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Dialogical Preaching

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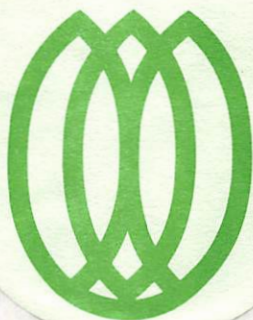
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DIALOGICAL PREACHING

A Research Paper Presented
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for elective P-505

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. THE PRINCIPLE OF DIALOGUE	1
II. THE DIALOGICAL NATURE OF THE GOSPEL	7
III. THE PASTOR'S RESPONSIBILITY IN PREACHING	10
IV. THE PEOPLE'S RESPONSIBILITY IN PREACHING	16
V. WORKING TOGETHER TOWARD DIALOGUE IN PREACHING	21
FOOTNOTES	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY	31

CHAPTER I

THE PRINCIPLE OF DIALOGUE

A little over twenty-five years ago, H. H. Farmer asserted that the most central and distinctive trend in contemporary theology is the rediscovery of the significance of preaching.¹ Preaching can certainly be that central if it is what it is intended to be-- if the pastor who, in preaching, has the opportunity to witness to large numbers of people at one time actually communicates the Gospel to them. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and preaching often fails, for a variety of reasons. There is no point in talking to people who are not listening, nor is there any point in listening to a preacher whose utterances are so incomprehensible as to merit the same criticism that the apostle Paul made against glossolalia.² Communication is the name of the game, and tremendous strides forward in the area of communication theory have been taken since Mr. Farmer made his bold assertion. Since so much of today's preaching is inert and uncommunicative, the pastor would do well to listen to what modern communication experts have to say. Dialogue is the big word in communication today, and it is a principle that those who work in group dynamics have put to good use. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that principles of dialogue--principles which have proven their value in group dynamics--are useful, indeed necessary, in preaching, if real communication is going to take place. Implicit in the

concept of dialogical preaching is the understanding that preaching is not a one-way phenomenon--from pulpit to pew--but that the listener has a function and responsibility in the communication that takes place on Sunday morning, both in response to the preacher and in communication with his fellow listeners.

Most preaching is monological in form--one person stands before a group and does all of the talking. This is not necessarily all bad. Real problems arise, however, when preaching becomes monological not only in form, but also in nature, so that the speaker becomes so preoccupied with himself that he loses touch with those to whom he is speaking.

Martin Buber is often given credit for directing the focus of our age in the direction of dialogue.

"Experiencing the other side" is Buber's phrase for identifying the nature of dialogue, and by it he means to feel an event from the side of the person one meets as well as from one's own side.

Reuel L. Howe has done a considerable amount of investigation in the field of communication theory, with particular focus on dialogue as it relates to preaching. In his book, The Miracle of Dialogue, he defines dialogue in these words:

Dialogue is that address and response between persons in which there is a flow of meaning between them in spite of all the obstacles that normally would block the relationship. It is that interaction between persons in which one of them seeks to give himself as he is to the other, and seeks also to know the other as the other is. This means that he will not attempt to impose his own truth and view on the other. Such is the relationship which characterizes dialogue and is the precondition to dialogical communication.

The major problem with monological preaching is that it does

not take the other person seriously. The monological preacher is concerned more about content than he is about people. He believes that as long as a message is spoken, it will be communicated. He is unconcerned about the other person's questions, problems, and needs. He views the other person more as a thing to be preached at than as a person to be related to. The only real needs to which his preaching relates are his own. The other person senses that he is being spoken to as an object rather than as a person, and so he listens to very little of what is being said, since it does not relate to his need anyway. As a result, no real communication--no meeting of meaning--takes place. Of course, in most cases this is an exaggerated picture. In really good preaching it has never been true. Even in not-so-good preaching, it has been only partially true, but since seldom has so much spoken by so many communicated so little as in much of today's preaching, it would seem good for all of us to take a long, hard look at dialogical principles of communication.

In discussing monologue and dialogue, Mr. Howe is careful to distinguish between principle and method.

Any method of communication may be the servant of the dialogical principle. A monological method can be an effective instrument of the dialogical principle, such as a creative lecture in which the lecturer is alert to and activates the meanings of his hearers in relation to what he is saying. Or a dialogical method can be used to serve a monological principle.⁵

Even though a sermon is spoken in the form of monologue, it may be dialogical in principle. Even though it is spoken by one person to a group of people, that speaker may take his listeners very

seriously. He may be deeply aware of their needs and questions, and he may direct his sermon toward answering those needs and questions. By the same token, a so-called "dialogue sermon" may be monological in nature. There may be two or more people speaking back and forth, asking and answering questions which have nothing to do with the real needs and questions that the people bring to their listening situation.

Often pastors preach monologically because they misunderstand the purpose of communication. They may believe that the purpose of communication is to give their answers to other people's questions. It is being recognized more and more in recent years that people are seldom helped by being told someone else's answers. They need to be helped to find their own answers. Reuel Howe suggests four purposes of communication. They appear in condensed form here:

1. Communication is a means by which information and meaning is conveyed and received between individuals and groups. ...there must be embodied in each a willingness to understand the problem from the other side as well as from his own.
2. A second purpose of communication is to help persons make a responsible decision, whether that decision be Yes or No in relation to the truth that is being presented.
3. Another purpose of communication...is to bring back the forms of life into relation to the vitality which originally produced them (eg. marriage, worship).
4. A final purpose of dialogue is to bring persons into being. Man becomes man in personal encounter, but personal encounter requires address and response between person and person. This, then, is the purpose of dialogue: the calling forth of persons in order that they may be reunited with one another, know the truth, and love God, man, and themselves. We move toward the realization of this purpose when we speak respon-

sibly out of what we know, when we help others to say Yes and No as responsibly as possible, and when we keep the forms of our life open to life itself.

When a pastor understands the nature of communication and really wants to communicate, it is unlikely that he will preach monologically, because he will take his people and their needs seriously, and will attempt to help them to face their needs as responsible persons.

If a pastor is consistently to preach dialogically, he must be a dialogical person--a person who is in dialogue with his whole environment. He takes God seriously, and really wants to know what God has to say to him and to his people in their situation. He takes the world seriously, and honestly attempts to know the demands that it makes upon his people. He takes his people seriously, and really wants to empathize with them in their needs and their joys, so that he can understand and speak to the meanings and questions that they bring to their listening situation. He is open rather than opinionated, and thus speaks relevantly, rather than in modern-day glossolalia which, like the old variety, edifies no one.

Much of today's understanding of dialogue has developed from work with small groups in which, over a period of time, members of the groups share their deepest feelings with each other and enter into a state of dialogue in which each person is concerned about the real needs and feelings of the other person. We shall later discuss the value of forming small groups in the congregation, both for sermon discussion, and for helping people to grow, but we would here note that many of the principles of small group

work can be helpful in the preaching situation itself, and in the total ministry of the pastor (of which the sermon is an integral, not isolated, part). Howard J. Clinebell, Jr. lists the functions of a creative group-centered leader:

1. He seeks the maximum distribution of leadership among the group members.
2. He sees that all members of the group have an opportunity to participate in group discussions.
3. He encourages freedom of communication.
4. He seeks to increase opportunities for participation.
5. He attempts to create a non-threatening group climate in which feelings and ideas are accepted.
6. He conveys feelings of warmth and empathy, thus encouraging others to do likewise.
7. He sets the tone by paying attention to the contributions of others, perhaps reflecting what they say with, "Let's see if I understand what you mean..."
8. He helps build group-centered (as contrasted with individual-centered) contributions by his "linking function," pointing to the relationships among various individuals' contributions to the discussion.

In a later chapter we will discuss the sermon more specifically, but here we would point out that the pastor who has these kinds of concerns in his day-to-day relations with his people, and who carries these concerns with him into the pulpit, will most likely be a dialogical preacher. He will understand and meet the meanings and needs that his people bring to their listening situation, and he will communicate Gospel to them.

CHAPTER II

THE DIALOGICAL NATURE OF THE GOSPEL

The application of modern communication theory to preaching has not been without criticism. Some people feel that it violates the norms that are set forth in the New Testament. Allan McDiarmid went so far as to say that

Preaching is by definition an historic intention for all time, proclamation of kerygma, and personal counseling is essentially a structured therapeutic activity, a product of dynamic psychology. Fosdick's concept (of preaching as personal counseling on a group scale) is, therefore, neither authentically Christian nor scientifically valid.¹

While we cannot quarrel with the fact that preaching is the proclamation of kerygma, we find it difficult to reconcile ourselves with this kind of reasoning. As Professor Caemmerer once put it, this is something like saying that the fork is something absolutely distinct from the food that a person eats, and since there is such a distinction, the two must never be mixed. Certainly, the fork without the food would accomplish nothing, but McDiarmid would seem to overlook the fact that it is helpful to use a fork, or some substitute for a fork (even if the fingers are that substitute) to transport the food from the plate to the mouth of the person who is eating. New Testament preaching adapted its method to its hearers and their needs. If modern methods help the kerygma to meet the needs of modern men, their use is not unbiblical. Whereas it may not be accurate to call preaching "pastoral counseling on a group scale," this does not give us reason for an

a priori rejection of the possibility of the effective use of certain counseling techniques in proclaiming kerygma from the pulpit.

God confronts people through people--through interpersonal communication. Small group theory has the purpose of helping people to interrelate--to really confront one another, so that communication is possible. It is not a substitute for the Holy Spirit. It is a method for making possible the communication through which the Holy Spirit does His work.

Jesus Himself was personal and dialogical in the way in which He met and communicated with people. His sermons were often preceded and followed by conversations in which He was able to relate to feedback from his listeners. Besides these "feedback sessions", He had many personal conversations in which He related to other people in a dialogical way. His conversation with the woman at the well is a good case in point. He reached her, not by reciting a creed or doctrinal formulation to her, but by relating to her as a person. This is only one example.

...much of Jesus' own teaching was dialogical in principle and method. He carried no Bible with him and almost invariably in his teachings started with a common concern or need of those with whom he was engaged conversationally. As his partners in the dialogue with him struggled with ideas and truths, God's word seemed to come through. See: Matthew 8:19; 12:46-50; 18:21; Luke 10:25-26; 11:1; 12:13; 17:5; 22:24-30; John 3:1-21; 4:1-15.²

Howard Clinebell says that the Christian movement began as a small sharing group,³ and in a sense, this true. From the first gatherings of the disciples after the Ascension on through the later "house churches", Christians related to each other as persons

and were concerned about each other's deepest needs. Whenever this was not the case in the congregations which the Apostle Paul started, he exhorted them to this type of activity. See: Romans 14:19; Colossians 3:12-17; and Ephesians 5:19-21. Other New Testament writers did the same. See: Hebrews 10:19-25 and James 5:16. Even the Incarnation itself may be seen as a form of dialogue between God and man. In it, God spoke His Word to man on man's own terms.

The Incarnation made the address and response between God and man immediate and personal. In a face-to-face way it became a dialogue between person and person. The Cross is a symbol of an event in which the barriers to dialogue were accepted as a part of the dialogue. The barriers to communication can only be overcome when there is honest address and response between person and person, when the meanings of one are confronted by the meanings of another in such a way that the being and freedom of each is respected in spite of whatever inequities may exist between them. Thus an adult can have edifying dialogue with a child, a scholar with a simple, untutored man, a teacher with a pupil, a priest with a penitent.

Many people have insisted that God enters into personal relationships with people only through other persons. Allowing for the possibility of a few isolated instances such as the one in Mutiny on the Bounty, in which a group of isolated non-Christians find a Bible and are converted by its written witness, it should be apparent that God almost always works through people. If we can agree that man's most basic malady is that he has alienated himself from God and other people by turning in upon himself (cf. Luther's homo incurvatus in se), then surely he needs to have people relate to him who are already relating to God so that he can come out of himself and relate to both of them.

CHAPTER III

THE PASTOR'S RESPONSIBILITY IN PREACHING

Perhaps part of the reason why much of today's preaching is monological is that the preacher often believes that he alone has the Word and God speaks only through him. As Reuel Howe puts it:

In monological communication the minister is so preoccupied with the content of his message, his purposes, and his delivery that he is blind and deaf to the needs of his people and their search for meaning.¹

A Pastor with this kind of personality is likely to use a lecture approach during meetings. In his eagerness to get his point across, he is likely to regard any discussion as misdirected effort. Since he fails to recognize that his people also have understandings and meanings in a given situation, he is likely to consider discussion nothing more than a pooling of mutual ignorance. This sort of pastor may also fail to communicate his message from the pulpit, because he has not really wrestled with the issues involved. When he thinks of resource material for sermons, he is most likely to think in terms of commentaries and theological works, and, more from habit than malicious intent, to ignore his relationships and experiences with people. Mr. Howe expresses the problem in this way:

The power of the Word is often weakened because there is little struggle to find its meaning for men today. The concern of much preaching does not seem to extend beyond the walls of the Church, or the preoccupations of institutions. Preachers preach to give meaning to people, but are oblivious of the meanings people have already.²

The physical arrangements of the preaching situation, --the elevated pulpit, dim lights, spotlight on the preacher--also tend to create the illusion that the preacher alone possesses all truth, and that the laity's role is strictly passive. Compounding the problem is the fact that such a preacher is apt to have a role concept as a performer, and so he continues to exploit the preaching situation, and the congregation expects to be entertained.

The pastor should not allow himself to be exploited by the status quo. It may take considerable effort for him to overcome his people's expectations and his own role concept, but this is necessary if the real purpose of preaching is to be fulfilled. The purpose of preaching, after all, is not that the people should hear the preacher, but that there should be a relationship--a continuum of communication--between God and man and between man and man; a dialogue, if you will. When preaching is consistent with its purpose, the preacher is the instrument through whom this takes place. Through his words the Word is communicated and, as this happens, the Spirit does His Work. At his worst, however, the preacher is a barrier which prevents the Word from getting through to his people. He makes the dialogue between God and man difficult, if not impossible. Such a pastor had better place a great deal of faith in the Sacraments, because he is not giving the Spirit much to work with in the Word department.

The pastor must come to realize that each of his people comes to the listening situation equipped with meanings of his own. Each person experiences pressures on the job, exasperation

on the freeways, grief when someone close to him dies, the joys of good food, recreation and entertainment, the intricacies of married life, the anxieties of financial pressures, and a host of other experiences to which he must relate as a person. If he is a thinking person at all, he must come to some conclusions about whether or how God relates to all of these things. In this twentieth century it will often seem a real live option to choose to believe that God has no relation to day-to-day living--that He ought to be worshipped on Sundays, but is best conveniently forgotten for the rest of the week. If the pastor, in his sermon, does not relate to the meanings that this person has himself arrived at, his opinion of the irrelevance of God can only be reinforced. If, for example, the pastor speaks of justification by faith in theological terms, it is likely to mean nothing to the listener. If, on the other hand, the pastor helps him to realize that his status-seeking is a form of self-justification, he may be led in this way to see his need for Christ.

If any such meeting of meanings is going to take place in preaching, the pastor must become aware of the world around him. He needs to be moved by the way that the questions of his times affect him and his hearers. Certainly, a strong theological background and a solid understanding of the text is important, but if the pastor is to relate his theology and the text to his people, he must be equally familiar with his people and the meanings which they bring. As Howe puts it:

Preparation for preaching should include time spent studying the human and social implications of their pastoral and community relationships; reading papers and magazines; listening to radio; watching television; attending the theater and movies in order that the church's preaching may engage the meanings that influence people with the meanings of the gospel.

The pastor must condition himself to watch for the sorts of things that provide meanings for his people. People notice the things that they want to see or are trained to see. During a television commercial, the child may notice the candy bar that is being advertised, the father may notice the pretty girl holding the candy bar, and the wife may notice her husband noticing the pretty girl. It may be difficult at first, but if a pastor concentrates on it, he should be able to train himself to notice things that will help him to relate the meanings of the Gospel to the meanings of his people.

The idea is not all that new. The pastor who is honestly concerned about his people and their concerns, and who reflects these concerns in his preaching, has been doing dialogical preaching all along, although he did not have this name for it. It all harks back to the old dictum, "The pastor who is invisible on six days of the week will be incomprehensible on the seventh." And yet, few pastors are doing this as efficiently as they might if they were to make a conscious effort to apply dialogical principles to their preaching.

Not infrequently, pastors who think they are preaching dialogically are actually preaching more monologically than some who have never given serious attention to books on communication.

theory, but have worked out their own dialogical principle.

Ministers frequently attempt to carry on both sides of the dialogue. They think they know what their people are thinking and they make their statements with these assumptions in mind. Experience, however, would seem to indicate that it might be wiser for them to devise means by which they might find out what their people are really thinking, and leave them free⁴ to make their own responses to their preaching and teaching.

Personal contact with his people is indispensable if a pastor is really to understand the meanings that his people bring when they come to church. In both his preaching and in individual personal confrontations, the pastor should attempt to stimulate his people to form meanings and convictions on the basis of their experience.

The raising of searching questions should be one of the purposes of preaching. Men should be asked by what principles they live; who are their gods. They should be given opportunity and assistance to formulate their convictions, to make their own interpretations of their experience, in order that its meaning may be the basis of further learning and⁵ growth. That...was the method commonly used by our Lord.

Reuel Howe suggests five barriers to communication that pastors should try to overcome as they attempt to preach dialogically.⁶

Language is a barrier because words have different meanings for different persons. The pastor should attempt to overcome the language barrier by explaining the meaning of biblical terms, and then attempting to relate these terms to the lives of his people. Images that people may have of their pastor (eg. as performer) and that pastors may have of their people (eg. as unthinking objects to be preached at) are a second barrier. This barrier can be overcome by dialogue between persons in which real personalities and meanings are uncovered by close relationships between people who really want to understand each other. Anxieties are a third barrier, and

there are too many of them to mention here. Personal anxieties about ourselves and our roles as communicators keep us from being attentive to the person with whom we are speaking. This may provoke his anxieties and keep him from being open to meaning. This is an area in which a pastor must seek to understand himself and his own problems. As Hiltner puts it:

Unless psychology is used for purposes of self-criticism by the preacher, its use, to aid techniques of communication will be under suspicion.

Defensiveness, which is really a form of self-justification, is a fourth barrier, and it shows itself in both pastor and people. The Gospel speaks to this barrier, but this part of the Gospel, too, must be related in a way that is meaningful to the listener. Contrary purposes are the final barrier. The pastor may have the purpose in mind of educating his people in a certain dogmatic concept. The people, on the other hand, may have come to be entertained or comforted. Very little communication is likely to take place unless some sort of agreement is reached concerning the purpose of the encounter. This, too, can probably be better resolved by dialogical preaching and dialogical conversation than in any other way.

None of these barriers are likely to be hurdled by a pastor who is so preoccupied with his own purposes that he is blind to the needs of his people, but a pastor who takes his people seriously, deals with them as persons, and honestly tries to understand their understandings and needs, has made a step in the right direction.

CHAPTER IV

THE PEOPLE'S RESPONSIBILITY IN PREACHING

A parishioner who was always critical of the sermon remarked as usual one Sunday morning, "I certainly didn't get much out of that sermon to take home," to which a fellow parishioner replied, "Well, you didn't bring anything to take it home in."

It may seem a truism to say that the listener has a responsibility in the preaching situation, but if it is, many parishioners do not realize it. Too many people come to Church to get something, not realizing that if they do not bring something with them, they are not only likely to get nothing, but they have failed in their obligation to God, the pastor, other people and themselves. Some of the reasons why lay participation in preaching is important are:

1. They should be participants because they are a part of the church, a part of the people of God!
2. Out of the data and experiences of their lives, they produce insights and points of view that must be taken into account if there is to be a true meeting of meaning between man and God.
3. It is Christian belief that God speaks to men through men, especially through his people if they are open to Him. If communication is two-way, then preaching should mean:
 - A. Communication between congregation and preacher; and
 - B. between members of the congregation and people with whom they live and work.

All of this transaction is part of the total act of preaching and has an important bearing upon our understanding of what a sermon is.²

Acknowledging that the listener has a responsibility in preaching and that, in many cases, he is not fulfilling his responsibility, it becomes apparent that something needs to be done. Since pastors are so dependent upon the laity for the effectiveness of their preaching, the pastor would be wise to take the initiative in helping his people to see and carry out their responsibility in this area. It would not seem out of place to, occasionally, use sermon time for this purpose. Texts on listening, such as the parable of the sower, suggest themselves immediately. Helping people to listen effectively to the Word which is preached to them is a part of the pastoral ministry.

There is no reason at all why we should not tell our congregations that our effort to communicate requires their effort to hear and respond. They need reminding, for example, that their faces are expressive instruments of their minds and spirit and that, therefore, they should reveal by facial expression their attentiveness and their desire to help the Word be proclaimed.

There are a few other things besides facial expressions that the listener can help with, however. Although much of the listener's responsibility is carried out during the week, one of the first things to which he needs to be alerted is the fact that in the very act of listening itself, he is fulfilling far more than a passive role. The listener must be constantly relating the meanings which he himself has brought to the listening situation to the words that the pastor is saying. He must realize that preaching has no value whatever as a kind of religious performance. What really matters is the meaning that the listener arrives at in his own mind as he cooperates with the pastor.

Any sermon has value for you only as it awakens forgotten knowledge and resolutions; only as it helps you to see human relationships with keener insight; only as it gives you information about God and yourself which you may find useful; only as it focuses your eyes more clearly on God's greatness and goodness. In one sense, listening to a sermon is a learning process.⁴ Learning requires that something happen inside the learner.

Part of the task of learning to listen simply involves learning to concentrate. The listener's mind is constantly barraged by a variety of factors that compete with the pastor for the listener's attention. Physical distractions are inevitable in a room full of people with traffic outside. No one can ignore them all, but the conscientious listener can discipline himself to get back to the business of serious listening with a minimum of delay. Various connotations of the words which the pastor uses may distract him, and tangents that he follows in his own mind are also bound to derail the listener's ~~attention~~ from time to time, but with practice, he should be able to bring these factors down to a workable minimum.

According to Professor Ralph Nichols, probably America's chief authority on listening, the basic cause of difficulty in concentrating is our multi-directional orientation. The average speaker can get across somewhere between 100 and 200 words a minute. ...We can listen...and still have a great deal of time to do something else. What⁵ we do with that time determines how skillfully we listen.

A good listener will use the extra time that he has during the sermon to relate what the pastor is saying to the understandings and problems which he has in his own mind. If he is to do this, he cannot sit passively and simply allow the words to come into his mind. He must be actively involved. Listening is hard work!

If he is serious about wanting to learn to listen to sermons better, he will discipline himself to listen better in all listening situations. Good listening is a habit that is only slightly more capable of being turned off or on at will than is the Christian life.

Since good listening requires energy, it might well be noted that the body must be prepared for it.

If you have less sleep than you need on Saturday night, attention will be difficult to focus. If the Sunday morning routine at your home is interrupted, or if it is tension-filled or upsetting, your listening ability will be impaired.

The conscientious listener will also be aware of this area of his responsibility.

Just as important as the act of listening to the sermon is the layman's responsibility during the week. Just as the pastor must be in dialogue with his total environment, so must the layman, if there is to be any meeting of meaning when the sermon is preached. Just as the pastor must prepare for his sermon partly by studying the human and social implications of his relationships; reading papers and magazines; listening to radio; watching television; attending the theater and movies (see chapter three); the layman also must keep his wits about him as he lives from day to day. As he confronts the joys and frustrations of each of the uncounted experiences of his everyday life, he must give thought to relating them to his whole Weltanschauung. He must ask himself how he and God and other people interrelate in all of these things, and on the basis of these questions he must form meanings. It is only as he brings these meanings to the listening situation and actively

relates them to the meanings that the pastor is seeking to convey, that a real meeting of meanings will take place when the sermon is preached.

An unreflective and, therefore, unprepared people can have as disastrous effect on a preaching encounter as an unprepared preacher, because they are not able to take their part in the church's preaching.

It will help the layman to relate his meanings to those of the pastor in a specific sermon if he has an opportunity to become familiar with the sermon text ahead of time. The pastor can facilitate this easily enough by simply printing the text, and perhaps a paragraph or two about the sermon, in the bulletin a week beforehand.

Just as the sermon cannot be divorced from the life-context from which it is taken, neither can it be really meaningful if it is understood apart from the worship context in which it finds itself. If the sermon is the only reason people come to Church, and they do not offer themselves in worship, they are denying many of the meanings that could hopefully meet in the sermon.

Worship that is rooted in the meanings of life opens the person through the act of offering and thanksgiving to the possibility of dialogue between himself and God.

The listener, then, must respond as a total dialogical person to the dialogue that takes place on Sunday morning.

CHAPTER V

WORKING TOGETHER TOWARD DIALOGUE IN PREACHING

The act of preaching in itself is an act of the Gospel. Preaching is not only a declaration about the action of God in Christ, but its very delivery is action and is a part of God's action.¹

If preaching is not merely communication, but is actually God in action, it becomes all the more important that communication really takes place so that God's action in that situation will become a reality. Since communication is so essential, the importance of pastor and people working together in their attempt to share this Gospel action can scarcely be overstressed.

Clyde Reid has worked out a theory of communication which involves seven steps: transmission, contact, feedback, comprehension, acceptance, internalization, and action.² Although he may be overstating his case when he says that instances of real communication are rare when there is no provision for feedback,³ he does make a strong case for the importance of giving listeners an opportunity to express their understandings of the meanings that the speaker has tried to communicate, and to be reinforced or corrected in these understandings by two-way verbal contact with the speaker. There was a time when such feedback was a natural, almost unavoidable, part of living in community, but in many parts of our society this is no longer the case.

Feedback is no longer built into the social structure of relationships in the church. In a small rural community a

century ago, a pastor only had to live there and get reasonably well acquainted with the people and he would have access to all sorts of information about them. Information flowed back and forth freely in the small, interacting, nonmobile populations that made up a typical town or countryside.

But how rarely such conditions prevail today! Unless a pastor makes special efforts, he knows little about the individual members of his congregation. The predispositions people bring, the way they understand his message, the way they react to it--this information does not come back to him automatically. There is no built-in social feedback in contemporary human relationships in our churches. Without a special effort, feedback such as ordinarily reaches a pastor is irrelevant to learning, or actually misleading.

It is unrealistic to say that a pastor no longer has any contact with his people. He is constantly attending meetings, discussing the Church's problems with prominent laymen and officers of the Church, and making calls on sick and delinquent members. Some feedback is inevitable in these contacts, just as it was a century ago in a rural situation. The difficulty is that such feedback is overbalanced in that it is drawn largely from a certain segment of the congregation. The officers and leaders of the congregation are already on the same "wave length" with him, and do not reflect the problems of the people in the congregation who find him difficult to understand.

It is natural for pastors to evaluate their efforts by reactions of those they know best and see most often. But these leaders of the church are seldom typical of the rest, and such feedback may be misleading.

Obviously the level of dialogue in preaching will be enhanced if the pastor makes a conscious effort to encourage feedback from people who are not on his "wave length"--the people who are not leaders in the congregation, and who perhaps attend Church services

only occasionally. He can do much of this in his daily calls and normal functions as a pastor to his people. He may also find it helpful, however, to use structured situations in which dialogue is built-in. Dialogue theory developed from work with small groups, and many pastors today are experimenting rather successfully with sermon "backfire groups". Such groups usually operate best when the sermon is still fresh in the minds of the participants. A logical way of operating would be to ask the group members to attend the early service and then meet immediately afterwards. Reuel Howe suggests a series of questions that might be used to stimulate group discussion. They might be mimeographed so that each group member could have a copy.

1. What did the preacher say to you (do not try to reproduce what the preacher said; this question asks for what you heard).
2. What difference do you think the sermon will make in your life, or was it of only of passing and theoretical interest?
3. In what ways were you challenged or drawn to greater devotion to your areas of responsibility?
4. Did his style and method, language, manner of delivery, and illustrations help or hinder the hearing of his message? Explain.
5. Do you think the preacher received any assistance from the congregation in the preparation and delivery of his sermon? If so, describe; if not, why not?

In spite of the fact that the whole purpose of the group is dialogue which will enhance dialogical preaching, Howe feels that the pastor's presence might inhibit discussion in such a group. He suggests that, since people readily become accustomed to a microphone, the session should be recorded (with full knowledge

of the members) and later played back by the pastor. The pastor who feels that it may be more valuable to build a relationship with the members in which they will not feel inhibited by his presence, may want to experiment.

Clyde Reid has experimented with similar discussion groups, and can give statistical evidence for the fact that participation in such sermon discussion groups have significantly helped both pastor and people to understand each other's meanings, and thus to participate in real dialogue when the sermon is actually delivered.⁷ Reid's evidence also indicates that the value and depth of dialogue is enhanced for people who participate in such a group over a long period of time.⁸ The pastor may have to make a choice between a long-term group which will participate in dialogue in depth, or a rotating group which will involve as many people as possible. He may choose to have both. It is generally agreed among experts in group dynamics that dialogue works best in groups which have between seven and twelve participants. Having too few people inhibits discussion, and if there are too many, it is easy for introverted individuals to avoid participation.

Another type of group activity that can enhance dialogue in preaching is the sermon seminar. In this type of situation, a group of parishioners meet with the pastor once a week to wrestle with the text and issues of the sermon for the following Sunday.⁹ The pastor will have done his exegetical work before the group meets. At the meeting he makes a brief presentation on what the

text actually says, and the rest of the time is spent in a discussion of how the meanings of the text relate to the meanings in the lives of the group members. When a pastor works with a group like this, he is directly in touch with the meanings that the members have in relation to the text. Conversely, when Sunday morning comes, the members are much more interested in and attentive to the sermon which they helped to make. A danger, of course, is that this sort of group may represent only the meanings of the leaders of the Church, and may not be representative at all. The pastor may guard against this, however, by careful choice of members for the group, or he may have a group in which the membership rotates, as in the "sermon backfire" group. There is much to be gained, however, both for the members and for the pastor, by making this a long-term group in which dialogue in depth becomes possible. Philip A. Anderson has noted that when a person participates in group dialogue in depth over a long period of time, he experiences a movement:

1. ...from self-centeredness to care for others.
2. ...from doubt about self to trust of self.
3. ...from irresponsibility to a sense of responsibility to others.
4. ...from secrecy to sharing.
5. ...from unfreedom to freedom.
6. ...from mistrust to trust.
7. ...from the need to receive ministry to an ability to give ministry as well.
8. ...from a closed mind to a mind opened to learning.
9. ...from fear of self, neighbor, and God to love of self, neighbor, and God (the most fundamental of all).¹⁰

These sound like high claims, but they are made more believable when you consider the fact that they are brought about by a mutual

witness among Christians who love one another--a "mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren," if you will--and the Holy Spirit works through this sort of thing.

When pastor and people really work together toward dialogue in preaching; when, through their efforts, a real meeting of meaning takes place between God's Word and their lives, then what Reuel Howe calls the "Church's Sermon" comes into being.

The Church's sermon is the joint product of the preacher's message and the congregation's meanings expressed through their listening. The minister's sermon, once it is preached, has served its usefulness and is destined for oblivion.

The Word must finally live in the lives of people who, when they leave the church, take it with them into the world for which the Word was intended.¹¹

When God's Word is really communicated, Gospel happens, and the Holy Spirit is at work. The people become the "living epistles" of whom Paul wrote in II Corinthians 3, who are in the world to be known and read by all men. As Howe puts it in another place, "The purpose of preaching is to cause the Word of God to take flesh in the lives of men and women."¹² When this actually happens, the people and pastor are both able to say, "I am the message." Of course, the pastor takes a certain amount of risk when he allows this to happen.

There may be no apparent resemblance between the preacher's sermon and the one born in the hearer. There need not be, and preachers could save themselves much anxiety if they could trust the Word and let it go without trying to control it by the forms with which they express it. The preacher's sermon never finds its way into life in the form in which he preaches it; it finds its way into life only in the form his hearers give it out of the meanings of their life and in the relationships they have.¹³

Dialogical preaching may be dangerous, because when the Gospel is really communicated and the Holy Spirit goes to work, things will begin to happen! We have been forewarned, and so we must be prepared to have something on our hands that is bigger than we can handle. To meet this dilemma we must be in dialogue with God, and perhaps our first response in that dialogue should be one of praise!

FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I

1. H. H. Farmer, The Servant of the Word. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942; The Preacher's Paperback Library, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, p. 1.
2. I Corinthians 14:9, et. al.
3. Reuel L. Howe, The Miracle of Dialogue. New York: Seabury Press, 1963, p. 38.
4. Ibid., p. 37.
5. Ibid., p. 40.
6. Ibid., pp. 56 ff.
7. Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, pp. 208 ff.

CHAPTER II

1. Allan McDiarmid, A Critique of Harry Emerson Fosdick's Concept of Preaching as Personal Counseling on a Group Scale, Th. D., Pacific School of Religion, Berkely, California, 1961, as quoted in "Abstracts of Doctoral Dissertations in Pastoral Psychology", Pastoral Psychology, 13 (March, 1962), p. 40.

cf. Edmund Holt Linn, Preaching as Counseling. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1966.
2. "Dialogue," Pamphlet from the Division of Parish Education of the American Lutheran Church, 1966, p. 3.
3. Clinebell, op. cit., p. 220.

cf. Acts 2:42.
4. Gene E. Bartlett, "When Preaching Becomes Real," Pastoral Psychology, 15 (October, 1963), p. 31

CHAPTER III

1. Reuel L. Howe, "Overcoming the Barriers to Communication," Pastoral Psychology, 14 (October, 1963), p. 30.
2. Reuel L. Howe, Partners in Preaching, New York: Seabury Press, 1967, p. 35.
3. Ibid., p. 38.
4. Gene E. Bartlett, "When Preaching Becomes Real," Pastoral Psychology, 14 (October, 1963), p. 31.
5. Howe, Partners, p. 76.
6. Howe, Miracle, pp. 26 ff.
7. Seward Hiltner, "On Preaching," Pastoral Psychology, 12 (April, 1961), p. 8.

CHAPTER IV

1. Reuel L. Howe, "The Recovery of Dialogue in Preaching," Pastoral Psychology, 12 (October, 1961), p. 12.
2. Howe, Partners, pp. 42 f.
3. Howe, Recovery, p. 12.
4. William D. Thompson, A Listener's Guide to Preaching, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966, pp. 56 f.
5. Ibid., pp. 78 ff.
6. Ibid., p. 71.
7. Howe, Partners, p. 53.
8. Ibid., p. 56.

CHAPTER V

1. Howe, Partners, p. 100.
2. Clyde Reid, "Preaching and the Nature of Communication," Pastoral Psychology, 14 (October, 1963), p. 42.

3. Clyde Reid, The Empty Pulpit, New York, Evanston, and London: Harper and Row, 1967, p. 84.
4. Henry B. Adams, "The Role of Feedback in Preaching," Pulpit, 37 (December, 1966), pp. 17 f.
5. Ibid., p. 18.
6. Howe, Partners, pp. 92 f.
7. Reid, Empty, pp. 86 f.
8. Ibid., p. 89.
9. Ibid., p. 108.
10. Philip A. Anderson, "The Group Member Becomes a Servant," Pastoral Psychology, 15 (June, 1964), pp. 17 ff.
11. Howe, Partners, p. 73.
12. Ibid., p. 46.
13. Reuel L. Howe, "Reader's Forum," Pastoral Psychology, 15 (February, 1964), pp. 56 f.

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