening, and reflection, real life situations that are similar will more easily come to mind. An argument with a spouse or an opportunity to offer

compassionate care to a co-worker will be more readily recognized as, "just what the preacher was talking about."

The interview questions for research data gathering will be designed to measure participants' perception of their increased ability in each of these areas.

Secondary Purpose

6. *Project participants will show an increased ability to provide constructive and insightful feedback to the preacher.* It was previously mentioned that a potential side benefit of the project would be more constructive feedback to the preacher about the sermons from listeners at Mount Calvary. Taking time together for the course of study with the topic of sermons should be a good step forward. The interviews after implementing study learnings should also help. I will assess at a later date whether a more structured format for intentional feedback might be instituted in response to the project. If there are future offerings of the course, as is anticipated, the potential pool for feedback will be increased also.

Population and Sample Boundaries

The heart of the project was the course of study in which a small number of selected participants pursued the purposes listed above. Those chosen for the study represented frequent attendees at worship with a minimum average attendance of two times per month over the most recent twelve months. They were chosen as nearly as possible to represent equally both male and female members, those with long standing Lutheran background and those of more recent membership in a Lutheran congregation, and those who have been members at Mount Calvary longer than and less than four years.

A cover letter to invite selected congregation members to participate in the study is included in Appendix C. A form for Consent to Participate in Research Activities is found in Appendix D.

Proposed Solution

The proposed solution to the challenges of listening to sermons for hearing and understanding involved a course of instruction for the members of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church. The course included sections on the theology of God's word preached in the local congregation, the purposes and structures of the sermon, and practical keys to enhance the listening experience. The effectiveness of the course was evaluated by interviews of the participants following a period of practical application of the lessons taught.

Course of Study

The course of study was presented to eight participants chosen according to the established criteria in the fall of 2004. The course was designed for presentation in three ninety minute sessions covering the core topics. The first session focused on the textual basis of preaching and the efficacy of God's word in preaching. The second session was designed to help participants understand the workings of a sermon by understanding the goals of preaching and the structure of sermons. Finally, the last session offered practical suggestions to help listeners to sermons to develop their skills in hearing for understanding. A brief outline is included here. The full participants' guide and annotated instructor's guide are found in Appendices E and F.

Session I - God's Word and God's Hearers!

Hearing the Word: "The Parable of the Sower," Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Hearing and Saving Faith: "Paul's Prayer for Unbelieving Jews," Romans 10:5-21

Hearing and the Christian Life: "Scripture Given by God," 2 Timothy 3:14-17

God's Word Spoken and Heard in the Sermon

Session II - Why Sermons? The Word at Work!

The Goal, the Malady, and the Means of a Sermon

The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel

Cross and Glory

Sermon Structures and Sermon Moves

Liturgy and Lectionary

Session III - Becoming an Active Listener

Preparation for Hearing

"Dialog" with the Preacher

Modes of Listening: *Ethos, Logos, and Pathos*

Memory Aids

Post-Sermon Reflection

Listener's Assignment

At the end of the course of study, participants were instructed to apply their learnings over the next several weeks in worship. A commitment was garnered from each participant to follow-up their time of listening with an approximately one-hour interview that would help the researcher measure the effectiveness of the course.

Data Collection Interviews

After the eighth Sunday following the course, appointments were made with the eight participants for analysis of the helpfulness of the course of study. While some

questions flowed naturally out of the conversations between subjects and researcher, the following list of questions guided the interviews.²⁰⁹

1. “I know how to prepare for preaching, but I don’t prepare to listen to sermons very often. I want to gain an understanding of the ways people prepare for worship and sermon listening. Take me through your thoughts on a Saturday, an early Sunday morning or Sunday in the church as you anticipate another worship hour and another sermon?”

Questions asking about behavior or experiences generally elicit a more ready response from interviewees. This open-ended question was designed to get the conversation going and to address the issue of preparation before the sermon and how the course of study may have impacted that preparation.

2. “What do you do before the preacher begins so you will be ready to get the most from the sermon?”

This question specifically seeks to find if any of the suggestions for preparation or any other aspects of the discussion of preaching and worship had proven helpful to the participants.

3. “In what ways is your preparation different than before you took the course?”

Obviously, the intent here is to gain insight into the course’s effectiveness. This type of question was not asked specifically again in the interview, but was asked early to help the interviewee be aware of the purpose of the interview.

²⁰⁹ Guidance in the development of questions was found in Corrine Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 1999), 67-94.

4. “If a friend asked you what you get out of listening to sermons, how would you respond?”

One of our measures of effectiveness was the listener’s perception of their increased ability to listen attentively and actively to the sermon. This question seeks to analyze attentiveness by asking the subject’s interest in listening to sermons for benefit. The scenario of sharing with a friend is intended to encourage a free response without specifically asking about the researcher’s own sermons.²¹⁰

5. “Is it most important to you that the sermon is authentic and believed by the preacher, intellectually stimulating, or emotionally stirring? Explain the difference that makes for you.”

It was hoped that this question would help the interviewee reflect on his or her own listening style. One of our measurements was the participants’ increased awareness of their own preferred style of entering into the sermon, whether by *ethos*, *logos*, or *pathos*, and their ability to listen accordingly.

6. “In the course, we suggested some aids for remembering the sermon like note-taking, journaling, or conversations about the sermon. Have you tried any of these and found them helpful?”

This question was intended to open a discussion on remembering the textual basis of the sermon and significant aspects of the sermon during the days and weeks following.

7. “Can you describe for me what it’s like when a thought from a sermon that you’ve heard comes to mind later in the week?”

²¹⁰ William R. Myers, *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 2000), 55-61.

Again, this question pursued the matter of remembering the message in the days following the sermon.

8. “A preacher once said, ‘Listeners are active participants in preaching... [T]he fact is, it takes two to communicate.’²¹¹ How have you found that to be true?

Responding to a quote can be an effective way of stimulating discussion.²¹² This question introduced the topic of listening as dialog with the preacher, another of the measures for success of the program.

9. “Sometimes when I hear, ‘Good sermon, Pastor!’ I think, ‘That remains to be seen,’ because the test of a sermon is how it is applied to daily living. Can you think of times you’ve recognized opportunities during the week to apply what you’ve been learning in sermons?”

A final result to be measured is participants’ perception of their ability to recognize such opportunities.

10. “What aspects of your pastor’s preaching could you recommend to others?”

11. “What improvements to preaching do you think Mount Calvary members might suggest?”

These final two questions were asked to pursue the significant corollary result of the research, feedback for the preacher. Responses were to indicate if the course of study was helpful in raising up informed sermon listeners who can offer such constructive criticism.

²¹¹ Craddock, *Preaching*, 25.

²¹² See Glesne, 73.

Project Implementation

The implementation of the project took place from September to December of 2004. The project itself included the course of study presented to eight members of the congregation, a period of implementation by listening to sermons, and the interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of the course.

Course of Instruction

Eight participants were chosen according to the criteria established above.²¹³ Participants ranged in age from the early twenties to the seventies. Tenure of membership at Mount Calvary ranged from less than two years to nearly seventy years. Six of the participants have been members less than ten years and four less than four years. Three from the group were life-long Lutherans; the other five were all relatively new to the Lutheran tradition. There were no adult converts to the faith in the group, but two of the group had recently ended long periods of inactivity in congregational life with their membership at Mount Calvary. Less than five percent of the congregation comes from racial backgrounds other than European American. One participant in the study is African American.

The researcher taught, “Hear the Word of the Lord,” the course of study, to the group on a Thursday evening and Saturday morning. Using the course description outlined above and included in Appendix E, Session One was covered on Thursday evening September 30, 2004 from 7:00-8:30 PM at the church. Session Two was held on

²¹³ A last minute cancellation of one male participant and subsequent addition of a female replacement resulted in a final census of six females to two males. While the original group of five females and three males more accurately reflects our slight imbalance toward females in worship, it is hoped that the overall diversity in the study group accurately reflects a broad cross section of the congregation.

Saturday, October 2 from 8:30-10:00 AM and after a thirty-minute recess, was immediately followed by Session Three from 10:30-12:00.

The course was presented in a combination of short lecture, informal discussion among class members and instructor, and question and answer formats. The group was actively engaged in the discussions and, while a number of somewhat unrelated issues for discussion were prompted by the course, the outline was closely followed and covered fairly comprehensively.

Implementation of Learnings

At the conclusion of Session Three, the participants were instructed in the assignment to listen to sermons during their regular worship attendance over the succeeding eight-week period. They were encouraged to apply any methods discussed for preparation and retention of the sermon messages and also to engage dialogically with the preacher as they listen.

Data Collection Interviews

Individual data collection interviews were conducted with each participant in the course during the period December 1 to December 21, 2004. The interviews ranged in time from 25-50 minutes. The questions designed for the data collection interviews were followed closely, with occasional inclusion of additional probing questions as deemed necessary by the researcher during the flow of the conversation.²¹⁴ Interviews were

²¹⁴ This practice follows the advice of Glesne. "For qualitative inquiry, the interview is rightly conceived as an occasion for depth probes – for getting to the bottom of things. By so doing you do justice to the complexity of your topic. Qualitative researchers operate from the assumption that they cannot exhaust what there is to know about their topic. They may stop their investigation because they have run out of time or satisfied their particular research conceptualization. While the research remains in process,

audiotape recorded with the subject's permission. Near complete transcriptions of the interviews were compiled and used in evaluating the effectiveness of the course of study toward the purpose of the project.

interviewing is a 'what-else' and 'tell-me-more' endeavor. The next question on your interview schedule should get its turn only when you have stopped learning from the previous one and its spin-offs" 87.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LISTENERS SPEAK: RESPONSES FROM PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

Summary of Findings

The findings of the study as taken from the participant interviews will be presented in this chapter. An analysis of the data in the light of the hypotheses will be given, noting how and to what extent the course of study and practical application helped the participants achieve the desired results.

The presentation of findings will show that the reactions to the course of study among the participants can be grouped into three categories: those who found the course quite helpful in their listening, those who showed moderate achievement of the goals, and those who were unable to apply practically the lessons of the course. Case studies of the eight participants will be presented in clusters according to their reaction in order that generalizations may be drawn in the analysis that concludes this chapter.

Each participant's comments from the interviews will be analyzed to see how they individually met or did not meet the five main purposes of the project:

1. *Project participants will show an increased ability to prepare in advance for the sermon listening experience.*
2. *Project participants will show an increased ability to listen actively and attentively to the sermon intellectually, emotionally, and relationally.*
3. *Project participants will show an increased ability to remember the sermon's textual basis and key aspects of the presented sermon.*
4. *Project participants will show an increased ability to mentally "dialog" with the preacher during the sermon.*

5. *Project participants will show an increased ability to recognize daily opportunities to apply the word in daily living.*

Group One Findings: Significant Benefit

Three of the participants in the study demonstrated the helpfulness of the course during their follow-up interviews.

Subject #1: Betty

Betty is a senior adult, and a life-long member of Mount Calvary, retired from a career in nursing. In the course of the interview, Betty repeatedly expressed how her preparation for hearing the sermon was enhanced by the course. She is a regular participant in a Tuesday Bible Class where we study together the text for the coming Sunday sermon. “I start thinking about church, well, actually, after our Bible Class on Tuesday after we discuss [the sermon text]. I think about it on Saturday. I think about it if it’s a special time of year for me, when it will be very meaningful.”²¹⁵ For Betty, preparation involves anticipation of the proclamation of grace. She says, “In your sermons, you make us feel that even though we’re sinners, that God still loves us, and you give us something to think about. And I think that’s in every sermon, Pastor.”

The suggestion of prayerful preparation in the days before the sermon took hold in Betty. “I always read the ‘Portals of Prayer,’ and the prayers in there at the end of the week, and on Saturday it talks about going to church and worshipping. And on Sunday the prayer is about what God has said to us and that I have been to church.”

²¹⁵ Quotes from participants in this chapter are taken from transcriptions of the audio taped interview sessions. Tapes and transcripts will be available from the researcher until the completion of the project and then destroyed as agreed upon by the researcher and the participants. Small modifications of grammar for the sake of readability have been made, but stylistic discrepancies in the cited quotations reflect the conversational dialog of the interviews.

We also studied how the sermon is part of the whole liturgy. Betty took note of that and brought it up during the interview, but said that her anticipation during the service is for the sermon itself. “I guess the preparation for the sermon [liturgy] is important, but for me, the sermon is the icing on the cake.”

How would Betty summarize her increased ability to prepare for sermon listening? “I just try to come with an open mind and an open heart and I feel it’s fuel for my week.”

The second purpose of the project was to help listeners engage more actively in the sermon experience. For Betty, the course was of great benefit in this area. “I think I listen more intently to the sermon now, not that I didn’t before, but, after having discussed the different sermons, and I tried to figure out what kind of sermon it is and I always don’t do it, but anyhow, that shows variety. And I think people like variety.” So the discussion of sermon structures and construction seemed to have a positive impact with Betty’s intentional listening.

Participation in the course helped Betty analyze her preferred style of listening, her window into the sermon. She was able to identify herself as a *pathos* oriented listener. “Emotions play a lot into it.” She was able to clearly articulate the difference between herself and her late husband, a *logos* listener. “I don’t know if it’s intellectual. Pastor Schroeder’s sermons [1943-1964] were always very intellectual. My husband loved his sermons. He just loved them... But I think it’s the emotional and the context of the sermon. I know a couple of times I’ve come to church and had a kind of weighty heart and had to take communion, and it was a wonderful experience and I just felt God there with me. When you go home with a feeling like that, that’s good. I think feelings

are important. I really do.” She was even able to differentiate her preference for the emotional from the *ethos*, or relational dimension of listening we discussed in the class. “And I always have said this: I don’t have to like the pastor to go to church. I mean, I could dislike you and love your sermons!”

Her *pathos* approach to worship is especially evident when it comes to sermons. “Sometimes the sermons really hit home and I get tears in my eyes.” Her description of a good sermon is one that fulfills a need on an emotional level and so she listens that way. “I know I’ve said to you sometimes going through the line what a wonderful sermon it was, but what a wonderful sermon means to me is that some sermons just touch you more than other sermons. I think, what we come to church needing is God’s way of fulfilling our needs.”

During the interview, Betty repeatedly affirmed how helpful the course of study was in helping her become a more actively engaged listener, with such comments as, “Taking that course helps you to be a better listener. It just can’t help but help you.”

Betty was also asked if she had utilized any of the suggested techniques for remembering the sermon and its textual basis and if they had helped. Betty came to the course with a great memory for sermons. During the interview she prefaced an answer with, “In fact, I don’t know if you remember your first sermon, [January 1994!] but one of the first things you said was...” She did, however, identify some new practices aimed at enhancing memory as a result of the course.

Note taking during sermons was strongly encouraged as a discipline for enhancing memory. “Since I’ve taken your course, I think about it a lot more. Sometimes I look at the notes I write and I ask, ‘Now why did I like that? What did he

say?’ and I go over it a little more.” Betty mentioned taking notes and how helpful it had been about six times during the interview. “I write down little things and it helps me remember the sermon.” Again, “And the note taking. I write down a lot of your phrases and then underline some things.” Betty found she prefers her own free hand notes to fill-in-the-blank outlines or note sheets with guiding questions supplied in the bulletin. “I’ve been making notes, which to me is better than filling out your sheet because I feel that I was distracted doing that.”

Betty appreciates the use of visual aids as part of sermon development and mentioned that they help her memory. “In the beginning you have an object... So that object is, I don’t want to say a ‘symbol’ of the sermon, but it’s a kind of explanation that we can look at and then apply that. That helps me remember the sermon.”

The fourth objective was to enhance the listeners’ ability to mentally dialog with the preacher, that is, to participate in the discovery of the sermon’s message by engaging in the sermon’s unfolding. Betty was able to identify a number of ways in which she is working with the preacher in her listening.

I do know that since I took your course I’m looking at the sermon in kind of a different way. I’m trying to figure out what kind of sermon it is. I better understand the structure of your sermon, how you do something in the beginning to catch our interest. I loved it when you played that song, “This Old House.” And then I can see during your sermon how this object, how you got my mind thinking along this line. There’s a beginning and there’s a middle and then there’s an end, and then you draw a conclusion. And hopefully I draw the same conclusion. [Researcher asks, “Does that happen?”] Yeah. Often it does. Often it does.

The portion of the study on sermon structure and development was so meaningful to Betty that she remarked, “The structures. That’s the thing I went over and read again.

I never thought about that before.” That understanding has helped her be more active as a listener as the sermon moves and develops.

The discussion of the textual basis for sermons has also helped Betty listen dialogically. She looks for the biblical foundation of a sermon. “[The sermon] comes from the Bible, and that’s the most important. When you preach, you can prove, we can prove that it’s from the Bible and there’s no ifs, ands or buts.”

For Betty, the dialog with the preacher involves both verbal and non-verbal expression. “Sometimes the little things you say and the expression on your face tells me that things aren’t just right.” As she listens and watches, she’s hearing the message and working actively to hear.

The final purpose of the project was to assess participants’ perceived increased ability to recognize daily opportunities to apply the message heard. Here again Betty expressed significant benefit from the course. She anticipates help with life application from the sermon during the week. Her emotional approach to listening shows through in her comment, “[The sermon] shows me how I’m supposed to live my life. It explains things to me. It shows me my faults. And sometimes it makes me very happy.” And also, “I think it’s important how you go home feeling about the sermon, and if it means something to you, it causes you to act in a certain way.”

Betty, like most of the participants in the study, did not mention specific sermons that yielded a specific life application. She spoke mostly of how sermons, over time, have affected her Christian walk. “One of the things I really get from a sermon is comfort. I really experience it, the assurance that God really loves me and that he’s always going to be there for me, even though sometimes I don’t feel right, but I almost

have to remind myself to let God take over.” She has a sense that sermons change things for her, without being able to cite specific examples.

You learn the things that you should do. It helps you interpret the scripture. It explains the scripture to you, but as you’re doing all these things, you’re not condemning us, you’re letting us know that we’re human, that God knows that we’re human, that he expects us to make mistakes, but he forgives us. But also you’re letting us know that he wants us to improve and not to make all these mistakes. A sermon to me is an explanation of how God wants me to live my life. I’ve really noticed as I’ve gotten older a change in my thinking. I don’t think that things people do really bother me.

While Betty had the most intensely positive experience in the class and the greatest number of favorable comments, others in the group showed significant benefit from the study and will be considered with her in this first group.

Subject #2: Joan

Joan is a long time member of Mount Calvary, recently retired from teaching. She often showed herself to be very thoughtful during the class, giving serious consideration to each topic and asking insightful and probing questions.

An active and attentive listener to sermons, Joan expressed benefit from some parts of the study, but not all. When asked about the first objective and how she prepared to hear the sermon, she responded, “I walk in the door. That is it. I walk in the door. And saying, ‘Lord, just help me listen.’ I know the text is listed in the previous Sunday’s bulletin, but frankly, I don’t read it... If I have time, if I give myself time, then I’ll pray before church.”

From her teaching experience, Joan concurred with the course’s emphasis on active listening.

But I also think we are in a different world, in a more visual world. You can’t stand up there and give a lecture. We’re all drifting and if the sermon is not

moving, if it's not grabbing us back, then the devil is taking us wherever. I think I'm a very good listener, and I'm also a critical listener. I get very impatient with people who are not doing their job, who are just wasting my time. You're not wasting my time.

She also mentioned how the visual aids to the sermon help her be actively engaged in the listening process. "I think the props that you use, the anecdotes that you use, the personal examples you use grab your audience and get their attention."

Joan identifies her preferred listening style as *logos*, or intellectual. She is not yet comfortable with the fact that it is just her personal approach, but questions if it is an adequate approach. She compared it to *ethos* which judges the authenticity of the preacher and the emotional, *pathos*.

Actually, to be honest, I think it's the intellectual. And that bothers me. It bothers me in Sunday School classes, because I ask too many questions, or I question, to be more to the point, um, yeah, I think the intellectual, then the authenticity and then the emotional. If I didn't think it was authentic, if it was true to what I've been brought up to believe, then I wouldn't be back. Intellectual can become a barrier, you just have to have faith, you can't have all the answers, but I think my natural is the intellectual. The logical, because I'm easily lost. I think I'm a gracious listener. I'm one of those people who will listen, and I will give them a break, but it gets to the point where I want to get up and leave. I'm questioning the authenticity until I see where you're going.

As with others in the study, Joan only partially implemented a strategy for enhancing memory, the third objective. "I've taken some notes and put them on the refrigerator. [Researcher asks, 'Has that been helpful?'] Every once in a while I look at it. It's there. I don't know about that. I feel guilty about not directly returning myself to it during the week... It's so rewarding, but I'm not there."

Joan's effort to mentally dialog with the preacher was one of the most rewarding parts of the experience for her. Concerning the interplay of preacher and listener she used her teaching experience as an analogy.

If there's no response, you're dead in the water. You want to pull another trick to get some response. Even if that one is not getting it, you go over there and stand next to him, or preach next to him [laughs]. It's got to be disheartening if you have this message and you're preaching it and not everyone is getting it. If you're preaching, you're responding to how they're responding to you.

The researcher asked Joan what dialog with the preacher was like and her comments hinted at a dialog with God himself. Dialog means

that I'm where I'm supposed to be, that the message is for me, that I'm not in a law kind of sense, heeding, but you're asking for all these things and then they're right here. Wow. Mainly I'm truly looking for guidance and also for strength, you know, if a thought comes through my mind, and you know, you've got hope again and hope gives me peace, because of your love, and for some reason that cannot be reinforced enough.

Like Betty, Joan did not link specific sermons with specific changes in behavior, but showed an increased ability to recognize opportunities for application of biblical truth because of the course. When asked if the course helped her she said,

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I think it's made me grow in more self assurance, to where I should go to remind myself that I don't have to worry what others think, because, golly, God loves me so don't be so, hurt or don't be a self-evaluator about things that happen in daily life. That's one. The other is God loves me, God forgives me, he's not done with me, but he has a path for me. I've asked him to show me, but I also realize that I have free will so I struggle with my roles here. It's like I'm just supposed to say, "Do this" without my bringing something to the table. I think the sermon has totally helped me with my relationships with others, with [my husband], because we're two people sharing the same space. With my family and neighbors. I'm totally disappointed that I'm not reaching other people. The sermons do a combination of things. It elevates us so we move beyond ourselves. And I think that's really important because we're so consumed with our own insecurities and self worth. We need to get out there so we can really do it.

Joan is listening for application.

The course emphasized that one goal of preaching is to help Christians discover ways to respond to Christ's love in service. "I'm also listening for ways to live my faith out, because that for me is a growing point, so I'm listening for it." Joan said that,

You've made us realize that we really have a commitment outside of Mount Calvary. You've really helped us to see that we're not here just for our own personal validation and growth, that there are people out there who are crying in the dark and need our help. Actually, I think you are doing a wonderful job to communicate with your audience, to get them to understand what our goal is as Christians... You've said to us, "Look, you have a responsibility as a Christian".

Joan wants to find guidance from God in the sermon.

And I also think people are looking for direction. We're all so insecure, and we're looking for direction in our lives. I want a neon sign in front of my house telling me "this way, this way." Should I get a job? I think it's out there on every level. I think it's just so incredible. I've known the way all my life, and here I am just like everybody else. You know, "Am I doing right?"

And she identified one way that sermons are making a difference. "I also think that what was said in the sermon reinforces my responses to things and my view of things."

Joan is very contemplative and insightful about her many years of sermon listening experiences, but indicated repeatedly her appreciation for the insights gained through participation in the course.

Subject #3: Eddie

Eddie came to Mount Calvary and the course of study with a much different background than either Betty or Joan. He is a young man in his mid twenties. He was raised and confirmed in the congregation, but dropped into inactivity through his adolescent years until about one year before the study. Like Joan and Betty, Eddie indicated in the interview how the course of study has helped him grow significantly in his capacity to listen to the sermon for understanding. He admits that he is just a beginner to sermon listening and maturity in Christ, quite different from Betty and Joan. And yet because of his eagerness to hear, he showed great appreciation for the course.

When asked how the course helped him prepare for listening, Eddie spoke of our emphasis on prayer. “Well, the first thing I do, which I normally do on Saturday nights, is I pray before I go to bed that God will help me be ready and be prepared to go into church on Sunday and hear his word and understand it. As far as getting up and getting ready for church, nothing out of the ordinary to prep myself. It’s just something I put in my prayers.”

Eddie has grown to recognize that he must play an active role in listening. He describes his preparation before the sermon as, “Just trying to focus, just trying to block out... I sometimes have weird things running through my head, you know, off the wall things, like what am I going to eat for breakfast. I don’t intend for it to happen, it just that something that pops up. I just try to block it out and get ready to listen.”

He has also grown to understand the purpose of preaching and why it is important for him to be an attentive, active listener. He spoke often about the effort he puts in. “Trying to hear and understand God’s word, and what he has planned for us, what his will is and try to abide by that. That’s the whole reason, pretty much the whole reason, for coming to church to study God’s word.”

Eddie appreciates the emotional side of listening, but believes that he is first and foremost influenced by the relational, or *ethos* aspect of the sermon.

I think it all starts with you, with the preacher, because if you’re just up there and you look like you’re just going through the motions, and you’re just talking just to talk, and people will pick up on that if you don’t sound like you’re sincere about what you’re trying to give us. You’re giving us God’s word. I think to answer that, yeah, it would be that the preacher is sincere, and because that’s where everything else comes from because if you’re not sincere, and that’s not coming over, if you’re not picking up on that, you can’t really get any emotion from that.

The course has helped him to be a more active listener. He shared that he is making a more concerted effort to follow the flow and structure of the sermon in order to discover the message.

[I'm] just trying to focus more or to see where you or whoever is going with the message or just trying to pick up on what you're trying to relate to us. [Researcher asks, "How is that going?"] I'm not going to say I'm all the way there, but I'm just trying to take everything in and to completely understand and everything. I can't say that I totally understood or remember everything, but I'm not there yet. It's better, but I'm not at that point. [Researcher asks about his first experience back in worship after a long absence and if he gained any benefit from the first sermons he heard.] Probably not a lot. First time back in there just trying to get my bearings and get reacquainted. I'm not where I would like to be.

The suggestion to take notes as an aid to memory struck Eddie as a useful suggestion, but he has not tried it yet.

Actually I haven't. I've been thinking about that lately, knowing that this meeting was coming up. I've been thinking about where have I failed and "What can I do?" Probably what would be best for me is if I started taking notes right now. It would stick with me a little better. Some sermons are like in general, like two weeks from then I'm like, "What the hell was that about?" I'm, like scrambling.

The struggle to remember specifics was mentioned in less descriptive terms by many of the participants. Eddie mentioned again that, "The best thing for me would be to probably jot down notes."

One sermon that Eddie remembered clearly and was able to apply directly was a sermon from the congregation's annual stewardship emphasis.

Yeah, it's helped. One I remember, out of the 33 Days of Stewardship about being content with what you have. That's something I'm battling with, that I'm trying to work on myself because I'm, I mean this is off the subject, but I'm a big electronics person, and I like to... I don't go all the way overboard, but I like to get nice things. You get what you pay for. And you know technology, once you get something a couple months later there's something new that gets out there and I think, "Man!" I'm just trying to be, you know, work on being content with what I have. Not being caught up on material stuff. There was a sermon on that that kind of stuck with me.

Maybe Eddie's most significant benefit was how the course helped him consider the intentional structure and movement of the sermon toward a specific conclusion. In his listening, he is

trying to get an idea from you when you were explaining about how you get ready for a sermon, kind of, what was going through your mind? You always seem to have like a good, well you don't do it every week, but you always seem to have a good story to tie it in, like, I guess it was a couple weeks ago when you mentioned going to the movies with your wife. Always having a nice little story and relating it to, you know, something in the real world and then tie that in to the sermon.

Eddie is learning to be active in his dialog with the preacher. He said, "There are times when I can pick up and try to go, to get to where you're headed to. I'm trying to think, 'Where are you going with this?'" [Researcher asks, "Has that worked well for you?"] "It did with contentment. Not all the time."

Eddie notes that his renewed faith in Christ has, in general, been of greater influence in his daily living than specific sermons. When asked about recognizing daily opportunities to apply the message of the sermon he responded, "It's not all the time from sermons, but just [pause] mostly trying to live right by God and just in general. I always pray that I can improve myself in all facets of my life in a positive way." He mentioned his active worship participation as an influential force, and also the sermon on contentment as the only specific example of direct application of a sermon's lessons.

Group Two Findings: Moderate Benefit

Subject #4: Roy

Roy is a middle-aged man who until recently was a life-long, active member of the Roman Catholic Church. He worshiped with us for many years with his wife before joining the congregation. His participation in the course of study was enthusiastic and he offered many helpful insights in the teaching sessions. His questions were pointed and

his presence encouraged an active listening and learning environment. However, when interviewed about the impact of the study, Roy could identify only a few small ways in which the course enhanced his listening experience.

The project was intended to help listeners prepare in advance for sermon listening. Eight weeks after taking the course of study, when asked if the course had had any impact on how he prepares for sermon listening, Roy stated,

No, I can't say that it did... I could lie and say I think about the sermon on Saturday, but I don't. Probably, really, I start to think about it during the liturgy, or when I see the name of the sermon. Or when I see what the theme of the season is, it's going to be something about Christmas. [Researcher asks if he does anything to prepare for listening as the sermon begins.] I don't know that I do a lot. The preparatory liturgy, I guess. I don't intentionally think what the message is coming up. I just want to experience it as it comes up. I'm probably not giving all the right answers.²¹⁶

Roy considers himself an active listener, but again suggested that the course had only a minimal impact on his listening efforts. He spoke of the *ethos* aspect of listening. The credibility of the preacher is important to Roy.

It's the idea of you presenting something that you believe in. Some preachers are up there just kind of reading a script. I think it's important to get your audience or maybe congregation feel that they have total faith in what you say. If you don't come across as credible in what you're saying, I think the whole congregation knows. If it's fire and brimstone, the congregation would leave very quickly. You can just tell when the presentation is not credible or not sincere.

Roy hinted at his understanding of the importance of being an active listener. "You usually start the sermon with a life example, and I look and see how you're going to tie that in to the sermon point."

The course clearly had no impact on Roy's capacity to remember the sermon in the days that follow. "I'd be hard pressed to remember two hours later what the topic

²¹⁶ The researcher affirmed for Roy that there were no right or wrong answers in the research project, only his honest responses to the interview questions. In Roy's case, the answers were very honest!

was.” He is, however, sympathetic to the researcher’s intentions in the project. “That must be depressing for you. You work so hard on this great sermon and we only retain it for three hours, but it’s refreshing.” When asked if he utilizes any of the suggestions for remembering, he said, “I do not. [My wife] takes notes, but I find that distracting. Really, truthfully, I don’t. We may talk about it on the way home after church. No, I can’t say that I go through any special...[response trails off]” Roy’s approach is that if there should be something worth remembering in the sermon, he would remember it. “I listen to the sermon, and I pick up a point, and if it was anything earth-shattering I think I would remember it. It’s mostly about refueling.”

Roy did not apply any effort to intentionally dialoging with the preacher. He did remember that we had talked about sermon structures and moves. “The only thing that I really remember, it’s tied in with Toastmasters, there are different types of presentation. You can build up or, you know. When you’re going to present a sermon or a speech or anything in a different format, and that’s probably what I remember most.” Roy is an active, but skeptical listener. “I’ll go with your point and see if I disagree or not. I see where it takes me. I analyze way too much. I’d love to see sermons on current topics, and I know to a degree that would be Darrell’s opinion or the church’s opinion and I don’t know if I would accept it or not, but it would be my choice.” He is, however, concerned that people are indeed listening attentively. “I think I’ve asked you at times whether or not you can look out and see if whether or not you are getting them or not, or whether or not there is enough of a facial expression or not, you know, if people chuckle at the right time or not tells if they’ve been listening.”

Like most others in the study, Roy identified only a broad, general application of sermon truths in daily life. "I don't know if I can give examples. Can I say that happens? I'd say yes, but details, I'm not so sure about. The idea of a theme or thought might come in." For Roy, the sermon is a time of renewal.

It keeps my week in perspective, and I don't just mean that time wise. It's kind of a reminder that there's a kind of a cycle. It keeps your life in order, including the religious side of your life. It's a good reminder. About listening to the sermon, I'd be hard pressed to remember two hours later what the topic was. It pushes you toward the straight and narrow. I know when I haven't gone to church. It changes my week. I need to be reminded of things very, very often. It keeps me on the straight and narrow.

Could Roy remember a time when the sermon influenced a decision?

Enough in a sense that I think I'm applying some sense of Christian principles in work and in life. I think invariably I think about that in making a decision. It's part of a decision process. In particular, I'd answer, sure I have. I don't have a particular example, however. I think quite often in your sermons you cite a personal example, and I can see where years later or months later, I can apply that.

Roy was attentive and inquisitive during the course of study, but chose not to apply the learnings and showed only minimal benefit from the class.

Subject #5: Mary

Mary is a working woman and long time listener to sermons who has only recently become a member of our congregation and the Lutheran Church. Like Roy, she was an active and engaged participant in the course of study who identified only a few affects on her sermon listening experience.

Mary had begun studying the text of the sermon in advance preparation for listening before taking the course. "I guess I started sometime this summer, reading the portion of the Bible that the sermon is about. I generally read that. It's helpful because I

sometimes have a hard time reading the Bible and understanding what it says. And it helps me be prepared to understand when I'm listening." She also likes to use the time before the service to prepare for listening. "I like to come in early and sit quietly for a few minutes, just to be ready."

In the interview, Mary did not make any comments that indicated the course had helped her become more active and attentive in her listening.

She did make an effort at note taking for greater memory, but expressed mixed success. "I've tried note taking, but I get to writing, but then I look and 'Oh, I've missed two [blanks in the outline sheet].' But when I went to it and I take all the note taking, when I get home I read through the Bible passage again, and that helps so it kind of stays with me. But many I times I go, 'Oh I forgot.' I've been thinking about journaling. Because we had a thing at our evening guild and I've been thinking about journaling. When I take notes, I take them home and look at them during the week."

Mary also indicated that her attempts to dialog actively with the preacher were not always fruitful or an important part of her listening. Her relationship with the preacher influences her active engagement in the sermon. "Whenever anybody speaks to me that I perceive that's saying what they think I want to hear, I don't like it. And I've been to services where I think the Pastor was saying what we wanted to hear, not what we needed to hear. For me, trust is knowing that I'm going to get what I need, not necessarily what I want." She tried to apply the lesson about sermon structures, but found it frustrating. "At first I tried to figure out which [structure] you were using, but then I couldn't figure it out."

The questions asked about dialog with the preacher caused some reflection on her part about her own listening and that of the rest of the congregation. “I’ve always wondered how you react to the expressions on people. I’m sitting there looking at you, but I don’t necessarily see what’s going on around, but I imagine you see it all. When you make a statement, then I will respond internally to that, but I’m not so sure that I expect it.” So Mary wonders about an active engagement of the listener with the preacher, but does not seek it intentionally herself.

Similar to Eddie, Mary could identify a time when a particular sermon led to an immediate application in her life. “I remember I said to my friend Betty, ‘You know, it’s been bothering me all week and I don’t know how he knew how to preach on that.’ I think I have a tendency to take what has been going on in my life, and if the message is in the sermon, I try to work it around there. Things I have questions about. Why people do things.” And similar to Betty and Joan, the peace given through the gospel finds regular application in Mary’s life.

We all struggle with “I want to be perfect.” I never want to say something bad, or I even chastise myself about thinking something bad about people, but your sermons help me, keep reminding me that I don’t have to be like the Old Testament, to be perfect and obey all the laws, because God gave us Jesus for that. And that brings it back to me. It seems like in your sermons there’s always that forgiveness.

Mary loves hearing the word proclaimed in the sermon and recognizes how the word influences her life as a Christian, but most aspects of the course of study were either not remembered or applied with only minimal impact on her ability to listen attentively to the sermon.

Group Three Findings: No Significant Perceived Benefit

Subject #6: Amy

Amy is a young wife and mother of two small children. She enthusiastically accepted the invitation to attend the course of study and is very interested in improving her listening skills in the sermon. The task of managing her two children in worship, however, inhibits her capacity to listen attentively to an entire sermon message.

Mount Calvary encourages the presence of small children in the worship service in order to build the habits of attentiveness from an early age. A cry room was recently installed in the back of the sanctuary. A children's message is a part of every Sunday service. Ushers make available children's books and children's bulletins, and the worship planning team intentionally selects music the children can sing. These steps are intended to encourage parents to worship with their small children. Amy and her husband greatly appreciate these efforts, but intentional and active listening to the sermon is very difficult.

In her interview, Amy repeatedly mentioned how she "tries" to practice many of the listening techniques discussed in the course, but that she finds it practically impossible. "I really tried to see what kind of sermon you were going to do... but I find that as the weeks go on I'm getting back to not being able to focus as much as I'd like to." When asked what it is that she gets out of listening to sermons, Amy laughed and said in a good-natured sarcastic way, "That's a good one! [Laughs] I would say I probably get one or two good points. If Lilly were older I'd probably be able to do a lot better listening."

Amy would love the opportunity to put some of her learnings into practice. “I feel bad because I can’t pay as much attention.” That seems largely impractical while her children are young.

Subject #7: Jill

Jill is also a mother of two young children. Her experience after the course of study was much the same as Amy’s. One suggestion Jill had for the researcher was, “Maybe you should have a class on how to make your kids sit still.”

Jill is also interested in making use of the skills taught in the course, but finds it impractical in her current situation.

I have tried to do the conversation thing, but I find that it’s just difficult. Note taking and journaling is near impossible, and I’ve tried to get in the car and talk about it before I forgot it, but a lot of times it’s just chaotic. But I do think that those kinds of things would be helpful. I think it would be helpful if I could pull it off, but I just don’t have a chance to do that. We just tend to get in the car and start the discussion about what the kids just did in church [laughter] and when we get home and try to get a meal together, by the time you sit down together and think about it, it’s like, “Okay, what was the sermon?”

Besides the suggestions for enhancing memory of the sermon just mentioned, Jill also found the discussion of sermon structures potentially helpful. “I did find it really interesting to see how [the sermon] is all set up and to discuss how you put it all together and help tie it in and help it flow from one week to the next and kind of follow.” Jill is hopeful that as her family situation progresses she will benefit more from what she learned in the course. “I think a person who doesn’t have the distractions I have will probably get more out of the listening part of it than I did.”

Subject #8: Marla

Marla was the third of the eight participants in the study who worships with her family, including two small children. While her daughters are a few years older than

Amy's and Jill's, she mentioned repeatedly in the interview that her parenting responsibilities during worship have prohibited her from practicing most of what she learned in the course.

Right now I think that's because I have the distraction of my kids, so it's an aspect where you have to really get involved and you really have to be tuned in and focused and hear [the sermon] all the way through without any interruptions, and I have the hanging on the sleeves, "Mommy!" so I'll miss part of it and I'll have to reset the focus to get back. You've missed the hill, like you're going up the mountain and then "Wait a minute! Where's the mountain?" You have to start back up again.

Marla recognized the potential benefit of the course.

I found the class interesting; the parts where you told us about sermons and how they are constructed, but as I've gone through this [eight weeks of application] I couldn't for the life of me remember it [laughter]. It could be helpful because of the different ideas, that it could be something that people had not have thought about, that they could try, and that was already something that I had considered doing.

She has a great desire to listen and learn from the sermon. "[M]aybe it would be nice if we could remember it and take each piece as an important part of it and take it out in our lives and live it and change and be better every week for hearing wonderful sermons, but it just doesn't seem like that's the way it happens." She shared that in her current situation, she finds it difficult to do more than casual listening to the sermon.

Summary Analysis of the Responses

The organization of the study's findings has indicated the first conclusion: different people received different benefit from the project. There are a number of reasons why.

Two Kinds of Righteousness

The authority and efficacy of the word of God are never modified by the listener's willingness or ability to listen attentively. The listener contributes nothing to God's work in human hearts through the word, the vertical dimension of righteousness.

But listening is a human activity, and different people listen in different ways. As evidenced in the study, in any Christian congregation, listeners to sermons will actively engage in the listening experience on a wide variety of different levels. And participants in a course of study aimed at enhancing listening skills will utilize the skills taught according to their own personal preferences and according to their own willingness and ability to apply them. That is the nature of the horizontal level of righteousness. Part of listening to the word is dependant upon the contribution of the listener.

Willingness to Apply Learnings

By their interview responses, it became clear that some participants in the study were far more interested in applying the lessons learned than others. Betty and Joan, for example, expressed a great degree of passion for the sermons and were eager to immediately apply some of the suggestions. This willingness was evidenced in their perceived increased ability to listen and to achieve many of the goals of the project. As a newcomer to sermon listening as part of Christian discipleship, Eddie was also very eager to apply as many of the lessons as he was able. In the weeks following the conclusion of the study, Eddie has remained inquisitive and open to guidance in gaining more from the weekly sermon.

Roy and Mary, on the other hand, were attentive and cooperative, but did not show the level of commitment to applying the lessons of the study to their listening.

Both were able to articulate in the interviews many of the suggestions, but shared that they had not really made a concerted effort to apply them. It was not a matter of opportunity. They understood the concepts, but benefited only to the limited degree that the suggestions were applied.

This reaction to the course indicates that not everyone in the congregation is a suitable candidate for this type of study. The implications for the future will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Ability to Apply Learnings

The three young mothers, Amy, Jill, and Marla, all expressed an interest in gaining more from their sermon listening, but related in the interviews how their ability to apply the learnings was hindered by the distraction of their children. They all indicated in one way or another that they appreciated the skills taught in the course and could see their potential benefit, but had had little opportunity to apply them to a degree that could provide insight for the project.

Eddie expressed how his lack of experience and still developing faith kept him from applying many of the lessons he learned. This indicates that the project attempted to do too much in too brief a span of time for those who are new to sermon listening. Betty and Joan, because of their prior experience, were easily able to apply many of the lessons learned. It would have been beneficial for Eddie to have learned some more rudimentary lessons and have some guided experience applying them before moving on to more advanced topics, like sermon structures. As he stated, "I'm not all the way there." Mary seemed to indicate that her ability to apply some of the learnings was hindered by her less than complete grasp of the topic. Concerning dialog with the

preacher along the lines of a particular sermon structure, she said, “At first I tried to figure out which [structure] you were using, but then I couldn’t figure it out.” This also points out that the course attempted too much too quickly for some participants.

Potential Side Benefit

More productive feedback for the preacher was identified as a potential side benefit of the study. Most of the interviews included favorable comments about the preacher’s sermon content, delivery, and embodiment. These comments were of a general encouraging nature and not of the constructive critical nature hoped for. While the participants are enthusiastic about the preaching at Mount Calvary, they have not yet shown growth in the type of discerning listening that will provide the feedback sought. There is certainly ongoing potential for that as more of the congregation joins the project participants in more active and informed listening.

Conclusion

The project should be considered successful because of the many participant responses indicating an increased ability to prepare for, listen to, and recognize opportunities to apply the message of sermons. The limited ability of most participants to fully apply the lessons of the project show that modifications to the subject matter and the teaching schedule should be considered before future application in the parish.

CHAPTER SIX

TOWARD BETTER HEARING OF THE WORD: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Immediate Impact of the Project

The project, “Toward Better Hearing of the Word in the Sermon,” has already impacted the way we do ministry at Mount Calvary. In some small ways that we hope will guide the future, the pastoral relationship between preacher and listeners has moved to a new level of openness and sharing. This chapter will review those changes and will also suggest recommendations for the future, both at Mount Calvary and for the Church.

Conversation about Preaching

The design of the project mandated numerous extended conversations about preaching between the Pastor and members of the congregation. The preliminary focus groups, the course of study, and the subsequent interviews proved so fruitful for both preacher and listeners that many more conversations, unrelated to the project, have been initiated. Many more congregational members not part of the study have been engaged in conversations about preaching also. Those discussions were initiated by participants in the study, an encouraging sign. Mount Calvary is talking about sermons, what’s good, what needs improvement, and what preacher and listeners can do to improve their skills. The study participants have encouraged the researcher to develop this model further because they sense the potential benefit for themselves and others in the church.

Sensitivity to Young Families

The interviews with Jill, Amy, and Marla, mothers of young children, made clear what was suspected: parents of young children can’t give 15 – 20 minutes of undivided attention to a sermon. The young women were very gracious toward their Pastor in the

interviews. As a result of the conversations and the frustration expressed, I have become extremely sensitive to the challenges faced by this growing population at our services.

I find myself offering both public and private encouragement to them to continue to be as faithful as they can be in weekly worship with the hope that as their children mature, they will see brighter days for sermon listening. I have also made modifications in my preaching. Sensitive to their sporadic listening techniques, grabbing a few short portions of the message as they are able, I use more refrains and repetitive phrases throughout the sermon so that the emphasis and main points are clarified. Visual aids are becoming more prominent, both to help adults and to draw the attention of the children so parents and children can listen together. Marla expressed a need to tune back in after missing a few hills while climbing the mountain. Pauses in delivery are becoming more prominent at strategic points to indicate to those distracted by children that the next words spoken are significant in the sermon.

Creativity

Christians gathered for worship have a great desire to hear the word of God with understanding. In recent years I have grown in my use of creative techniques in sermon structure and delivery. The project has impressed me with a need to provide sermons that are easily hearable for the congregation. As the congregation grows in listening skills, I have a desire to stay ahead of the pace by being ever more hearable. Use of visual aids is well received by most all listeners. Variety in sermon structures that engage the listening ear and encourage active engagement is more and more prominent. Styles of delivery, like dialog or interview sermons, are happening more often. I expect this trend to continue.

“Windows” to the Sermon

The “Listening to Listeners”²¹⁷ research prompted the inclusion of a section on listening styles in the project. In the interviews, each of the eight subjects was able easily and readily to identify his or her preferred style of listening, whether intellectual, relational, or emotional. That has resulted in an ongoing conversation among more and more of the members of the congregation as we learn together that there is variety in how people listen. It has also influenced sermon development. I regularly analyze sermon preparation to see if there are windows for our different kinds of listeners. The congregation is, to some degree, also learning to appreciate the necessity for a sermon to address different listening audiences in the same setting.

Listener Preparation

One of our regular weekly Bible study opportunities has been an advance study of the upcoming sermon text, a practice beneficial to both listener and preacher. Class attendance has grown as a direct result of the study. Members of the class have requested regular updates on the progress of the project. Enthusiasm for the difference the class makes for hearing with understanding now spills over into invitations to others to join us on Tuesdays.

Because of this, my Sunday Bible class offering during Lent focused on the preaching texts for the Wednesday Lenten services. I anticipate that such opportunities for the preacher and the congregation to prepare together for the sermon will continue and expand.

²¹⁷ See Chapter 3, 67-69. The third volume in the series, yet to be published, will further consider the wide range of listener responses to researchers’ questions. The fourth will offer practical suggestions for preachers.

Long-Term Impact of the Project

Numerous potential long-term implications for ministry can also be identified as a result of the project.

Encouragement for Listeners

Even though the project was limited in its scope and in its level of success, it has raised the level of conversation about listening for understanding. As modifications are made to the course of study and as the course is further implemented in the congregation, I expect to see listeners becoming more enthusiastic about the potential in the sermon listening experience. The response of participants has motivated me to have an even higher view of preaching and its potential to impact the congregation with the life-changing word. I am an unapologetic advocate for sermon listening and even more so for training the congregation to listen.

Small Groups and Sermons

Because of the impact on our regular Bible studies noted above, discussion has begun about using the sermon as the topic in our small group ministry studies. These lay-led home groups engage in Bible study as a part of the regular meetings. Reflection on the previous Sunday's sermon and preparation for the upcoming Sunday are being considered as topics for the groups.

Youth Confirmation

Junior confirmands are required to submit sermon studies as part of their instruction. The concepts developed in the project will be translated to the junior confirmation context and more extensive instruction will be given throughout the years of their preparation.

Strategic Planning

Mount Calvary's Board of Directors has recently established intentional ministries for the spiritual growth of the members as a top priority. Strategic planning for the future includes a core curriculum of growth experiences, such as retreats and preparation for vocation by all believers. The course in sermon listening is included in the curriculum.

Preaching for Cumulative Effect

When asked about specific application of truths learned in the sermon, hardly any examples were given that showed a one to one correlation between a sermon and a life application. Many participants, however, indicated that sermons have a cumulative effect over time. Preaching at Mount Calvary will continue to be planned with a long-term focus. The effect of preaching should not be judged from week to week, but more from disciple to disciple.

Implications for the Church

Recent trends in homiletics are proving fruitful in congregational life, but focus primarily on the efforts of the preacher. The limited scope of the project at Mount Calvary shows enough promise to have implications for the church at large.

Local Congregations

The project, especially as modified in the recommendations below, should prove helpful in many parish contexts. Pastors might adapt the study to reflect their own local practice regarding creativity in preaching. Listeners to sermons everywhere would benefit from the instruction offered and the conversations with the preacher that would naturally arise from the course.

Literature

While all homiletical texts are ultimately concerned with sermons that are received, most traditional homiletical texts offer little more than a token chapter on the listener. The focus is almost always exclusively on the preacher's role in preparing and delivering the sermon. Even in Craddock's *Preaching*, where the needs of listeners are central to his presentation,²¹⁸ there is no effort to intentionally train the listener for his or her role. Craddock emphasizes understanding the listener and speaking to the listener's needs, but not helping the listener to listen. Johnston's *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners* examines wide ranging needs of contemporary listeners and many reasons why traditional sermons may not reach them. As important as this contribution is, Johnston still offers no suggestions for coaching the listeners in their task.

Even the "Listening to Listeners" project will conclude with suggestions for the preacher. I will be interested to see if the project offers any guidance for helping the listeners in their task. The foundation of the study in the conversations with listeners should result in aid directly to the listeners. I fear Ronald Allen will conclude with more preachers talking to preachers about preaching.

Seminary Training

Further research in the area of assisting listeners in their task could result in helpful material for pastors in training. The challenge of listening to sermons will grow increasingly difficult as the media culture continues to impact our congregations. We live in an information age, and our listeners are bombarded with data, advertising and

²¹⁸ Craddock, *Preaching*, 84-98.

messages of all sorts. Equipping our pastors to prepare their congregations for the Sunday listening experience can only help enhance the communication of God's word in the parish. As seminary graduates develop the pastoral/preaching relationship in the parish, it would be good intentionally to build a common foundation for the unique communication that happens in the Christian sermon.

Impact on the Researcher

Professional Growth

One aspect of theological reflection is to take that which appears quite simple, such as a preacher sharing Christ in the sermon, and make it complex. This project afforded me the opportunity to examine thoroughly the work of the word in the lives of God's people. Months of reflection on the preaching task, intense conversations with listeners to sermons, and development and sharing a course on listening have heightened my awareness of the complexity and mystery of how the Holy Spirit is at work. The word enters the preacher's life, is transmitted to the congregation in the sermon, and received to the benefit of the people. Each stage of this divinely guided process is a complex and wondrous event.

The task of parish ministry, by contrast, is to take that which is complex and make it simple. My most significant learning as a parish pastor is an increased awareness of the need to speak to people in terms they can understand and to assist them by any means possible to receive the word of the Lord. I'm living now in a new paradox. This project has made me recognize what a difficult and complex task it is to preach the word clearly and understandably. At the conclusion of this project, however, I will be most pleased to hear from the congregation that my preaching has become more plain.

The project design required a partnership of pastor and congregation in the effort to improve the ministry of the word at Mount Calvary. The experience proved enriching for me as a professional in the church, and judging by comments from participants in the study, was a blessing also to the saints who served through their efforts. Pastoral relationships have been strengthened and our mutual commitment to the work of the Lord's mission for the Church will benefit the entire Mount Calvary community.

Many advances in homiletics have been made since my graduation from Concordia Seminary in 1982. The Doctor of Ministry program and especially the intense endeavor of the Major Applied Project forced me to apply the insights from these new studies to our local parish context. The experience has also created a desire to watch closely for the ongoing development of research along the lines of the study in the future.

The opportunity to consider the doctrinal formulations of the Lutheran Confessions and their significance for parish life at Mount Calvary was also an enriching experience. The timeless truths of the scripture as expounded in the Confessions have been renewed as a useful tool for very practical aspects of our weekly ministry of the word. More recent reflections on our Lutheran theology, as in the study on the two kinds of righteousness, also proved so useful as a foundation for the project that I will be a more eager student of the current theological dialog in the Church.

Personal Growth

I am a different person because of my work on the project over the past year. The intensely personal conversations about faith and the work that God does in his people through the sermons has been a humbling experience. I've gained a greater insight into the trust relationship that is established between Pastor and people. To be invited week

after week into such an intimate place as the hearts and souls of God's people is an enormous privilege. I am more aware of my role in the horizontal dimension and more eager than ever to prepare excellent sermons and deliver them with precision and care. And I am ever more reliant on what God alone can do, reliant week by week upon the Word of God himself and the Spirit of the Lord to work wonders on this preacher and his people at Mount Calvary as we gather around the word.

Luther's Sacristy Prayer has become especially dear to me over the months of this project.

Lord God, You have appointed me a bishop, a pastor in Your church. You see that I am unfit to undertake this great and difficult office, and were it not for Your help, I would long since have ruined it all. Therefore, I call to You; I will assuredly apply my mouth and heart to Your service. I desire to teach the people, and I myself would want to learn more and more. Instill the desire to diligently meditate on Your Word. Use me as your instrument, only do not forsake me, for if I am left alone, I shall easily bring it all to destruction. Amen.²¹⁹

I am changed also by the knowledge of the continuing prayers of God's people for their preacher, and the response of our gracious Lord to those prayers. We are growing in our recognition that the preaching and listening tasks are the work of God and dependant upon prayer.

Working on the project has also refreshed me in my expectation for the Lord's work among our community of faith in the future. Pastor and people at Mount Calvary move forward into further endeavors in preaching and listening with great enthusiasm. The dialog begun in the course of study will continue.

Toward that end, I suggest these recommendations for modification and future implementation of the project.

²¹⁹ Martin Luther, quoted in George Kraus, *By Word and Prayer: A Pastor's Daily Prayer and Study Guide* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 20.

Recommendations

Participant Selection

Participants in the study were chosen to reflect a broad spectrum of the congregation. The project indicated that certain individuals are more apt to benefit from the course of study than others. If presented in the same scope and sequence as the project and over the same brief period of study, the course should be offered only to those ready for a significant challenge. Betty and Joan are people of mature faith who enter the sermon listening event with high expectations and a wealth of sermon listening experience. They are sensitive listeners and eager learners with a desire to gain even more benefit from the proclaimed word. Congregational members of similar capacity should be considered for participation in the course very much as it was presented in the project.

Some congregational members will not display the eagerness to invest the effort required to benefit from this or a similar course of study. The Pastor should continue to cultivate that desire, but not encourage such members to participate in such an intensive growth experience until they show a greater level of willingness.

For the large number of members who are interested in getting more from the sermon, but who don't exhibit the maturity level of Betty or Joan, a modified course should be developed. If the course of study developed for the project was compared to a "300" level university course, a "100" level course would benefit a greater number of the members of the congregation. The most significant modification to the course would be the pace at which material is presented and subsequently applied.

Pace

The time parameters for the project encouraged a short, intense period of study followed by an extended period of implementation. Most participants in the study noted limited application of the skills presented. On reflection, I believe that for most participants the course presented too much too quickly. Most all members could benefit from a course of study on the nature and purposes of preaching in the church, the structure and development of thought in the sermon, the place of preaching in the worship of the Church, and skills for listening and remembering. Such a course should, however, be taught in small increments with plenty of opportunity for experimentation and conversation between preacher and listeners along the way.

One possibility that I will strongly consider would divide the three teaching sessions of the course into three separate courses of study, each to be presented not in a single session, but in weekly sessions spanning as many as six to eight weeks each. The subdivisions of the sessions marked in bold type seem to be natural places to break. The teaching sessions would be followed by a week of implementation where participants would be encouraged to reflect on the insights gained during their preparation for, listening to, and reflection upon the sermon in the next Sunday's worship. Each session after the first would include time for participant reaction to the concepts and skills taught. The Pastor would review the previous week's teaching and answer questions that arose from the week's experience.

Having affirmed a smaller amount of material by experimentation and by clarification, the class would move to another topic and proceed through the session's

remaining topics in the same fashion. The Session Three subunit “Aids to Memory”²²⁰ would be further subdivided into three sections so that the class could experiment individually with the skills of note taking, journaling, and conversation.

Summary Conclusion

God the Holy Spirit is at work in his people through the proclamation of the word and God gives all benefit of the word in the lives of people. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”²²¹ Preaching is hard work and requires the utmost effort on the part of preachers. “For we are God’s fellow workers.”²²² And listening, likewise, is an activity of the people, as Jesus himself said, “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. Hear then the parable.”²²³

To the pastors in the Church, the task is given of proclaiming the word purely and clearly. To pastors also is given the responsibility of aiding the hearing of the people. May God bless the efforts of pastors and people as together they gather to hear and to proclaim the word of the Lord. I hope that this project will in some way enhance the hearing and the proclaiming of that word.

²²⁰ Appendix E, 155-156.

²²¹ Rom. 10:17.

²²² 1 Cor. 3:9.

²²³ Matt. 13:16-18.

APPENDIX A

**COMMUNICATION MATRIX OF SENT
AND RECEIVED BEHAVIOR**

Preachers communicate on many levels that may include verbal, nonverbal, and unintentional messages. Messages sent are not always received. The following matrix, developed by Stephen Littlejohn,²²⁴ is an attempt to define when communication happens between sender and receiver.

RECEIVER BEHAVIOR	SOURCE BEHAVIOR		
	Unintentional Behavior	Intentional Behavior	
	(Symptoms)	Nonverbal	Verbal
Not Received	Nonperceived symptomatic behavior	Nonperceived nonverbal messages	Nonperceived verbal messages
Received Incidentally	Incidentally perceived symptoms	Incidental nonverbal messages	Incidental verbal messages
Attended To	Symptoms attended to	Nonverbal messages attended to	Verbal messages attended to

²²⁴ Littlejohn, 7.

APPENDIX B

PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON

Paul wrote to Philemon with a specific intention. The apostle wanted to persuade Philemon to receive back into his household his runaway slave, Onesimus. "Receive him, as you would receive me."²²⁵ The persuasive force, that which alone can change the heart of any man, is not the law, but the love of Jesus Christ: "Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you."²²⁶ The appeal is made on the basis of love, but the content of the brief letter is a telling example of Paul's use of the force of a number of different arguments from many different perspectives, directed toward the hearer, Philemon. Luther says that, "He attacks Philemon in so many passages that even if he were made of stone, he would have to melt."²²⁷

Paul "shows perfect tact in this letter. He calls out all that is noble in Philemon. He touches all the motives that will induce Philemon to receive Onesimus back in a Christian manner."²²⁸ And he begins immediately. The salutary greeting is seemingly quite intentionally phrased. Paul calls himself "a prisoner for Christ Jesus,"²²⁹ making it from the very start difficult, if not impossible, for Philemon to refuse his coming request. Herbert Carson reminds us that, "This is a principle involved in any true pastoral work.

²²⁵ Phm. 17.

²²⁶ Phm. 8-9.

²²⁷ Martin Luther, "Lectures on Titus, Philemon and Hebrews," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 29, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 93.

²²⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *St. Paul's Letters to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 952.

²²⁹ Phm. 1.

The pastor can only appeal to his people for self-sacrifice and discipline if he himself knows the meaning of discipline in his own life."²³⁰ His later reference to his imprisonment in verse 9 only strengthens the impact.

The opening address is at first deeply personal. Paul calls Philemon his "beloved fellow worker,"²³¹ suggesting an intimacy of love and a bond of unity in service to the gospel at a very high level. "This is really what you call arousing goodwill,"²³² says Luther, as Paul places Philemon's efforts in the church on a par with his own. The personal appeal to Philemon as a "partner" will be renewed in Paul's final exhortation in verse 17. But the personal entreaty soon turns to a request within the context of the whole community, for the address continues to include Apphia, presumably Philemon's wife,²³³ with whom Paul claims a close relationship by calling her "sister," and Archippus, clearly an important minister of the gospel, possibly at nearby Laodicea.²³⁴ Finally, by addressing the letter to the whole church that meets in Philemon's house, Paul has skillfully invited everyone who heard the letter to influence Philemon's decision.

Before the specific request comes, Paul sets the stage with more flattery, elevating the context of Philemon's decision to the realm of the whole work of the gospel ministry in which he is so closely involved. Paul mentions his great joy at hearing of Philemon's love and faith, a faith and love toward Christ that overflows in faithfulness and love

²³⁰ Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), 104.

²³¹ Phm. 1.

²³² Luther, "Philemon," 94.

²³³ Lenski, 954.

²³⁴ Carson, 104.

toward all the saints, who "have been refreshed through you."²³⁵ The appeal the apostle will make is a kingdom appeal. Philemon's history of service and sacrifice for the church will be the context from which he does the right thing once again by receiving Onesimus back to himself. This is the kind of effective work he has shown in the past and the reason why his faith should not "grow lazy, but rather... become richer, more splendid, and more active."²³⁶

Paul now makes his petition, not in a legalistic command, although he is certainly within his rights to do so, but in an appeal to the heart of Philemon. Luther makes this strategy clear in his paraphrase of verse eight. "I do not want this to be a matter of obligation, but of entreaty. But I have also experienced how laws usually take away desires. A man is more easily drawn than pushed, and compulsion brings with it a rebellious will."²³⁷ By the force of his repeated persuasive techniques, Paul is drawing, not pushing. His twofold authority for giving a command, his current imprisonment and his age, are carefully placed before his friend, but the appeal is love. Later in verse 14, that which is implied here is specifically mentioned. It is a love such as the love between a father and his child.²³⁸ "To you, he may be just a slave," Paul seems to argue, "but to me he is much more. My appeal is as a slave, a prisoner who has made this slave my own son."

Commentators have always wondered if the word play on the name "Onesimus" that follows next is an intentional use of humor by the apostle to break the tension of the

²³⁵ Phm. 7.

²³⁶ Luther, "Philemon," 97.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

²³⁸ Phm. 10.

appeal just made. It is certainly possible. While some, like Lenski, argue against it,²³⁹ it seems quite likely that the apostle's intent was to get a smile from the lips of Philemon, while making the clear argument that now in the gospel even a runaway slave, who may well have caused offense to his owner, is indeed useful, "to you and to me."²⁴⁰ Since Paul, a prisoner in great need, could certainly have found Onesimus useful in his present circumstance, but still had returned him to his owner, could Philemon send him away?

Paul's argument then turns in verse 12 to the personal once again. He earlier reminded Philemon of the deep regard he had for him, and he now makes his appeal on the basis of their relationship. "I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart."²⁴¹ Notice again how Luther interprets this phrase as persuasive speech. In his opinion, no other appeal seems necessary. "This carries a great force of persuasion. If he had recommended his very heart to me, I would have said: 'Be free.' I would want to open everything in the house to Paul's heart. It was impossible for Philemon not to accept him."²⁴²

That gospel motivation underlies Paul's next argument in favor of Philemon's welcome. There is no denial of the sin Onesimus had committed. Whatever he had done, there was no excuse, but there was the grace of God in Christ that applies to all believers, whether "slave or free."²⁴³ Sin separates, but grace restores. After a time of separation, suggests the apostle, it is time for restoration. "The Holy Spirit extenuates the sin,

²³⁹ Lenski, 962-963.

²⁴⁰ Phm. 11.

²⁴¹ Phm. 12.

²⁴² Luther, "Philemon," 101.

²⁴³ Gal. 3:28.

because there is forgiveness of sins, and He takes them away completely. Thus Paul calls it *a while*."²⁴⁴ It is the gospel that makes a slave a brother, "both in the flesh and in the Lord"²⁴⁵ and a brother, argues Paul, cannot be turned away.

In his final appeal, Paul deals with the practical matter at hand: any debt that may be owed Philemon because of the actions of Onesimus. He addresses that matter clearly and directly, suggesting that he himself would make restitution if called for. But once again, in masterful fashion, he uses the force of subtle yet persuasive argument to encourage Philemon to do what he must. Paul measures the debt of a few dollars against the debt of his very self to his father in the faith: "I will repay it - to say nothing of your owing me even your own self."²⁴⁶ The implication is very clear. In the light of the gospel of Christ and the debt he canceled for all the saints,²⁴⁷ there can be no debt held against a repentant brother. And so the apostle closes with a statement of his confidence that he knows the matter is settled. Philemon will, of course, respond as he is compelled by the gospel of love in Christ, and in keeping with the arguments presented to him by his friend, his partner in the work of the gospel, and his mentor, Paul.

The word of God is the power of God for changing human hearts. The Holy Spirit is at work. And as clearly evidenced throughout scripture and here especially in this brief epistle, the Spirit of the Lord has led the biblical authors to use the force of persuasive argument in their presentation of the word of the Lord to his people.

²⁴⁴ Luther, "Philemon," 102, translator's emphasis.

²⁴⁵ Phm. 16.

²⁴⁶ Phm. 19.

²⁴⁷ See Matt. 18:21-35, The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant.

APPENDIX C

LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear _____:

Greetings in the Lord Jesus!

I am writing to request your help with a study that I am completing for the Doctor of Ministry Degree at Concordia Seminary. In twenty-two years of preaching ministry, I have grown in my desire to make the sermon experience on Sunday mornings as beneficial as possible. I have done quite a bit of study recently to improve my preaching skills.

Sermons, however, take more than a preacher. Listeners to sermons have an important task before them each week and I believe that I have not done all I can to adequately prepare listeners for their part in hearing the sermon. As part of my research titled, "Toward Better Hearing of the Word in the Sermon," I've developed a three session study to help members of our church be better listeners to sermons. I'd like to invite you to participate with the first group to take the course.

Your participation will involve your active involvement in the three class sessions that will last approximately ninety minutes each. The classes are scheduled for _____. The class will involve instruction by me and classroom discussion among the participants. After the sessions are completed, I will encourage the class to utilize their newly acquired skills during a period of listening to regular Sunday sermons. At the end of a period of ten to twelve weeks, I will ask you to meet with me for approximately one hour where you and I will privately discuss your learnings and whether or not the course has helped you in listening to sermons.

To insure accuracy, I'm also requesting your permission to tape record our conversation at the interview. The information I gain from our interview will be combined with that from interviews with the other participants in the study for my final report. All responses will be kept anonymous and your responses will not be identifiable in the report. Once the semi-final report is complete, I will invite the class to review my conclusions together to test their accuracy. When the final report is complete, all tapes of interviews will be destroyed.

I will be calling you in the next few days to see if you are willing to participate. Please prayerfully consider if you can help me in this project. I hope you will also remember this effort in your prayers for our church, that God might use it for the benefit of all of our members.

When I call, I would be glad to answer any questions you might have, or I can be reached at the church office, 968-2360, or at home, 822-3539. Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to our conversation to discuss the project and your participation!

In Christ's care,

Darrell W. Zimmerman,
Pastor

APPENDIX D

CONCORDIA SEMINARY, ST. LOUIS CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Rev. Darrell W. Zimmerman, Graduate Student
Doctor of Ministry Program

Rev. Darrell W. Zimmerman has requested my participation in a research study at this institution, the Major Applied Project for the Doctor of Ministry degree. The title of the project is, "Toward Better Hearing of the Word in the Sermon."

I understand that the purpose of this research is to help equip some members of Mount Calvary Lutheran Church in Brentwood, Missouri to grow in the skills of listening to sermons. My participation will include each of the following: attendance at all of the scheduled class sessions; a period of sermon listening in the regular Sunday services at Mount Calvary or other Christian congregations; an interview with Rev. Zimmerman after the period of listening to reflect on my learnings; and an evaluation session with the other members of the class to consider the accuracy of Rev. Zimmerman's conclusions.

I understand that there are possible risks to me if I agree to participate in the study. The risk is that confidentiality of my responses in the interview may be lost. I understand that Rev. Zimmerman will try to minimize these threats by insuring that all information will be kept as confidential. I understand that the results of the interview are expected to be my honest reactions to the course of study, whether positive or negative. I understand that the results of the interview are intended for publication, but that my name or identity will not be revealed.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that refusal to participate will involve no penalty to me or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I understand that I may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty of prejudice.

If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, or in the event I believe I have suffered an injury as a result of participation in the research project, I may contact the Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at Concordia Seminary (314/505-7100), who will discuss my questions with me or will be able to refer me to the individual who will review the matter with me, identify other resources that may be available to me, and provide further information as to how to proceed.

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by Rev. Zimmerman. I believe I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I hereby give my informed and free consent to be a participant in this study.

Date

Consent Signature of Subject

Printed Name of Subject

Other Signature (Witness)

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose and the potential benefits and possible risks associated with participation in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

I have provided the subject with a copy of this signed consent document.

Date

Signature of Researcher

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANTS' STUDY GUIDE FOR "HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD!"

SESSION ONE: GOD'S POWERFUL WORD

Opening Introductions

Introduce yourself to those seated near you and share with them the approximate number of sermons you have listened to so far in your life.

Agree or Disagree

Share your responses with the group.

- A D No one ever taught me how to listen to a sermon.
- A D I often sit and listen to twenty minute lectures outside of church.
- A D Some sermons touch my heart more than they touch my mind.
- A D A good sermon makes me think hard about life, faith, God, etc.
- A D I have counted bricks on the church wall during a sermon.
- A D I can remember the book and chapter of last Sunday's sermon.
- A D Sometimes I can remember the sermon weeks after I heard it.
- A D Sometimes I forget the sermon by Monday night.
- A D I'm pretty good at getting the message of a sermon.
- A D Pastor Zimmerman is a fabulous preacher!

A Prayer for Those who Listen to Sermons

The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23) Hearing the Word of the Lord

Tell what you know about seeds. How can tiny seeds produce, "a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown"?

Why does the same seed from the same sower produce different results in different soils, that is, different hearers of God's word?

List some hopes that members of the class have for their time in this course.

Some hopes Pastor Zimmerman has for us:

1. Better _____ for sermon listening.
2. More _____ listening to the sermon.
3. Increased ability to _____ the sermon through the week.
4. Increased ability to " _____ " with the preacher.
5. Heightened awareness of opportunities to _____ the lessons of a sermon.

The Power to Save (Romans 10:1-17)
Hearing and Saving Faith

Paul wants all people, and especially the Jews, to be saved (see verse 1). Why are the Jews, or other unbelievers, not saved? (see verses 3, 5)

Where does saving faith come from? (see verses 14-17)

What force does God use to turn our hearts into "good soil"?

The Power for Christian Living (2 Timothy 3:14-17)
Hearing and the Christian Life

Christians, and especially Lutherans, are known as "people of the word." What does that mean to you?

Discuss and define the following from 2 Timothy 3:

teaching

rebuking

correcting

training in righteousness

good works

What is your prayer for the work of God's word in your life?

God's Word Spoken and Heard in the Sermon

Read together Isaiah 55:10-11. What is God's promise?

The Lutheran Confessions say:

[W]hen the Word of God is preached, pure and unalloyed according to God's command and will, and when the people diligently and earnestly listen to and meditate on it, God is certainly present with his grace and gives what man is unable by his own powers to take or to give... The Word which is heard and preached is an office and work of the Holy Spirit, whereby he assuredly is potent and active in our hearts. (Formula of Concord, SD, II, 55-56)

What does God do when his word is proclaimed?

What role does the preacher play?

How about the listeners? What role do they play in the sermon?

Applying the Lesson

What should I expect from God in a sermon?

What should I expect from the preacher as he prepares and delivers the sermon?

What should I expect from myself as I listen to the sermon?

SESSION TWO: THE SERMON AND HOW IT WORKS

Opening Devotion and Prayer

Summary and Clarifications from Last Session

What Was He Thinking When He Wrote That Sermon?

Every sermon has a _____.

Faith goals seek reliance on the grace of God.

1. A call to _____. (Acts 2:37-39; Psalm 32)
2. The _____ of salvation. (Ephesians 2:8-9; 3:14-21)
3. _____ over doubts. (Mark 9:14-29; Matthew 14:22-33)

Life goals seek change in behavior.

1. Living by the law of _____. (Romans 13:8-10; Luke 6:27-35)
2. Engaging in spiritual _____. (Romans 7:14-25;
Ephesians 6:10-20)
3. Producing _____. (John 15:1-17)

Every sermon, therefore, addresses a _____.

1. Temptation to sin, because it
_____ from God (faith goals); (Genesis 3) and
hinders a life of love and _____ (life goals).
(Romans 7:14-25)
2. The reality of spiritual death, because it
leaves us in _____ (faith goals); (1 Peter 2:8-9) and
makes us _____ to please God (life goals). (Romans 3:9-20)
3. The power of the devil, the world and our flesh, because they
tempt us to _____ in ourselves (faith goals); (Romans 10:1-5) and
tempt us to _____ ourselves first (life goals). (Matthew 19:16-22)

And every Christian sermon has a _____ to accomplish the goals. It's the good news from God that conquers the malady I face and is also the power to attain what I cannot accomplish on my own.

The means in a Christian sermon is

the _____ of _____, the _____.

God's Law and God's Gospel in the Sermon

God's Word of Law

1. Reveals God's holiness, that is, his _____.
2. Reflects the sinner's _____.
3. Announces God's _____.

God's Word of Gospel

1. Reveals God's mercy, his _____.
2. Indicates God's _____ to the sinner's problem.
3. Announces God's _____, because of Christ!

LAW

_____ news

We are _____

_____ -righteous

Makes me _____, _____

Weight is on _____

Obedience to _____

_____ sin

Leads to _____

GOSPEL

_____ news

We are _____

_____ -righteous

Makes me _____

Weight is on _____

Faith in _____

_____ sin

Leads to _____

Gospel Imperatives in the Sermon

Changed behavior is not _____ the saving love of Christ. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Changed behavior, often suggested in the sermon, is the _____ of the saving love of Christ.

The saving love of Christ transforms ordinary people into

_____!
(Ephesians 2:10)

Cross and Glory

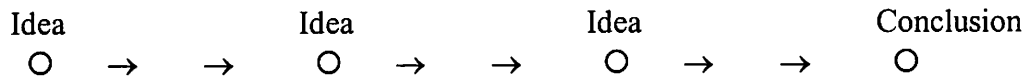
Why is it that even the most devout Christians experience financial troubles, broken relationships, life-ending illness, and all the other troubles of life?

What is hope? For what do we hope?

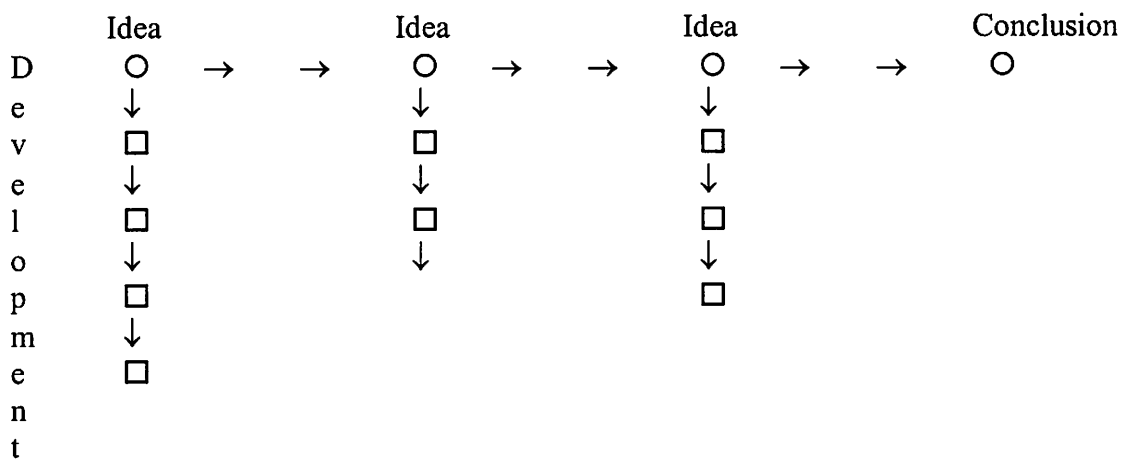
Read Romans 8:18. Why do we Christians gather around God's word week after week after week until Jesus returns?

Sermon Structure and Sermon Development

Every sermon is an experience in time, organized in a sequence. A sermon has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Listening to a sermon is like taking a journey along the route of the sequence of ideas that lead from one idea to the next. That's a sermon's **structure**.



Along the way each idea is pondered and fleshed out. That's a sermon's **development**. Different ideas are developed in different ways and for different amounts of time.



Varieties of Sermon Structures

Each week, the preacher will select from a wide variety of different structures that will lead the listeners on a different journey.

Propositional Structures present a central teaching that is delivered to listeners in a logical order. A propositional structure might follow one of these outlines.

Definition

A topic is explained by describing its particulars:

- Baptism is a work of God...
- A. that he commands
 - B. for the forgiveness of sins
 - C. and the gift of the Holy Spirit
 - D. who gives the gift of faith
 - E. and assurance of new life and salvation.

Problem/Solution

The preacher leads the listeners to understand a problem caused by sin, and then shows the gospel resolution to the problem.

- A. Living in harmony with others is hard because of our self-centered nature.
- B. Christ's selfless sacrifice for our sin offers us forgiveness that overflows in our love/grace relationships with one another.

Question Answered

A difficult question is posed, various solutions are examined and found wanting, and a gospel solution is offered.

- Question: How should we present God's plan of salvation to the lost?
- First False Answer: Tell people that all are welcome to God's family, but don't scare them away with talk of sin and guilt.
- Second False Answer: Challenge people with the many burdens and responsibilities of Christians.
- Gospel-based Answer: Share the free gift of grace in Christ that fulfills the demands of the law we could never meet.

Textual Structures follow the leading of the biblical text to present the ideas of the sermon.

Verse-by-Verse

Each verse or natural cluster of verses in a text is explained according to a consistent theme and message that ties them together.

Psalm 130

Verses 1-2: Awareness of my sin makes me call to God for mercy.

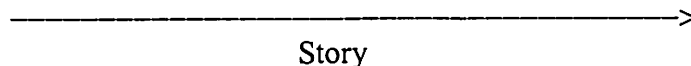
Verses 3-4: Unexplainably and undeservedly, God offers forgiveness!

Verses 5-6: I learn to live day by day in expectation of his mercy.

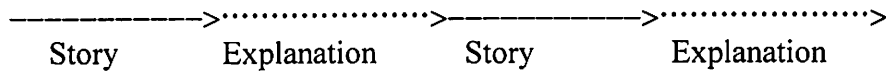
Verses 7-8: I invite all who will hear to enjoy God's grace with me.

Narrative

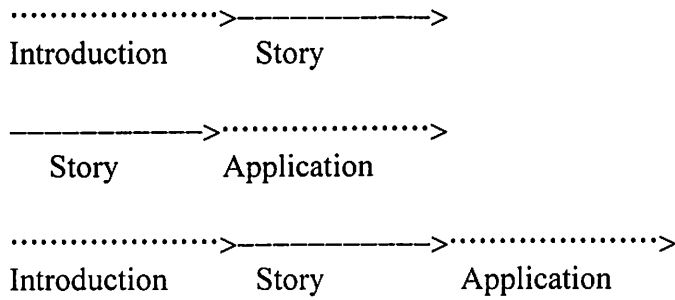
The story of the text is the core structure of the sermon. The story may be fully told without interruption. The listeners are left to draw the conclusions the story intends.



The story might also be interrupted once or more for explanation and application by the preacher.



Or the story might be preceded by an explanatory introduction, concluded with a life application, or framed by both introduction and application.



Dynamic Structures are designed to lead listeners on a dynamic experience as they hear the sermon. The ebbs and flows and the highs and lows of the sermon experience help the hearers gain insight into God's work in their lives.

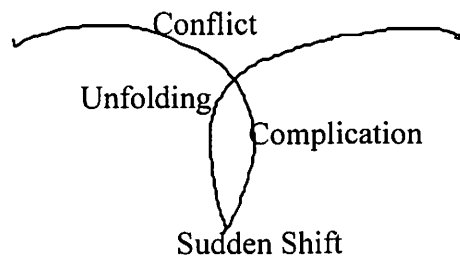
Law then Gospel

- A. How the text and life experiences of hearers indicate our need for God's grace.
- B. How God's intervention in Christ answers our great need.

Narrative Loop

One preacher, Eugene Lowry, suggests the use of a narrative structure for sermons that follows a four point dynamic pattern.

- A. Conflict
- B. Complication
- C. Sudden Shift
- D. Unfolding



Imagistic

An object or a piece of art is used as a focus for meditation and reflection throughout the sermon. The image might or might not undergo a change during the sermon. Multiple images might also be presented in sequence.

- A. A small stone seems insignificant and useless, as insignificant as one lowly life.
- B. But a small stone in David's sling, by God's power, killed a giant.
- C. And a small stone in my pocket reminds me of Christ's resurrection power in me and at work in my single, humble life.

Sermon Development

Each idea of the sermon is developed fully before moving on to the next idea. A sermon, like a symphony, is a series of these movements, the development of ideas brought together in an ordered sequence. Preachers use a variety of methods to develop ideas.

Narration - A story that leads to a conclusion, the main emphasis of the sermon segment.

Serial Depiction - A series of examples presented in order to make a point.

Image - An image that is shown or described that creates an association for hearers.

Dialog - A conversation that leads to a conclusion.

Explanation - A logical, reasonable portrayal of an idea.

Liturgy and Lectionary

How does the liturgy help prepare us for the sermon?

In what way is the sermon itself an important part of the liturgy?

What are the advantages of lectionary preaching according to the church year calendar?

Applying the Lesson

How will an understanding of sermon construction help me as I listen?

SESSION THREE: BECOMING AN ACTIVE LISTENER

Opening Devotion: Matthew 13:9

Preparation for Hearing the Sermon

A Listener's Prayer

Blessed Lord, since you have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn and take them to heart that by patience and comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life. Amen. (LW, 156).

How might hearers of sermons pray for their pastor throughout the week?

How might hearers include worship and the sermon in their weekly prayers?

Preparatory Study

The following Sunday's sermon text is typically printed on the sermon outline page. How else could a listener find out the text for the coming Sunday?

What might personal study in preparation for sermon listening look like?

Group study of the sermon text is currently available on Tuesdays at 9:00 AM and Wednesdays at 7:00 PM. What are the advantages of group study with the Pastor?

Preparation During Worship

How do each of the following elements of the liturgy help to prepare us for hearing God's word expounded in the sermon?

Invocation

Confession and Absolution

Hymn of Praise

Prayer of the Day

Scripture Readings

Hymn of the Day

Active Listening: Dialog with the Preacher

A sermon is always dialog with God. His inspired word is proclaimed in our hearing, and we prayerfully respond to God while listening.

A sermon also has an element of dialog between preacher and people. Their relationship through the week and through the years finds its expression in the sermons of the church.

It's traditional in many African American churches for the congregation to speak right out loud and give the preacher signals and clues about how their listening is progressing. A vocal "Preach it! Tell it, brother!" can be a signal to dwell on that point for a few more minutes. A hearty "Amen!" can clue the preacher that the congregation understands and is ready for the next idea.

If well prepared and attentive listeners are engaged in the sermon as it is being preached, how can their active listening be like a dialog with the preacher?

What skills would it take to be that kind of an active listener to sermons?

Modes of Listening: *Ethos*, *Logos*, and *Pathos*

Three "Ears"

Centuries ago, Aristotle taught that there are three ways to hold the attention of those to whom we speak. He called them *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*.

Ethos can be translated "character." It refers to the way a speaker conveys himself to the listeners. He wants to be recognized as someone who is trustworthy and authentic, someone who speaks with authority. He portrays that in his voice, his expression, his gestures, and with his choice of words. In the case of parish pastors, *ethos* is portrayed in the pastor's relationship with the people in their every encounter.

How important is it to me that the preacher is someone I can trust and relate to on a personal level?

Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
-------------------------	-----------------------	-------------------	------------------------

Logos can be translated "word." It refers to the choice of words and the presentation of those words by the speaker. The content of the message, the way it is organized logically, and the conclusions the speaker presents, or expects the listeners to draw themselves, are all aspects of *logos*.

How important is it to me that the sermon be logically organized around clear and rational ideas?

Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
-------------------------	-----------------------	-------------------	------------------------

Pathos can be translated "feeling." It refers to the way the speaker communicates the emotions he is feeling, or the way he seeks to create an emotional response in the listeners. The speaker recognizes that an emotional response to a message can make it more memorable and persuasive.

How important is it to me that the sermon touch me deeply and stir my emotions?

Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
-------------------------	-----------------------	-------------------	------------------------

Aids to Memory

It's not uncommon for those who hear a sermon on Sunday to have a hard time remembering the sermon on Wednesday. Here are samples of memory aids that some people have used to keep the sermon's message alive in their heart throughout the week.

Note Taking

Three kinds of notes are kept either on the outline sheet or in a notebook. The first notes record significant things the preacher says that the listener wishes to remember. The second are significant insights the listener has during the course of the sermon that she wants to reflect upon more at a later time. A third set of notes are personal suggestions on how the listener might apply the lessons of the sermon to daily living.

How could note taking help assist my memory of the sermon?

Journaling

Another form of written memory aid is journaling. A journal can be a diary of reflections upon the weekly sermon. These reflections can be written into a journal on the same day as the sermon, and then added to through the week as continued reflection takes place. A journal is a good way to observe growth in faith as a listener returns to notes and comments about sermons from months or years past.

How might journaling help in my memory and meditation on the sermon?

Conversation

A conversation with friends or family while the sermon is still fresh in mind can help reinforce the lessons and commit them to memory. By verbalizing what was heard into short summary statements, the mind is forced to place the sermon deeper into the memory banks.

With whom could I have conversation about the sermon? How could such a conversation help me remember the sermon?

Meditation on the Sermon

At the beginning of the course we read that Jesus compared the word of God to seeds cast upon the soil (Matthew 13). God's word is planted in our hearts each time we listen attentively and prayerfully to the sermon. Intentional, deliberate and prayerful meditation on the word planted helps those seeds take root in our lives. The following questions can help guide meditation on a sermon.

What truths from God's word were presented in the sermon this week?

Where did I experience the judgment of God's law?

Where did I experience the healing grace of God's gospel?

What did I learn about God from this sermon?

What did I learn about God's activity in the world from this sermon?

What new insight did I gain from the sermon?

What knowledge or learning did this sermon reinforce?

How would I summarize this sermon in one sentence?

What could I do this week to show what I learned?

Applying the Lesson

Which ideas from this lesson will I try to implement to become a more active listener to sermons?

Which ideas from this lesson will I try to implement to better remember the lessons of the sermon?

APPENDIX F

LEADER'S ANNOTATED GUIDE FOR "HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD!"

SESSION ONE: GOD'S POWERFUL WORD

Opening Introductions

Introduce yourself to those seated near you and share with them the approximate number of sermons you have listened to so far in your life.

Be sure that everyone is introduced and has a chance to share a brief summary of their sermon listening history.

Agree or Disagree

Use the statements and responses to stimulate discussion and introduce the topic of sermon listening. Encourage some fun and humorous answers to build community within the class participants. Remind the class that there are no right or wrong answers, just opinions. When appropriate, mention that the topic will be discussed more fully in the course.

Share your responses with the group.

- A D No one ever taught me how to listen to a sermon.
- A D I often sit and listen to twenty minute lectures outside of church.
- A D Some sermons touch my heart more than they touch my mind.
- A D A good sermon makes me think hard about life, faith, God, etc.
- A D I have counted bricks on the church wall during a sermon.
- A D I can remember the book and chapter of last Sunday's sermon.
- A D Sometimes I can remember the sermon weeks after I heard it.
- A D Sometimes I forget the sermon by Monday night.
- A D I'm pretty good at getting the message of a sermon.
- A D Pastor Zimmerman is a fabulous preacher!

A Prayer for Those who Listen to Sermons

Offer an opening prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the Lord's people study the word in this opening session.

The Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23)

Hearing the Word of the Lord

Spread a handful of seeds, such as popcorn or dried beans, across the table in front of the participants. Encourage class members to pick them up and feel them.

Tell what you know about seeds. How can tiny seeds produce, "a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown"?

Be sure that the miracle of God's work of growth, "each according to its kind" comes out in the discussion. The power at work in the fields is the power of the Lord who brings life from that which is planted in the ground.

Why does the same seed from the same sower produce different results in different soils, that is, different hearers of God's word?

Help class members to struggle with the mystery of faith, that the same word produces different results, because, as is pointed out in the parable, different hearers have different responses to the word.

List some hopes that members of the class have for their time in this course.

Invite the participants to share why they accepted the invitation to attend this course. What do they hope to gain, according to the way the class was advertised to them. Affirm all answers. If some expectations are beyond the scope of the course, mention to the group that those hopes may have to be addressed at another time.

Some hopes Pastor Zimmerman has for us:

1. Better PREPARATION for sermon listening.
2. More ACTIVE listening to the sermon.
3. Increased ability to REMEMBER the sermon through the week.
4. Increased ability to "DIALOG" with the preacher.
5. Heightened awareness of opportunities to APPLY the lessons of a sermon.

The Power to Save (Romans 10:1-17)

Hearing and Saving Faith

Paul wants all people, and especially the Jews, to be saved (see verse 1). Why are the Jews, or other unbelievers, not saved? (see verses 3, 5)

Their hope for salvation was based on a self-righteousness based upon the fulfillment of the law by their own efforts. Paul points out how this hope is always futile. Hope of salvation is always based on the "righteousness that comes from God" (10:3).

Where does saving faith come from? (see verses 14-17)

Focus the attention of the group on verse 17, "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

What force does God use to turn our hearts into "good soil"?

Point out that "the word of Christ" is the saving word of the gospel, the righteousness that comes by faith, of which Paul spoke earlier in the letter to the Romans.

The Power for Christian Living (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

Hearing and the Christian Life

Christians, and especially Lutherans, are known as "people of the word." What does that mean to you?

Encourage the sharing of personal stories about the importance of the God's word in their own lives. Point out ways that the word of God predominates in the worship, the preaching, the teaching and the witness of the congregation.

Discuss and define the following from 2 Timothy 3:

Use the contributions of the class members to quickly define the terms Paul writes about to Timothy. Discuss briefly how each is an important work of God, through the word, in the life of a Christian.

teaching

rebuking

correcting

training in righteousness

good works

What is your prayer for the work of God's word in your life?

Encourage open discussion and affirm all positive responses by the class. If time, ask how the word preached in the sermon can be a tool of the Holy Spirit to work his work in their lives.

God's Word Spoken and Heard in the Sermon

Read together Isaiah 55:10-11. What is God's promise?

Be sure that participants recognize how this passage teaches that God brings his word to our ears for a purpose, and it is a powerful word that works the work for which it is sent.

The Lutheran Confessions say:

Offer a brief explanation of why the Lutheran Confessions are important in the life of the church, then read the following passage for the group to consider.

[W]hen the Word of God is preached, pure and unalloyed according to God's command and will, and when the people diligently and earnestly listen to and meditate on it, God is certainly present with his grace and gives what man is unable by his own powers to take or to give... The Word which is heard and preached is an office and work of the Holy Spirit, whereby he assuredly is potent and active in our hearts. (Formula of Concord, SD, II, 55-56)

What does God do when his word is proclaimed?

The office and work of the Holy Spirit, mentioned in the confessions, brings to mind the discussions from the previous sections: God works saving faith; he teaches, corrects, rebukes, etc.

What role does the preacher play?

If appropriate, this would be the appropriate place to discuss the two kinds of righteousness, God's working on the vertical plane through his means of grace, and God's working on the horizontal plane, through the efforts of the preacher in writing and delivering a sermon. Note the emphasis from the Formula, "preached, pure and unalloyed according to God's command and will."

How about the listeners? What role do they play in the sermon?

Note from the Formula, "when the people diligently and earnestly listen to and meditate on it." At this point, summarize the intention of this course of study, that listeners to sermons would be better equipped for their tasks in listening.

Applying the Lesson

What should I expect from God in a sermon?

Discuss and affirm all positive suggestions from the class.

What should I expect from the preacher as he prepares and delivers the sermon?

Discuss and affirm all positive suggestions from the class.

What should I expect from myself as I listen to the sermon?

Discuss and affirm all positive suggestions from the class.

SESSION TWO: THE SERMON AND HOW IT WORKS

Opening Devotion and Prayer

Read and discuss Matthew 13:10-17. What a privilege for the disciples, and for us, to have the revelation of the secrets of the kingdom!

Summary and Clarifications from Last Session

Briefly review the topic of the first session and answer any questions that remain.

What Was He Thinking When He Wrote That Sermon?

Help the participants to fill in the blanks in their study guides and discuss the following topics.

Every sermon has a GOAL.

Set on the table a toy action figure, or a doll, representing a person. Emphasize to the class that God's work in history is his work in the lives of people. When Christ returns, he is coming for the people; everything else will be destroyed. The goal of a sermon is changed lives. Use the doll throughout this section to remind people that God is at work through his word making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Delineate for the class the difference between faith goals and life goals.

Faith goals seek reliance on the grace of God.

1. A call to REPENTANCE. (Acts 2:37-39; Psalm 32)
2. The CERTAINTY of salvation. (Ephesians 2:8-9; 3:14-21)
3. VICTORY over doubts. (Mark 9:14-29; Matthew 14:22-33)

Life goals seek change in behavior.

1. Living by the law of LOVE. (Romans 13:8-10; Luke 6:27-35)
2. Engaging in spiritual WARFARE. (Romans 7:14-25; Ephesians 6:10-20)
3. Producing FRUIT. (John 15:1-7)

Every sermon, therefore, addresses a MALADY.

Define "malady" as the deficiency that exists in all people, the difficulties and challenges we face because of our fallen, sinful nature. Hold up for the class a medical thermometer. Illustrate with the doll that disciples of Jesus must be regularly diagnosed for their maladies. Preachers preach with maladies in mind.

1. Temptation to sin, because it

SEPARATES from God (faith goals); (Genesis 3) and
hinders a life of love and OBEDIENCE (life goals).
(Romans 7:14-25)

2. The reality of spiritual death, because it

leaves us in DARKNESS (faith goals); (1 Peter 2:8-9) and
makes us UNABLE to please God (life goals). (Romans 3:9-20)

3. The power of the devil, the world and our flesh, because they

tempt us to TRUST in ourselves (faith goals); (Romans 10:1-5) and
tempt us to LOVE ourselves first (life goals). (Matthew 19:16-22)

*Hold up a medicine bottle and place it beside the doll and the thermometer.
When discussing the means of the sermon, explain that sermons address the malady in the listeners by presenting God's means of healing, restoration and cure, the gospel of Christ.*

And every Christian sermon has a MEANS to accomplish the goals. It's the good news from God that conquers the malady I face and is also the power to attain what I cannot accomplish on my own.

The means in a Christian sermon is

the SAVING LOVE of CHRIST, the GOSPEL.

Explain the origin and use of Mount Calvary's Mission Statement, "At Mount Calvary we share the saving love of Christ, that transforms ordinary people into extraordinary servants." Our mission is the presentation of the gospel, God's power for salvation and transformation.

God's Law and God's Gospel in the Sermon

God's Word of Law

Show the class a hammer. Explain how a hammer, while a useful tool, wields a mighty and painful blow and is often used first for demolition. Use the following notes to lead a discussion on the uses of God's law in a sermon.

1. Reveals God's holiness, that is, his PERFECTION.
2. Reflects the sinner's LIFE PREDICAMENT.
3. Announces God's DISPLEASURE.

God's Word of Gospel

Show the class a tube of medicated ointment or anti-bacterial cream. Explain how the gospel works a different work than the law. Instead of tearing down, it builds up and heals. Use the following notes to lead a discussion on the work of the gospel in a sermon.

1. Reveals God's mercy, his UNDESERVED LOVE.
2. Indicates God's SOLUTION to the sinner's problem.
3. Announces God's PLEASURE, because of Christ!

LAW

BAD news

We are LOST

SELF -righteous

Makes me SAD, MAD

Weight is on ME

Obedience to COMMANDS

MULTIPLIES sin

Leads to DEATH

GOSPEL

GOOD news

We are FOUND

CHRIST -righteous

Makes me GLAD

Weight is on GOD

Faith in PROMISES

ERASES sin

Leads to LIFE

Gospel Imperatives in the Sermon

Conclude the discussion of law and gospel by explaining how the gospel is the power of God to enable us to live lives of Christian obedience and service. The law then serves Christians as guide for living in response to the gospel's saving grace.

Changed behavior is not HOW WE ATTAIN the saving love of Christ. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Changed behavior, often suggested in the sermon, is the RESULT of the saving love of Christ.

The saving love of Christ transforms ordinary people into

EXTRAORDINARY SERVANTS!
(Ephesians 2:10)

Cross and Glory

Why is it that even the most devout Christians experience financial troubles, broken relationships, life-ending illness, and all the other troubles of life?

Lead a discussion about the problem of suffering in a fallen world. While we journey through this life by faith, because we live in a world that is broken, even Christians must endure hardship. Indicate how preachers keep this reality in mind when they prepare to preach. They recognize that the members of the congregation are, to greater or lesser degrees, bearing the burden of life's hardships.

What is hope? For what do we hope?

Hope has been described as "the feeling you have that the feeling you have will get better." Christian hope is the confidence that despite the sufferings of this life, God has in store for us glories beyond imagination. If there is time, consider a brief reflection on Romans 5:1-5, the hope of glory.

Read Romans 8:18. Why do we Christians gather around God's word week after week after week until Jesus returns?

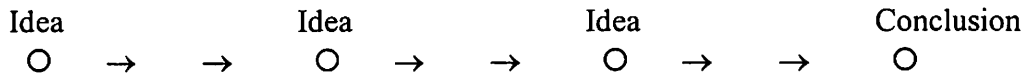
We gather to be confirmed in our hope in Christ. We can live for a time without food, without water, and even for a short time without air, but we cannot live without hope. Explain how Christian preaching is preaching of the cross of Christ that gives hope while we bear the crosses of this life. We do not preach methods or principles to live by that promise glory in this life.

Sermon Structure and Sermon Development

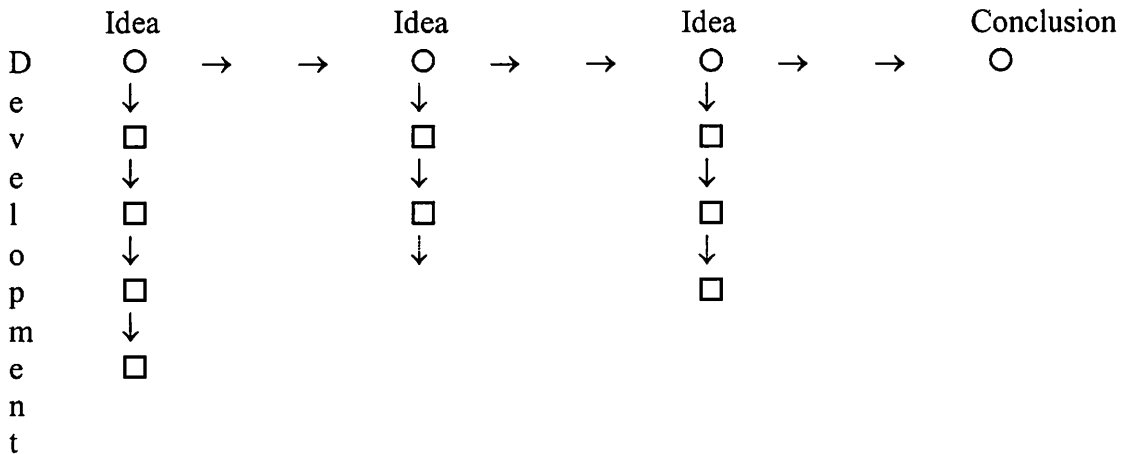
Use the following notes to explain the process by which preacher's determine a sermon's structure and development so that listeners will be more able to listen actively to a sermon as it progresses through its various moves.

Help the participants to understand the difference between viewing a painting and listening to a symphony. A visual experience happens in a brief moment, but an auditory experience unfolds over time. A movement of a symphony builds on the previous and transitions toward the next in order to make it's full impact after the last movement. A sermon is like a symphony. It's an auditory journey.

Every sermon is an experience in time, organized in a sequence. A sermon has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Listening to a sermon is like taking a journey along the route of the sequence of ideas that lead from one idea to the next. That's a sermon's **structure**.



Along the way each idea is pondered and fleshed out. That's a sermon's **development**. Different ideas are developed in different ways and for different amounts of time.



Varieties of Sermon Structures

Briefly review a variety of sermon structures, but make it clear to the class that the intention is awareness of different structures, not the ability to necessarily identify a structure. Use the example of preachers listening to other preachers and doing so much analysis that they fail to hear the sermon.

Each week, the preacher will select from a wide variety of different structures that will lead the listeners on a different journey.

Propositional Structures present a central teaching that is delivered to listeners in a logical order. A propositional structure might follow one of these outlines.

Definition

A topic is explained by describing its particulars:

Baptism is a work of God...

- A. that he commands
- B. for the forgiveness of sins
- C. and the gift of the Holy Spirit
- D. who gives the gift of faith
- E. and assurance of new life and salvation.

Problem/Solution

The preacher leads the listeners to understand a problem caused by sin, and then shows the gospel resolution to the problem.

- A. Living in harmony with others is hard because of our self-centered nature.
- B. Christ's selfless sacrifice for our sin offers us forgiveness that overflows in our love/grace relationships with one another.

Question Answered

A difficult question is posed, various solutions are examined and found wanting, and a gospel solution is offered.

Question: How should we present God's plan of salvation to the lost?

First False Answer: Tell people that all are welcome to God's family, but don't scare them away with talk of sin and guilt.

Second False Answer: Challenge people with the many burdens and responsibilities of Christians.

Gospel-based Answer: Share the free gift of grace in Christ that fulfills the demands of the law we could never meet.

Textual Structures follow the leading of the biblical text to present the ideas of the sermon.

Verse-by-Verse

Each verse or natural cluster of verses in a text is explained according to a consistent theme and message that ties them together.

Psalm 130

Verses 1-2: Awareness of my sin makes me call to God for mercy.

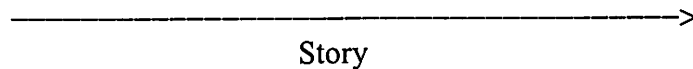
Verses 3-4: Unexplainably and undeservedly, God offers forgiveness!

Verses 5-6: I learn to live day by day in expectation of his mercy.

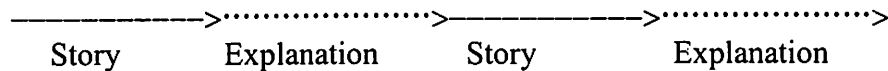
Verses 7-8: I invite all who will hear to enjoy God's grace with me.

Narrative

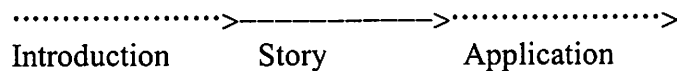
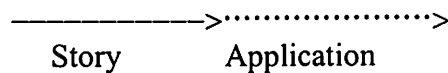
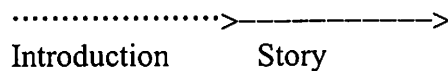
The story of the text is the core structure of the sermon. the story may be fully told without interruption. The listeners are left to draw the conclusions the story intends.



The story might also be interrupted once or more for explanation and application by the preacher.



Or the story might be preceded by an explanatory introduction, concluded with a life application, or framed by both introduction and application.



Dynamic Structures are designed to lead listeners on a dynamic experience as they hear the sermon. The ebbs and flows and the highs and lows of the sermon experience help the hearers gain insight into God's work in their lives.

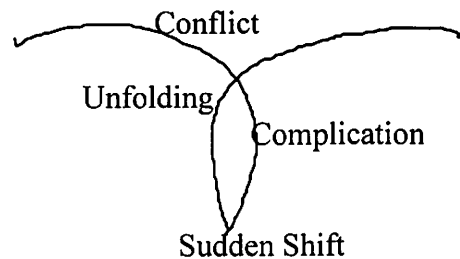
Law then Gospel

- A. How the text and life experiences of hearers indicate our need for God's grace.
- B. How God's intervention in Christ answers our great need.

Narrative Loop

One preacher, Eugene Lowry, suggests the use of a narrative structure for sermons that follows a four point dynamic pattern.

- A. Conflict
- B. Complication
- C. Sudden Shift
- D. Unfolding



Imagistic

An object or a piece of art is used as a focus for meditation and reflection throughout the sermon. The image might or might not undergo a change during the sermon. Multiple images might also be presented in sequence.

- A. A small stone seems insignificant and useless, as insignificant as one lowly life.
- B. But a small stone in David's sling, by God's power, killed a giant.
- C. And a small stone in my pocket reminds me of Christ's resurrection power in me and at work in my single, humble life.

Sermon Development

Again, briefly explain the variety of methods used to develop a sermon idea. Listeners should be made aware of these techniques, but instructed not to try to overanalyze the sermon.

Each idea of the sermon is developed fully before moving on to the next idea. A sermon, like a symphony, is a series of these movements, the development of ideas brought together in an ordered sequence. Preachers use a variety of methods to develop ideas.

Narration - A story that leads to a conclusion, the main emphasis of the sermon segment.

Serial Depiction - A series of examples presented in order to make a point.

Image - An image that is shown or described that creates an association for hearers.

Dialog - A conversation that leads to a conclusion.

Explanation - A logical, reasonable portrayal of an idea.

Liturgy and Lectionary

How does the liturgy help prepare us for the sermon?

Highlight for the class some of the following aspects of the liturgy that help prepare listeners for their encounter with the Lord in the sermon.

Invocation: Our Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier has invited us to gather in his name that he might bless us, as he did first at our baptism.

Confession/Absolution: Humbled by the law, cleansed by the gospel, the grace relationship with God has been reaffirmed and reestablished, preparing us to hear again his word.

Hymn of Praise: We worship the Lord in response to his saving work of the past and in anticipation of future blessings.

Collect: We pray for his work in us and through us.

Scripture Readings: We begin our focus on the word by listening carefully to the lectionary readings and anticipating the exposition that comes in the sermon.

Hymn of the Day: Themes of the hymn often reflect themes that will be pursued in the sermon that follows.

Emphasize for the participants that active participation in the liturgy can be an invaluable aid to gaining the most from the sermon.

In what way is the sermon itself an important part of the liturgy?

Encourage the class to offer suggestions. Affirm and expand those that recognize the sermon as one of the high points of the liturgy, along with the sacrament.

What are the advantages of lectionary preaching according to the church year calendar?

Review the cycle of the Church Year from Advent through Sunday of the Fulfillment and the one or three year cycle of readings as a balanced survey of scripture.

Applying the Lesson

How will an understanding of sermon construction help me as I listen?

SESSION THREE: BECOMING AN ACTIVE LISTENER

Opening Devotion: Matthew 13:9

Read the passage and encourage a brief discussion by the participants on what it means to be hearers of God's word.

Preparation for Hearing the Sermon

A Listener's Prayer

Read together the following prayer. Ask participants if the prayer is familiar to them.

Blessed Lord, since you have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn and take them to heart that by patience and comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life. Amen. (LW, 156).

Invite a discussion on the importance of prayer before turning to God's word. Emphasize how a vital and consistent prayer life is an important part of preparing to hear the word in the sermon.

How might hearers of sermons pray for their pastor throughout the week?

Review the important role of the pastor as an instrument of the Lord in service to the word. Express how the prayers of the people and their encouragement through the week are important to the pastor during his time of preparation. Remind the class of the essential role of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the word.

How might hearers include worship and the sermon in their weekly prayers?

Again, emphasize for the class that our gatherings for word and sacrament ministry are only beneficial to us because of the presence and the power of God. We pray throughout the week for the working of the Spirit on Sunday because the Lord has commanded us to pray and promises to answer. Worship is an encounter with the holy and as a central part of congregational life should be a focus of our prayers.

Preparatory Study

The following Sunday's sermon text is typically printed on the sermon outline page. How else could a listener find out the text for the coming Sunday?

Tell the class that the church secretary always knows sermon texts some months in advance and would be more than happy to share them. Also point out where the lectionary readings are listed in the front of the hymnal.

What might personal study in preparation for sermon listening look like?

Review some basics of personal Bible study and meditation such as repetitive reading throughout the week, quiet reflection and meditation with note taking, the use of study notes and cross references from a good study Bible or commentary.

Group study of the sermon text is currently available on Tuesdays at 9:00 AM and Wednesdays at 7:00 PM. What are the advantages of group study with the Pastor?

Listen to and affirm positive responses. If regular participants from the Tuesday or Wednesday groups are present, allow them to share their insights. Mention the benefit of hearing from the Pastor and fellow church members their understanding of the sermon text under study.

Preparation During Worship

How do each of the following elements of the liturgy help to prepare us for hearing God's word expounded in the sermon?

Review some of the suggestions from the previous session and how they might be implemented on a practical level.

Invocation

Confession and Absolution

Hymn of Praise

Prayer of the Day

Scripture Readings

Hymn of the Day

Active Listening: Dialog with the Preacher

A sermon is always dialog with God. His inspired word is proclaimed in our hearing, and we prayerfully respond to God while listening.

A sermon also has an element of dialog between preacher and people. Their relationship through the week and through the years finds its expression in the sermons of the church.

It's traditional in many African American churches for the congregation to speak right out loud and give the preacher signals and clues about how their listening is progressing. A vocal "Preach it! Tell it, brother!" can be a signal to dwell on that point for a few more minutes. A hearty "Amen!" can clue the preacher that the congregation understands and is ready for the next idea.

If well-prepared and attentive listeners are engaged in the sermon as it is being preached, how can their active listening be like a dialog with the preacher?

Share the example of reading a novel or watching a movie, where the reader or watcher is always anticipating the next scene, or wondering what surprise is coming next. See if the participants can apply the same active listening to the sermon experience on Sunday.

What skills would it take to be that kind of an active listener to sermons?

Listen for and affirm any responses that consider any of the skills covered in the last session, such as an ability to differentiate law and gospel and their places in the sermon, or the recognition of a move from one idea to the next in a sermon's structure.

Modes of Listening: *Ethos*, *Logos*, and *Pathos*

Use this section to help participants begin to discover their preferred mode of listening to the sermon. Emphasize that no one way is "better" than another, but that different listeners enter into the sermon through different aspects of the sermon's construction and presentation.

Also encourage listeners to grow in appreciation for the two modes of listening that are not their preferred style. Through participant conversation, have people with the different style preferences explain what it means to be a logos, ethos, or pathos listener.

Three "Ears"

Centuries ago, Aristotle taught that there are three ways to hold the attention of those to whom we speak. He called them *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos*.

Ethos can be translated "character." It refers to the way a speaker conveys himself to the listeners. He wants to be recognized as someone who is trustworthy and authentic, someone who speaks with authority. He portrays that in his voice, his expression, his gestures, and with his choice of words. In the case of parish pastors, *ethos* is portrayed in the pastor's relationship with the people in their every encounter.

How important is it to me that the preacher is someone I can trust and relate to on a personal level?

Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
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Logos can be translated "word." It refers to the choice of words and the presentation of those words by the speaker. The content of the message, the way it is organized logically, and the conclusions the speaker presents, or expects the listeners to draw themselves, are all aspects of *logos*.

How important is it to me that the sermon be logically organized around clear and rational ideas?

Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
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Pathos can be translated "feeling." It refers to the way the speaker communicates the emotions he is feeling, or the way he seeks to create an emotional response in the listeners. The speaker recognizes that an emotional response to a message can make it more memorable and persuasive.

How important is it to me that a sermon touches me deeply and stirs my emotions?

Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	Extremely important
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Aids to Memory

Help the class participants to see the potential value in each of the suggested practices intended to assist with in the memory of sermons and their teaching.

It's not uncommon for those who hear a sermon on Sunday to have a hard time remembering the sermon on Wednesday. Here are samples of memory aids that some people have used to keep the sermon's message alive in their heart throughout the week.

Note Taking

Three kinds of notes are kept either on the outline sheet or in a notebook. The first notes record significant things the preacher says that the listener wishes to remember. The second are significant insights the listener has during the course of the sermon that she wants to reflect upon more at a later time. A third set of notes are personal suggestions on how the listener might apply the lessons of the sermon to daily living.

How could note taking help assist my memory of the sermon?

Journaling

Another form of written memory aid is journaling. A journal can be a diary of reflections upon the weekly sermon. These reflections can be written into a journal on the same day as the sermon, and then added to through the week as continued reflection takes place. A journal is a good way to observe growth in faith as a listener returns to notes and comments about sermons from months or years past.

How might journaling help in my memory and meditation on the sermon?

Conversation

A conversation with friends or family while the sermon is still fresh in mind can help reinforce the lessons and commit them to memory. By verbalizing what was heard into short summary statements, the mind is forced to place the sermon deeper into the memory banks.

With whom could I have conversation about the sermon? How could such a conversation help me remember the sermon?

Meditation on the Sermon

Discuss the ancient practice of meditation on God's word and the practical application of that practice for sermon listeners today.

At the beginning of the course we read that Jesus compared the word of God to seeds cast upon the soil (Matthew 13). God's word is planted in our hearts each time we listen attentively and prayerfully to the sermon. Intentional, deliberate and prayerful meditation on the word planted helps those seeds take root in our lives. The following questions can help guide meditation on a sermon.

What truths from God's word were presented in the sermon this week?

Where did I experience the judgment of God's law?

Where did I experience the healing grace of God's gospel?

What did I learn about God from this sermon?

What did I learn about God's activity in the world from this sermon?

What new insight did I gain from the sermon?

What knowledge or learning did this sermon reinforce?

How would I summarize this sermon in one sentence?

What could I do this week to show what I learned?

Applying the Lesson

Which ideas from this lesson will I try to implement to become a more active listener to sermons?

Which ideas from this lesson will I try to implement to better remember the lessons of the sermon?

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