

John S. McClure, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, L. Susan Bond, Dan P. Moseley, and G. Lee Ramsey, Jr. *Listening to the Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004; Ronald J. Allen. *Hearing the Sermon: Relationship/Content/Feeling*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004; Mary Alice Mulligan, Diane Turner-Sharaz, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen. *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005; Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen. *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006.

These four works present findings from a project on how sermons are heard, sponsored by the Lilly Endowment through the Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Two hundred and sixty-three lay people (ethnically diverse) from 28 churches (denominationally diverse – including Anabaptists) who regularly listen to sermons were interviewed about what they find engaging or disengaging in preaching. Each of the above books “slices the data differently” from this one massive study.

*Listening to the Listeners* looks at six full interviews (five individuals and one small group) conducted in this study. For instance, we get to listen at length as an AME African-American man and a Caucasian Anabaptist woman respond to specific questions on preaching. Alongside their responses is a column of commentary that interprets and connects the responses in light of larger homiletical, theological, and churchly issues. There are interesting surprises as each person is “heard out” on what they actually hear in a preached sermon. Individuals from various ethnic backgrounds and denominations – while having differing views and expectations – value preaching, and use remarkably similar language to say so.

Readers who like the case study approach will gain much from this slice of the data. The summary chapters and the appendix show excellent examples of how congregations can conduct and interpret their own interviews on preaching.

*Hearing the Sermon* pays attention to how parishioners process sermons. Aristotle’s rhetorical categories of *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* are used here

to show how listeners hear in distinct ways. The researchers were surprised at how respondents listened to sermons primarily out of one of these three modes.

Some parishioners were engaged in a sermon mainly because they knew, loved, and respected the preacher (*ethos*). These folk speak of “connecting” with a sermon or a preacher and use relational language, regardless of what kind of question is posed. An equal number of parishioners were captivated by a sermon based on its biblical or theological content (*logos*). These listeners “think through” the sermon and are impatient when the preacher takes a long time to get to “the point” or keeps rambling on after it is made. Another almost equal third of respondents were engaged when feelings were elicited by a sermon (*pathos*). Those whose mode of processing is that of pathos speak of what “moves” or “touches” them in the sermon.

These three types of listeners are represented by extended transcripts from respondents plus commentary from psychology, rhetoric, and theology. The message is clear: one style of preaching (i.e., narrative preaching that gives its nod to *ethos* and *pathos* but little to *logos*) will not cut it over time.

Throughout each chapter and especially in the last one, the authors show how the three modes can be woven together in the preached sermon. Appendices list the questions asked and provide handy charts related to *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* in preaching.

*Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons*, the longest of the four volumes, treats the data in ten clusters revealing the range of ideas that arose in the interviews. Here we get a glimpse into the diverse views of parishioners on certain aspects of preaching.

One issue has to do with challenge and controversy. There was clear, widespread support for pastors who tackle controversial issues. At the same time there were diverging views on *which* particular issues should be dealt with and *how* they can best be treated from the pulpit. Researchers found that listeners were not interested simply in topical sermons or some treatment of the topic *du jour*: what they fervently desired was honest grappling with theology and biblical texts as they relate to life.

Other areas that respondents saw as central included the role of God, scripture, and emotion in the sermon. Also, they were interested in the role that the sermon plays in forming the individual and the community. Affirmed throughout this book is the reality that while listeners view the purpose of preaching in sometimes divergent ways, they do care deeply about preaching and see it as central to Christian life and worship.

*Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity* could be called “the listeners unplugged.” The twelve chapters in this volume correspond to twelve qualities that listeners mentioned which helped them to engage with the preached word.

The chapter titles succinctly spell out each topic in the imperative. For instance, “Make the Bible come alive” and “Show how the gospel helps us” place the Bible’s role at the forefront of preaching. Chapters such as “Speak from your own experience,” “Make it plain,” “Keep it short,” “Walk the walk,” and “Talk loud enough so that we can hear you,” relate to how preachers live, move, and have their being in and out of the pulpit. Preaching that relates to tough issues is emphasized in “Talk about everything,” and “Don’t oversimplify complex issues.” Two chapters deal specifically with the listeners’ desire to be in relationship with God. “Help us to figure out what God wants” is a call for preachers to keep God central in their sermons.

These chapters are more dense and nuanced than one might suppose from the titles. For instance, “Keep it short” hardly comes from a desire for “theology light” or a desire to get out of church early. Many listeners in this study were smart enough to know when preachers are filling in the sermon with more than is needed. Many were also aware that when preachers slovenly throw together their sermons on Saturday night, the results tend to be long and tedious. Editing takes time – but what happens is that more is said in fewer words.

The chapter entitled “Speak from your own experience” is hardly an endorsement of endless stories from the pastor’s life. As one parishioner warned, “Don’t go to the well too often.” In other words, preachers often do have powerful, appropriate, and helpful stories from their deep well of experience, but going there too frequently (even once per week) turns

the sermon into an exercise in ego rather than a preaching of the gospel. Preaching out of deep experience can be conveyed without constant reference to oneself.

At first I was skeptical of this entire project. As a preacher of the gospel, am I not beholden to what God would have me say, as opposed to “tickling the ears” of the congregation? Listening to the listeners might get me a hearing, but am I compromising the gospel by giving people what they want?

Thankfully, these questions are met frankly in several ways in this study. The authors stress that the preacher is not giving away theological integrity by listening to the listeners. What this study offers is just one – albeit comprehensive – way of listening to what people are hearing when they hear the sermon. One of the authors puts it something like this: With the obligatory handshake at the end of the service, preachers so often hear “That made me think,” or “That sermon moved me,” and sometimes “Nice sermon but I really don’t need all the stories.” Following up with the parishioner is one way to handle such brief comments.

With this study and its four books, the preacher gets to hear 263 parishioners explain why they say what they do when they shake the pastor’s hand. And the preacher gets to hear a slice of what the silent individuals might say if we asked the right questions. In these volumes we also get to hear some of North America’s finest scholars of preaching reflect, both in the body of the text and in the endnotes and numerous appendices, on what is being said by listeners in the context of larger theological and practical issues.

Many works stress that preaching actually starts when the preacher shuts his or her mouth and just listens. Listening to the biblical text, to the rhythms of God in the world, and to the individuals and congregations we serve is crucial to preaching that is both engaging and faithful to the gospel.

These four books – I would start with *Make the Word Come Alive* and see where it leads – allow the preacher to simply stop and listen.

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