

Getting the Most Out of the Preacher

By Bill Scheidler

How many sermons will a believer listen to in their years of going to church? If you became a Christian in your teens and live to the national average you will have an opportunity to listen to approximately 7000 messages (based on two per week), not counting special services, radio and television preachers and other taped messages.

When you add these together, your lifetime average could easily exceed 10,000 messages. This would be the equivalent of listening to one message after another, 8 hours per day for 3 ½ years! John Wesley in his lifetime is actually believed to have preached about 80,000 times (Just think what it would have been like to have been his wife!).

With all of this time spent listening to sermons, you would think that we would be pretty good at it. Yet some people get precious little out of the preached word. One woman I observed in a particular church had the consistent habit of coming to church, sitting on the second row, and singing and worshipping with the congregation. But when the preaching began, her head would lean all of the way back, her mouth would go wide open and she would fall into a trance (sometimes snore) until the preacher said, “Amen!”

Then she would jump up and sing the closing song. I felt like asking her, “Just why do you come to this church?” However, she most likely would have said, “I’ve thought a lot about leaving, but I need the sleep!”

In many cases we have become experts at criticizing the craft of preaching, “it was too long”, “it was not deep”, “it was too deep”, “it was boring”, “he didn’t tell enough jokes”, “he told too many stories”, etcetera.

It is so easy to sit back and judge technique, style, and other preaching mechanics. However, in all of this preaching, God does want to speak to us and lead us forward. Listening to a preacher or a message has as much to do with the attitude and preparation of the heart of the listener as it has to do with the communication skills of the particular speaker.

When our heart and attitudes are right, we can hear from God whenever the Bible is opened. After all, it is actually the Holy Spirit who is the teacher. He uses the Word of God and clumsy human vessels to communicate the good things of God to our hearts.

Perhaps instead of being so focused on analyzing the pastor’s preaching skills, we should focus on that which we can do something about—our own listening skills. Instead of being a passive listener on the verge of a spiritual trance, perhaps we should actively participate with the speaker and actively respond to the Holy Spirit as we listen.

Our spiritual life is not dependent upon the homiletical skills of the pastor. It is not based on how well our pastor does in the pulpit. Our spiritual life is dependent on our ability to appropriate the Word of God to our personal lives. Perhaps we have actually become cold to the preached word because we have lost a personal responsiveness to the word preached.

It is easier to turn the knife of criticism on the pastor instead of allowing the Sword of the Spirit to penetrate our private world.

In our world we have a tendency to want to be entertained. As a result we have “entertainment-related” expectations. If the pastor does not “humor” me today, I feel that I have not been met. If I am bored, it is the fault of the pastor.

The answer to your situation is not changing the pastor. The answer is changing my expectations of what is to happen to me in the portion of the service when the Word of God is being exalted.

In some historic traditions and at times in the Old Testament, the people of God would actually stand at the reading of the Word. There is something to be said for such reverence for the Word of God no matter who is doing the reading. Nehemiah chapter eight gives us a great prescription for what should take place when “The Book” is opened.

Leviticus 8:1-8. NLT

*All the people assembled together **as one person** at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given for Israel to obey. 2 So on October 8 Ezra the priest brought the scroll of the law before the assembly, which included **the men and women and all the children old enough to understand**. 3 He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud **to everyone who could understand**. All the people **paid close attention** to the Book of the Law. 4 Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform that had been made for the occasion. To his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah. To his left stood Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. 5 Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. When they saw him open the book, **they all rose to their feet**. 6 Then Ezra praised the LORD, the great God, and **all the people chanted, “Amen! Amen!”** as they lifted their hands toward heaven. Then **they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground**. 7 Now the Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah--instructed the people who were standing there. 8 They read from the Book of the Law of God and **clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage**.*

- 1. All the people gathered together as “one person” (vs. 1).** This should not be a time of division but a time of unity if we expect the “dew of Hermon” to be released in our midst (Ps. 133:3).
- 2. It was read to “the men and women and all the children old enough to understand.” (Vs. 2).** The word of God is not just an “adult” thing. All age groups should be exposed to the Word.
- 3. The ears of all people “paid close attention” (vs. 3).** This is the part over which we personally have control. We need to dig out our spiritual ears so that we can receive what is being said to us by God through His Word.

4. **All the people stood up when the word was read (vs. 5, 7).** While we do not necessarily need to be standing in our natural posture when the Word is read, we should be standing at attention in our “spiritual posture” much like a soldier who awaits instructions from their commander.
5. **All the people said “Amen” (vs. 6).** The people actively interacted with the word that was being read to them. They treated them as the “words of life” that they indeed were.
6. **All of the people prostrated themselves before the word (vs. 6).** The people so reverence the word that they lowered themselves in humility before it.
7. **The Levites helped the people to understand the reading (vs. 8).** This is the job of the church leaders. It is to help the people understand and apply the word of God to their individual lives.

The preacher can prepare a message, but he can do nothing to prepare the heart of the hearer. This is the responsibility of the listener. How much different an experience we could have each and every time we hear the word if we spent some time praying and preparing our hearts to receive. God help us to do so!