

# PREACHING AND LEARNING STYLES: HOW TO COMMUNICATE SO PEOPLE CAN LISTEN

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## Abstract

To enhance preaching, homileticians have been concerned with communication theory with ample literature available on such issues as the process of communication, sermon structures, congregational awareness, and matters of delivery. One neglected factor has been learning styles which accounts for why people relate well to some sermons and struggle with other ones. Responses are not necessarily related to content but stem from the orientations of listeners.

Educational research indicates numerous factors impact listeners. Models of learning can be grouped into four categories. Personality models are the most stable and form the core of learning styles. Information processing models examine how people tend take in and process information. Social interaction models consider how individual's ability to learn is impacted by various contexts. Instructional preference models deal with people's inclinations as far as teaching methods. For greater effectiveness, preachers should not only be aware of these styles but their own learning preferences.

## Introduction

Roger Van Harn writes the concerns of men and women in the pew should be paramount and reminds preachers "the pulpit was made for the pew, not the pew for the pulpit."<sup>1</sup> In referring to Romans 10:13-17 he notes attention is often directed to the pulpit where the preaching occurs. But in so doing, we miss the Apostle Paul's point where he focuses on the hearing of Christ. Van Harn states:

Because faith comes by hearing, he gives hearing the central place in the church's mission order:

sending – preaching – *hearing* – believing – calling

The whole mission order includes a church order and a salvation order. The church order is composed of sending, preaching, and hearing. The salvation order is composed of hearing, believing, and calling on the name of the Lord. (When) the mission order joins the church order and the salvation order . . . hearing stands at the center between preaching and believing. It fulfills the purpose of the sending and makes possible our calling on the name of the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the centrality of hearing in mission, Van Harn continues:

The church must be a sending community, a preaching community, a believing community, and a community that calls on the name of the Lord. (But) if we fail to be a hearing community as well, the whole order collapses. What remains may be a religious society that preserves tradition and promotes good causes, but it will not be the church of the crucified and risen Lord.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roger E. Van Harn, *Pew Rights: For People Who Listen to Sermons* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

Because hearing stands between preaching (purpose of the church) and believing (experience of salvation) it can be easily overlooked. From personal observation, it is more than overlooked but simply assumed. Preachers can tell themselves, "Of course, my people will want to hear what I have to proclaim because I am speaking for God." Perhaps but not necessarily.

But before reprogramming the church for action, it would be wise for preachers to check what people actually hear because they may be surprised. People may be hearing but not listening because congregations and preachers are on different wavelengths. While in pastoral ministry, it was my custom to stand at the back of the sanctuary and greet people following the worship service. On more than one occasion, individuals would offer a comment about the sermon but I had no idea what they were talking about. Yet they heard me say it! So did something go awry with the sermon? Possibly but not necessarily other than what you say and how people listen will differ. Though no one is to blame for the apparent miscommunication, it only points to my premise that an appreciation for learning styles is significant if men and women are to understand what is spoken and more importantly, what the Lord considers essential.

Pertaining to this relationship, Beverly Zink-Sawyer's comments are appropriate and helpful:

The powerful cultural forces that have influenced homiletical and liturgical styles over the past few decades have been accompanied by an awareness of the diversity of those individuals who occupy the pews. The awareness is due in part to new educational, sociological, psychological and epistemological theories that have revealed the multifaceted ways in which individuals hear and learn. Educational and communicational theories have deepened our knowledge of unique patterns of thought, giving us terms like left and right brain and concrete and imaginative thinking. The relatively new field of congregational studies has joined sociological methodologies to ecclesiological elements, enabling church leaders to understand better the dynamics inherent in religious communities. Even personality type can influence the way in which different listeners hear a given sermon. An analytical tool such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator that suggests personality preferences can demonstrate the different ways people process information. A judgment concerning the effectiveness of any given sermon will vary according to the interaction of the preacher's own personality preferences, the form and content of the sermon, and the hearer's personality preferences. In the end, we must resign ourselves to the fact that, no matter how faithful we try to be in shaping textual meaning into appropriate sermonic form, a "sermon preached to seventy-five people is actually transformed by them into seventy-five more-or-less related sermons."<sup>4</sup>

#### Definitions

Research continues into styles of learning with studies being conducted in the physiological, psychological and sociological dimensions. Though learning styles have yet to be clearly or comprehensively defined, there is still an abundance of literature providing a range of models that help us deal with this mysterious terrain.

One reason for the plethora of definitions is that learning is an internal process which you know has taken place only as you are able to observe changes in a person's behavior. For instance, if a woman exhibits different attitudes or conducts herself in new ways, you assume learning has occurred. In trying to ascertain how and why these changes come about, models are created by theoreticians that seek to account for the underlying causes. And so, styles are but hypothetical constructs that help explain the teaching-learning process.

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<sup>4</sup> Beverly Zink-Sawyer, "The Word Purely Preached and Heard: The Listeners and the Homiletical Endeavor," *Interpretation* 51(4), (1997), 351.

Definitions of learning styles include the following:

- D.H. Kalsbeek describes a learning style as “a person’s preferred approach to information processing, idea formation, and decision making; the attitudes and interests that influence what is attended to in a learning situation; and a disposition to seek learning environments compatible with these personal profiles.”<sup>5</sup>
- Marlene LeFever understands a style of learning as a way in which “a person sees or perceives things best and then processes or uses what has been seen. Each person’s individual learning style is as unique as a signature.”<sup>6</sup>
- James Keefe states learning styles reflect “genetic coding, personality development, motivation and environmental adaptation. Style is relatively persistent in the behavior of individual learners. It can change, but it does so gradually and developmentally. Learning style has cognitive, affective and environmental elements. Cognitive elements are internal controls of the information processing system that are trainable for more affective levels of skill. Affective and environmental elements are preferential in nature and can respond to both training and instructional matching strategies.”<sup>7</sup>
- David Kolb views a learning style as “the way we process the possibilities of each new emerging event (which) determines the range of choices and decisions we see, the choices and decisions we make, to some extent determine the events we live through, and these events influence our future choices.”<sup>8</sup>
- Kenneth and Rita Dunn reflect an inclusive approach to style based on multiple elements. They define learning style as “the way each learner begins to concentrate, process, and retain new and difficult information. That interaction occurs differently for everyone . . . multi-dimensional characteristics to determine what will most likely trigger each student’s concentration, maintain it, respond to his or her natural processing style, and cause long-term memory.”<sup>9</sup>
- In conjunction with Jeffrey Beaudry and Angela Klavas, Rita Dunn offers another definition in which she considers a learning style as “a biologically and developmentally imposed set of personal characteristics that make the same teaching method effective for some and ineffective for others.”<sup>10</sup>
- Robert Sternberg provides another definition (and term, thinking styles, and which is similar but not identical to learning styles). “A style is a preferred way of using one’s abilities. It is not in itself an ability but rather a preference. Hence, various styles are not good or bad, only different.”<sup>11</sup> He continues to state everyone has a style profile which means we show varying amounts of each style but we are not locked into any one specific profile. We have the ability to vary our style to suit different situations and tasks.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> D.H. Kalsbeek, *Linking Learning Style Theory with Retention Research: The TRAILS Project*, (Association for Institutional Research, 32, 1989), 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Marlene D. LeFever, *Learning Styles: Reaching Everyone God Gave You to Teach*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook Publishing Co, 1995), 17.

<sup>7</sup> James W. Keefe, ed., *Learning Style and Theory*, (Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1979), 2.

<sup>8</sup> David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1984), 64.

<sup>9</sup> Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn, *Teaching Elementary Students through Their Individual Learning Styles*, (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1992), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Rita Dunn, Jeffrey S. Beaudry and Angela Klavas, “Survey of Research on Learning Styles,” *Educational Leadership* 46(6), (1989), 50.

<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Sternberg, “Allowing for Thinking Styles,” *Educational Leadership* 52(3), (1994), 36.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

### Models of Learning

Because of the wide variety of models, categorization of the research aids our understanding. Lynn Curry categorized learning styles into three levels, likening them to layers of an onion.<sup>13</sup> This metaphor has been expanded by Charles Claxton and Patricia Murrell to four levels.<sup>14</sup>

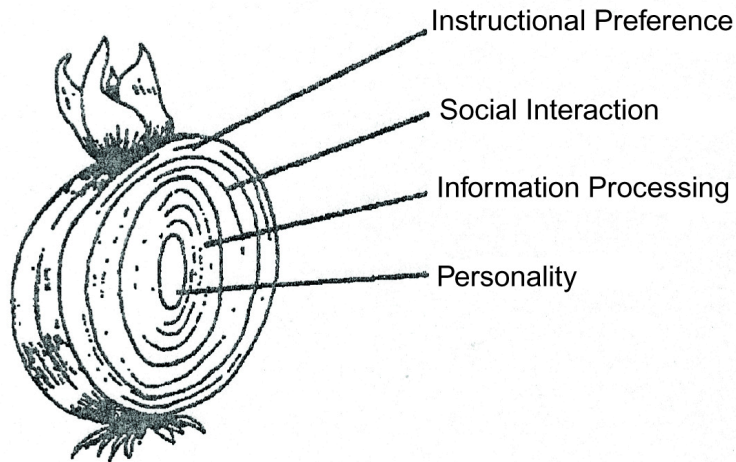


Figure 1  
Source: Charles Claxton and Patricia Murrell 1987.

The onion should be understood holistically. Claxton and Murrell write the traits described at the different levels are not discreet (or self-contained) units. Traits at the core (personality) are the most stable and least subject to change. As one moves outwards, traits or preferences are less stable and more susceptible to change. Yet as you move from the core level of personality to the outer levels, the inner set of traits influences the next layer. Hence, personality impacts one's information processing abilities, and a person's social-interaction style affects their instructional/environmental preference.

Before considering the representative styles in Claxton and Murrell, there is worth considering the relationship of learning styles to preaching theory. In regard to engineering education, Richard Felder and Linda Silverman have stated:

Mismatches exist between common learning styles of engineering students and traditional teaching styles of engineering professors. In consequence, students become bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the courses, the curriculum, and themselves, and in some cases change to other curricula or drop out of school. Professors, confronted by low test grades, unresponsive or hostile classes, poor attendance and dropouts, know something is not working; they may become overly critical of their students (making things

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Curry, "An Organization of Learning Styles Theory and Constructs," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Montreal, Quebec, (April 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Claxton and Patricia K. Murrell, *Learning Styles: Implications for Improving Educational Practice*, ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No.4, (Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1987), 7.

even worse) or begin to wonder if they are in the right profession. Most seriously, society loses potentially excellent engineers.<sup>15</sup>

Substituting some words and phrases, Felder and Silverman's assessment can be applied to the field of homiletics. It can be similarly stated (*italics mine*):

Mismatches exist between common learning styles of *people in the church* and *the preaching style of the pastor*. In consequence, *God's people* become bored and inattentive in *church*, do poorly in *their walk with God*, get discouraged about *the church, the preaching*, and themselves, and in some cases change to other *ministries* or drop out of *church*. *Preachers*, confronted by *low involvement, unresponsive or hostile boards*, poor attendance and *inactive members*, know something is not working; they may become overly critical of *members (making things worse)* or begin to wonder if they are in the right profession (or *calling*). Most seriously, *churches as well as society* loses potentially excellent *pastors (and the message of Christ is not proclaimed)*.

### Personality Models

Personality models describe the onion's innermost layer or core of learning styles. The models focus on men and women's deepest personality characteristics and how they view the world.

#### *Myers-Briggs Type Indicators (MBTI)*

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is probably the most common personality method and stems from the work of Isabel Myers who revisited the research of Carl Jung on psychological types. Subsequently, Myers worked with Kathryn Briggs to create the MBTI model that identifies sixteen patterns by which people take in information (perception) and the manner in which they make decisions (judging). Their model states, "The world can be perceived in two distinct ways – sensing or intuition – and people use two distinct and contrasting ways to reach conclusions or make judgments – thinking or feeling. In addition to a person's preference on both mental functions is an accompanying preference for extraversion or introversion, and a preference for attitude toward life which is either judging or perceptive."<sup>16</sup>

MBTI consists of four dichotomous scales and categorizes people as:

1. *Extroverts* (focus on the outer world of people, willingly try out new things) versus *introverts* (focus on the inner world of ideas and thinking through matters).
2. *Sensors* (practical, detail-oriented, factual, procedural) versus *intuitors* (conceptual, imaginative, interest in meanings and possibilities).
3. *Thinkers* (skeptical, decisions are logical and rule-oriented) versus *feelers* (appreciative, decisions are personal and considerate).
4. *Judgers* (set and follow agendas, seek closure even with incomplete information) versus *perceivers* (adapt with circumstances, resist closure to obtain more data).

How a person rates along these scales indicates tendencies in their personalities as well as engagement with the world. The MBTI model is helpful in recognizing how natural instincts can enhance or limit learning outcomes with individuals.

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<sup>15</sup> Richard M. Felder and Linda K. Silverman, "Learning and Teaching Styles in Engineering Education," *Engineering Education* 78(7), (1988), 674.

<sup>16</sup> See Isabel Briggs Myers and D.B. Myers, *Gifts Differing*, (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologist Press, 1980).

### *Ned Herrmann's Brain Dominance Model*

A second model involves hemispheric dominance of the brain (or as it is commonly referred to as the right brain – left brain approach). According to Ned Herrmann, the left side of the brain is the seat of language and processes information in linear or sequential ways. As for personality, left brain individuals are considered to be more logical in their thought processing. This side of the brain takes pieces of data, arranges them in a order, and seeks to draw conclusions which are consistent with the data. In contrast, the brain's right side is more visual and processes information intuitively, emotively, randomly and holistically. The brain's right side is inclined to see the big picture before attending to details.<sup>17</sup>

Lisa Verlee Williams has categorized these differences:<sup>18</sup>

Left Hemisphere	Right Hemisphere
interested in component parts	interested in whole and gestalts
detects features and particularities	integrates component parts, organizes them into a whole
analytical/logical	relational, constructional, pattern-seeking, creative
sequential processing, serial processing	simultaneous processing, processing in parallel
temporal	spatial
verbal – encoding and decoding speech, mathematics, musical notation	visual – spatial, musical

Most people seem to have a dominant side or thinking preference. While nothing is entirely isolated on one or the other side of the brain, these characteristics are commonly attributed to their respective sides of the brain. When learning is new, difficult or stressful, the brain will automatically shift to its dominant hemisphere.

### *Herman Witkin's Field Dependence-Independence Theory*

In *Personality through Perception*, Herman Witkin developed the field dependent versus field independent approach to learning. Though men and women may have similar intellectual capacities, their ability to use information and the manner in which they process data will differ. From experiments in visual pattern detection, two broad categories of learners have emerged: field-dependent (or field-sensitive) and field-independent.<sup>19</sup>

Individuals who are field-dependent are sensitive to their environment and more likely to be influenced by their surroundings. Strong in interpersonal relationships, happy in group settings, and sensitive to other people's judgments, they prefer mutually-enriching learning contexts. Field-dependent learners are more likely to be obedient to authority, conscious of culturally determined social roles, and anxious to be accepted by other individuals.

Field-independent learners are not influenced as strongly by the environment. More analytical, they are inclined to be task oriented. More globally-oriented, they are likely to look at pieces of the whole or particular aspects of a concept or idea. Field-independent individuals are internally motivated, may prefer to be by themselves, have greater cognitive flexibility, and are strongly influenced by their own judgments.

<sup>17</sup> See Ned Herrmann, "The Creative Brain," *Training and Development Journal*, 35(10), (1981), 10-16.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Verlee Williams, *Teaching for the Two-Sided Mind: A Guide to Right Brain/Left Brain Education*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 14-15.

<sup>19</sup> See Herman A. Witkin, *Personality through Perception: An Experimental and Clinical Study*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1954).

### *Implications for Preaching*

Personality is a function of the creative action of God in people's lives. Though a myriad of social factors impact personalities, people will be introverts or extroverts, thinkers or feelers, right or left-brain dominant, analytical or relational, and field-dependent or independent because God has created them in these ways. Though uniqueness can be invigorating, puzzling, empowering, or cause for conflict, everyone is fearfully and wonderfully made in God's image (Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139:14). Being in his image implies these differences are very good since these traits have been established by an all-purposeful God. As a result, preachers should expect styles to differ from one pew to the next and seek to minister in responsive ways.

This creational implication is not to imply that personality sets limitations on learning styles. Wilbert J. McKeachie has written: "styles or types . . . are not little boxes, neatly separated from one another; rather, they represent dimensions along which learners may differ. Each individual is unique, falling at different points along the various continua that the learning style inventories purport to measure."<sup>20</sup> In other words, though every individual has been fashioned by the Lord with a personality and character traits, it does not necessarily mean his or her personality is locked-in" or unchanging nor are their learning abilities. Rather personality indicates preferences, not limitations.

Personality models also point to the preacher's need to value diversity among God's people. The church is a multi-layered, richly-textured community. It is comprised of extroverts and introverts, thinkers and feelers, sensors and intuitors. Regarding this complexity in the church, David Dickinson comments it is appropriate to view a congregation as an interpretive community, created in response to the mutual reading of texts (Bible, creeds, hymns, etc.). Since there are considerable differences between God's people who share in these expressions of the Christian faith, we dare not turn a blind eye to issues such as gender, generation, ethnicity, education, theology, nationality or level of involvement in the life of the church and how these factors impact learning.

Consequently, preachers should not view their people as single unitary interpretive communities but as being composed of several interpretive communities-in-the-making.<sup>21</sup> In fact, a most positive (and engaging) approach in contemporary preaching is "not to overpower hearers with a superior reading of the Christian story . . . To preach in the postmodern era is to collaborate with the several interpretive communities within a congregation in the exercise of interpreting the text."<sup>22</sup> In other words, preaching should take on more of a collaborate look which accounts for and honors a God-based and theologically-intended diversity. At the same time, the task of homileticians must be conducted in such ways that Scripture is upheld as God's sacred text.

### Information Processing Models

Information-processing models describe the second layer and consider how individuals engage or interact with the world. They reflect how people gather, sort, store and utilize information for learning.

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<sup>20</sup> Wilbert J. McKeachie, "Learning Styles Can Become Learning Strategies," *National Teaching and Learning Forum* 4(6), (1995), 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> David Dickinson, "In Honesty of Preaching 4: The Insights Offered by Literary Theory," (*Expository Times*, 111(10), (2000), 331-332.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

### Gordon Pask's Holist-Serialist Approach

In his work, Gordon Pask has identified two approaches to learning – holistic and serialistic.<sup>23</sup> Nigel Ford has schematized these modes.<sup>24</sup>

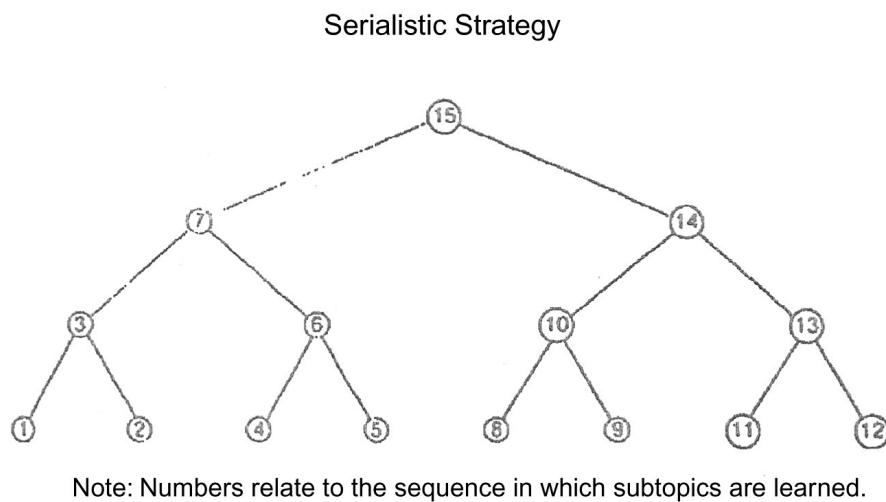
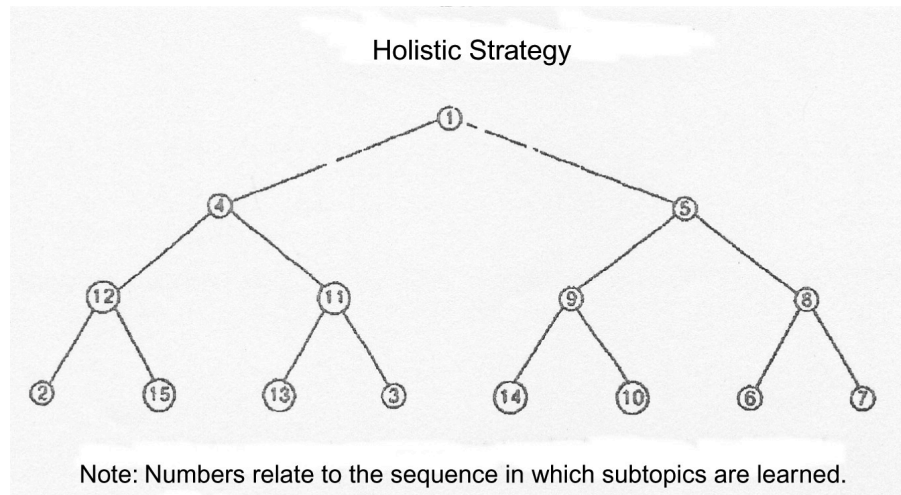


Figure 2

Source: Nigel Ford 1985.

With the holistic approach, a learner uses a broad framework of information into which she or he can fit more detailed information. Taking a more global approach, holists are far likely to make

<sup>23</sup> See Gordon Pask, "Styles and Strategies of Learning," *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 46, (1975), 128-148.

<sup>24</sup> Nigel Ford, "Styles and Strategies for Processing Information: Implications for Professional Education," *Education for Information* 3, (1975), 3-15.

liberal use of “anecdotes, illustrations, and analogies to arrive at a description. They tend to look further ahead than other people when working through a hierarchy of topics, have a wider focus of attention, and try to first build up the ‘big picture’ before determining where any of the details fit.”<sup>25</sup>

A second type are serialists who focus their attention more narrowly on pieces of information and are more likely to progress linearly from one piece to the next. Concerned with details and operational procedures, serialists work step by step through a list of topics and are careful to attend to sequencing and well-defined steps. Working from more of a “bottom-up” approach, their tendency is to work slowly, logically and thoroughly.<sup>26</sup>

### *David Kolb Experiential Learning Model*

Kolb’s model recognizes the need to address the different ways individuals process information. In his theory, Kolb deals not only with learning styles but also with the basic questions of personal development, drawing from the writings of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget. He identifies four phases, each entailing different processes and abilities in the accessing of factual information:<sup>27</sup>

1. *Concrete experience (feeling)*: person becomes fully involved in an activity in order to gain firsthand understanding. Characteristically, individual is asking “why” do I need to know this information.
2. *Reflective observation (watching)*: person asks “what” data needs to be known. Learner views experiences impartially or from many different perspectives.
3. *Abstract conceptualization (thinking)*: individual seeks to understand “how” information applies or the generalizability of the data to various situations.
4. *Active experimentation (doing)*: person is more innovative and think of her or his own situation as to where the information applies.<sup>28</sup>

Kolb maintains new information is more meaningful and retained longer when individuals work through all four phases of the learning cycle. Extending these phases, he identifies four styles:

1. *Convergers* rely on abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. They like to have concrete answers and move quickly to solutions. Convergers are good at defining problems and making decisions.
2. *Divergers* use concrete experience and reflective observation to generate a broad range of ideas. These individuals excel at brainstorming and imagining alternatives.
3. *Assimilators* rely on abstract conceptualization and reflective observation. These men and women like to assimilate a wide range of information and recast it into more concise and logical forms. They are good at planning, developing theories, and creating models.
4. *Accomodators* are best at concrete experiences and active experimentation. They often use trial-and-error or intuitive strategies to solve problems. Accomodators are also inclined to take risks and plunge into problems.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ronald R. Schmeck, “Learning Styles of College Students” in Ronna F. Dillon and Ronald R. Schmeck, eds., *Individual Differences in Cognition*, (New York: Academic Press, 1983), 236.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984).

<sup>28</sup> Sharan B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), 224.

<sup>29</sup> Claxton and Murrell, 27-28.

*Anthony Gregorc's Style Delineator Approach*

Similar to Kolb's understanding, Anthony Gregorc proposed that learning styles emerge from our natural predispositions and people will learn both from their personal experiences (concrete) and abstract thinking (abstract).<sup>30</sup> We either perceive things in ways that are concrete-oriented (from the physical senses) or abstract-oriented (from logical, deductive reasoning). Ordering is making sense out of what we are able to perceive and can be either sequential (organized, systematic) or random (unorganized). Crossing these dualities, concrete-abstract and random-sequential, four learning styles emerge with each style being a duality. Their combinations have been categorized by Cynthia Ulrich Tobias.<sup>31</sup>

<i>Concrete Sequential</i>	<i>Abstract Sequential</i>
hardworking	analytical
conventional	objective
accurate	knowledgeable
stable	thorough
dependable	structured
consistent	logical
factual	deliberate
organized	systematic

<i>Abstract Random</i>	<i>Concrete Random</i>
sensitive	quick
compassionate	intuitive
perceptive	curious
imaginative	realistic
idealistic	creative
sentimental	innovative
spontaneous	instinctive
flexible	adventurous

*Implications for Preaching*

Preachers are to be aware of the ways in which people process information. But the likelihood is high that most preachers are under the naive assumption that people think and learn much as they do. In regard to secular education, Robert Sternberg emphasizes the importance of taking into account people's styles in designing programs and cautions "most instructors are best at teaching people who match their own styles of thinking and learning . . . and tend to overestimate the extent to which their students share their own styles."<sup>32</sup>

Similar comments can be made in regard to homiletics where preachers need to be cognizant of their own preferences. The temptation is to believe other people process thoughts as they do. If a pastor dwells in the world of concepts or ideas, she or he assumes the same for the people in the pew. Some people may but others will undoubtedly not be so inclined. Though well-intended, such thinking is illusionary and can lead to frustration as people sense the preacher is not on their wavelength.

<sup>30</sup> See Anthony F. Gregorc, *An Adult's Guide to Style*, (Columbia, CT: Gregorc Associates, 1982).

<sup>31</sup> Cynthia Ulrich Tobias, *The Way They Learn: How to Discover and Teach to Your Child's Strength*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1994), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Sternberg, 39.

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale states: "Greater awareness of the congregational knowing modes can help a preacher avoid the consistent use of sermon forms that deny or devalue the predominant ways in which local people come to understanding."<sup>33</sup> She continues:

It is one thing for the creative pastor to occasionally preach a sermon that "misses" a local congregation through its use of a novel form. It is quite another for the pastor to preach consistently in structures that demean or devalue the predominant ways in which a local congregation comes to deeper knowledge in faith.<sup>34</sup>

Consequently, greater effectiveness in preaching necessitates an appreciation of how individuals process information. The preacher's task is to stretch herself or himself out of her or his comfort zone and utilize forms or styles that may not be natural but appropriate.

Awareness of information processing styles can lead to the crafting of stylistically integrated sermons. Such an equalized approach would involve offering an idea (abstract or simple) and following it with a concrete or life-related example. Preachers can satisfy the multiple learning styles when they offer a concept and follow it with an anecdote, illustration or story. In so doing, they are satisfying the preferences of abstract thinkers (with a biblical principle) and concrete, realistic individuals (with a picture of how this idea is fleshed out in life). By employing a balanced homiletical approach, the information processing styles of various individuals are being satisfied.

Congregations also benefit when preachers are holistic and serialistic in the development of their sermons. Some learners respond well when able to envision the big picture of the sermon. More global in style, they appreciate broad strokes being used to present biblical ideas. Anecdotes and other illustrative material may be preferred in a more inductive approach as these learners are capable of making connections between ideas. They appreciate induction in that it allows them to sense they are accompanying the preacher toward a central truth.

Conversely, serialists focus on details. More analytical and particular in the processing of data, they like to see connection between ideas. Understanding how individual points are related to the whole is important. They may prefer deductive sermons where the central truth is offered early in the message and then explained or supported. "Mapping" at the outset is also appreciated in that it lets them know where you are headed with the message. In addition, outlines in the bulletin or on overhead may be favored by serialist learners in that they demonstrate how the sermon is progressing. Serialists are also appreciative that as new points are being made, transitional statements are utilized to convey the movement.

### Social Interaction Models

Social interaction models consider how interpersonal contexts and various social settings alter the strategies learners will utilize to gather information.

### *William Perry's Stages of Intellectual and Ethical Development*

William Perry claimed students went through categories of development (or thinking patterns) during their college years. These categories are:

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<sup>33</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, "Ways of Knowing and Forms for Preaching," *Journal for Preachers*, 19(4), (1996), 34.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

1. *Dualism*: students tend to divide the world into dichotomies (right/wrong, true/false good/bad). Individuals will view their instructors as being right and their role is to respond back to him or her what they have received. Such individuals can be frustrated when asked to listen to other people's opinions and are content when instructors are clear in their lectures.
2. *Multiplicity*: individuals have come to realize most knowledge is a matter of opinion and any opinion is knowledgeable. An individual's role is to offer ideas and they may become frustrated when she or he is restricted.
3. *Contextual relativism*: people recognize there are guidelines for choosing an opinion. In this category, individuals realize that the information and context of a situation impact one's final understanding of truth.
4. *Commitment within contextual relativism*: men and women learn to connect their disciplinary skills to new settings. They recognize a need to apply knowledge and skills to settings outside their environment. At this point, an individual may become frustrated when content is being offered without relevant application.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Anthony Grasha's Student Learning Styles Scale*

In his research with Sheryl Riechmann, Anthony Grasha identifies three learning styles among students: avoidant-participant, competitive-collaborative, and dependent-independent. Styles were subsequently defined around three environmental dimensions: learner's attitudes toward the learning, views of the instructor and/or peers, and reaction to procedures. Subsequently, Grasha and Riechmann have developed six styles of learning:

1. *Independent* individuals like to think for themselves. Self-confident in their own abilities, they prefer working on their own though they will listen to other people.
2. *Dependent* men and women have little intellectual curiosity and are willing to learn only what is required. Instructors are perceived as sources of structure and support. These individuals tend to look to authoritative figures to be told what to do.
3. *Collaborative* individuals enjoy learning while sharing with other people within a group. They view learning as a mutually enriching venture.
4. *Competitive* learners feel as if they must compete with other individuals. Their reward for learning is to do better than others. Consequently, the environment is understood as one in which they are to vie with individuals and win.
5. *Participant* individuals enjoy learning and see it as their responsibility to get as much as possible out of situation (though they are not inclined to do what is required).
6. *Avoidant* men and women do not participate in the learning and are not especially interested in the material.<sup>36</sup>

Grasha and Riechmann state individuals learn best in settings that meet their social-emotional needs and are attuned to their predominant pattern of behavior. These researchers also propose instructors should develop activities which appropriately match their students so as to deepen their involvement in the learning.

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<sup>35</sup> See William G. Perry, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*, (Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970).

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Grasha and Sheryl Riechmann-Hruska, "A Rational Approach to Developing and Assessing the Construct Validity of a Student Learning Style Scales Instrument," *Journal of Psychology* 87, (1974), 213-223.

### *Marcia Baxter-Magolda's Model of Epistemological Reflection*

In *Assessing Intellectual Development*, Marcia Baxter-Magolda reconceptualized William Perry's developmental ideas and affirmed that individuals are likely to use their age and gender as well as the social expectations of the setting when learning. Her four stages of knowers are:

1. *Absolute knowers* are common in early years of college students. Like Perry's dualists, they believe teachers have all the right answers and the responsibility of the student is to get it right. Learners appreciate a teacher's efforts to be friendly and open which makes it easier to know what is expected of them.
2. *Transitional knowers* use absolutist strategies in some areas of learning but recognize their capacity for interpretation is important in different areas. They can be encouraged to experiment with their own views but want assurances they are close to being correct.
3. *Independent knowers* are men and women who know how data can be open to interpretation and are cognizant of a need for their own approach to interpreting information, theories and experiences. They appreciate a leader's promotion of independent thinking and exchange of opinions.
4. *Contextual knowers* are comfortable judging or critiquing their knowledge and skill may apply to a new or unique situation. While there is a greater degree of mutuality in the learning, learners are capable of applying concepts to a variety of settings.<sup>37</sup>

### *Implications for Preaching*

Preachers enhance their communication as they are responsive to the life stages of people. Regarding congregational responsiveness, Beverly Zink-Sawyer writes:

Augustine applied the devices of classical rhetoric to the proclamation of the gospel not for the ultimate goal of eloquence but to enable those who hear to be "moved rather than taught, so that they may not be sluggish in putting what they know into practice and so that they may fully accept those things which they acknowledge to be true. Augustine suggested that the speaker-preacher be attentive to the listeners in order to discern the level of comprehension among them. Until the crowd shows by its motion whether it understands, and until it signifies comprehension the matter being discussed should be expressed in a variety of ways.

The ultimate purposes of preaching are "to teach, to delight, and to persuade." In order to accomplish those purposes, Augustine reminded his readers, the speaker-preacher must discern the effectiveness of various styles of speech, for "when one style is maintained too long, it loses the listener. Throughout his homiletical treatise, Augustine revealed a concern for studied, intentional communication of Christian doctrine through the spoken word. Like all perceptive preachers he realized that the translation of biblical meaning into acts of devotion depended upon the active presence of God in the words of the preacher and in the hearts of the hearers. But he realized also the necessity of the preacher's attentiveness to those whose hearts might be moved by the truth of the gospel.<sup>38</sup>

To homiletically respond to stages of life calls for familiarization with developmental psychology, the stages of the family life cycle, and theoreticians such as Jean Piaget (cognitive), Erik Erikson (psycho-social), Lawrence Kohlberg (moral) and James Fowler (faith). Their insights can be quite helpful in understanding and assessing the maturity of people, and consequently, content of sermons will be affected. For instance, one individual's moral development will be at the "eye for an eye" level while others will be seeking to live out the principles of the Sermon on

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<sup>37</sup> See Marcia Baxter-Magolda, *Knowing and Reasoning in College: Gender-Related Patterns in Students' Intellectual Development*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Zink-Sawyer, 343-344.

the Mount. Some people's faith will be child-like while other men and women will have a more complex and integrated faith.

Furthermore, homileticians can enhance their ministries by recognizing learning-dependent people may lack curiosity and consequently, view preachers as authority figures. They are not averse to being told what to think in absolute terms or how a particular issue pertains to them. In contrast, independent learners like to sort through ideas and reach their own conclusions. Though these individuals will not reject clear instruction and direct application of biblical truth, they are able to reflect on the ideas and determine relevancy on their own and/or make pertinent applications in multiple contexts. So when the preacher says, "Now, here is something you may want to think about," the independent or contextual listener will be more responsive. Their commitment to a cause or idea necessitates time for reflection and/or discussion.

At the same time, accommodation to the life stages of learners can be counter-productive to spiritual formation. Though appreciating the role and value of contextualization in preaching, Lenora Tubbs Tisdale offers cautionary advice:

In contextual proclamation, fittingness in form (as in content) never simply means giving people what they want. It also involves the transformation and expansion of congregational horizons. Thus, the wise pastor will recognize that sermon form in itself has the potential to stretch and transform congregational modes of knowing.

Preaching has the potential not only to influence what people think, but also how they think. Greater attention to congregational modes of knowing can assist the preacher in shaping sermons that are not only more intelligible for a local community of faith, but that are also more transformative of the ways in which people to know and express their own faith.<sup>39</sup>

### Instructional Preference Models

These models describe the outermost layers of the onion and deal with people's preferences in teaching methods or instructional approaches.

#### *Rita and Kenneth Dunn's Individual Learning Styles*

Rita and Kenneth Dunn have identified stimuli groups or dimensions in a learning environment which impact a someone's preference or aversion for learning. These factors are as follows:

1. *Environmental.* The environmental group refers to lighting, sound, temperature, and seating arrangement. For instance, some individuals prefer a cool and quiet atmosphere where others cannot focus unless they have music playing and it is warm.
2. *Emotionality.* This group includes motivation, persistence, responsibility, and structure. Some people feel the need to complete one task before they can begin another one, and other individuals are good at multi-tasking, working well at a variety of responsibilities at the same time.
3. *Sociological.* The sociological group represents how individuals learn in association with other people (alone or with peers; with an authoritative adult or with a colleague; learning in a variety of ways or more routinely). For example, some people need to work alone while other individuals are more likely to learn best when working in a group.
4. *Physiological.* The elements in this group are perceptual (auditory, visual, tactual and kinesthetic), intake (eating or not while studying), time (morning, afternoon or evening), and mobility (sitting still or moving around). For instance, certain individuals work best at night while others are better in the morning.

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<sup>39</sup> Tisdale, 35-36.

5. *Psychological*. The group pertains to psychological processing (i.e. global or analytical, hemispheric, impulsive or reflective).<sup>40</sup>

According to this model, as leaders gain greater understanding of preferences and aversions, adjustments can be made in the environmental setting to accommodate learners and enhance learning in appropriate and satisfying ways.

#### *John Holland's Environmental Model*

John Holland has sought to ascertain correlations between personality and vocational preferences. Six personality types (realist, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional) emerged from his research. In *Making Vocational Choices*, Holland writes of six environmental models sharing a common set of constructs with personality types. He believes one can predict what will happen when a person is placed in a different setting because environments powerfully influence an individual's opportunity to learn. These settings are:

1. *Realistic*: In realistic surroundings, people are encouraged to see the world in simple, tangible and traditional terms. While encouraging people to understand themselves as having mechanical abilities, it discourages interpersonal relationships. It stimulates people to perform realistic activities and rewards them for the display of conventional goods and values such as money, power and possessions.
2. *Investigative*: This environment is characterized by investigation and observation. It encourages people to see the world in abstract, complex, independent and original ways and to utilize scientific competencies to investigate biological, cultural and physical phenomena.
3. *Artistic*: An artistic climate is characterized by ambiguous, free, unsystematized activities and competencies. It encourages people to see themselves as expressive, original, intuitive and nonconforming, and to view the world in flexible, unconventional ways.
4. *Social*: This social environment is characterized by sociability and dominated by similar types of men and women. Individuals are encouraged to participate in activities that necessitate such competencies as cooperation, flexibility and helpfulness.
5. *Enterprising*: In enterprising surroundings, individuals are encouraged to see themselves as popular, aggressive, self-confident, sociable and possessing leadership abilities. There can be demands to attain organizational or self-interest goals and in so doing, dominate others.
6. *Conventional*: In this climate, individuals are encouraged to see themselves as conforming and orderly. Conventionality is valued which can lead individuals to feel constricted, simple and dependent on others within the group. As a result, men and women may be controlling and practical with values such as money, position and power being acceptable.<sup>41</sup>

#### *Robert Sternberg's Mental Self-Government Theory*

Underlying Robert Sternberg's theory is the idea men and women must organize themselves in ways which correspond to the types of governments and government branches in society - legislative, executive, judicial, monarchic, hierarchic and oligarchic. Thirteen styles are subsumed under the following categories: functions, forms, levels, scope and leanings.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn, *Teaching Students Through Their Individual Learning Styles*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978.

<sup>41</sup> See John L. Holland, *Making Vocational Choices: A Theory of Careers*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973.

<sup>42</sup> Sternberg, 38.

<i>Functions</i>	
Legislative	Likes to create, invent, design, do things his or her own way, have little assigned structure
Executive	Likes to follow directions, do what he or she is told, be given structure
Judicial	Likes to judge and evaluate people and things.
<i>Forms</i>	
Monarchic	Likes to do one thing at a time devoting to it almost all energy and resources
Hierarchic	Likes to do many things at once, setting priorities to which to do when and how much time and energy to devote to each
Oligarchic	Likes to do many things at once, but has trouble setting priorities
Anarchic	Likes to take a random approach to problems; dislikes systems, guidelines, and practically all constraints.
<i>Levels</i>	
Global	Likes to deal with big picture, generalities abstractions
Local	Likes to deal with details, specifics, concrete examples
<i>Scope</i>	
Internal	Likes to work alone, focus inward, be self-sufficient
External	Like to work with others, focus outward, be interdependent
<i>Leaning</i>	
Liberal	Likes to do things in new ways, defy conventions
Conservative	Likes to do things in tried and true ways, follow conventions

Sternberg comments in regard to the fluidity of styles of learning:

We all have a style profile, meaning we show varying amounts of each style, but we are not locked into any one profile. We can vary our styles to suit different tasks and situations. For example, the style you need to discern the meaning of a work of literature is not the same one you need to read detailed direction. The style you need to solve an algebra word problem is not the one you need to construct a geometric proof. Styles further vary over the course of a lifetime, and change as a result of the role models we emulate at different points in our lives. We do vary in our flexibility to shift styles, and in the strengths of our preferences. But while we have preferred styles, our styles are fluid, not fixed.<sup>43</sup>

### *Implications for Preaching*

Effective preaching requires an appreciation of individuals' instructional learning preferences. Like other theoreticians advocating the matching of learning and teaching styles in education.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

S. Ellis favors an approach that calls for having a variety of innate as well as acquired styles.<sup>44</sup> To borrow from the Apostle Paul's desire to become "all things to all men," preachers should be accommodating so that God's words might be heard in the best ways possible by their people. A question that preachers should consider posing to themselves might be, "How can I best convey biblical truth so my people will understand and be prompted to respond in godly ways?"

Regarding classroom settings, Kenneth Henson and Paul Borthwick state: "There is certainly no shortage of avenues through which educators can match teacher styles with learner styles."<sup>45</sup> Opportunities for creativity and imagination abound for secular educators. But as preachers, we are not limited either. Imaginative and creative forms can be utilized in the pulpit to facilitate learning among God's people. Again, Tisdale states: "There is no 'one right way' for the biblical world and congregational world to meet in sermonic form. Indeed, the very meeting of the two worlds creates new and exciting possibilities for the preacher's craft."<sup>46</sup> Dramas, first person narratives, deductive, inductive, and dialogical sermons are just some of the methods which can be used to satisfy instructional preferences.

Second, preachers need to be aware of the ways in which environmental settings enhance and detract from listening. Do individuals like a formal, perhaps reverent, atmosphere or do they prefer a more light-hearted one filled with personal warmth? Do they want preachers to be authoritative or ones who allows them to sense they are mutually investigating a pertinent topic? Are they interested in ideas and concepts or desirous of a more realistic approach to the faith? Do they want to know what is expected of them when leaving the sanctuary or would they prefer to have opportunity to reflect on the message either by themselves or in conversation with other listeners?

Though men and women may prefer styles of preaching to which they are accustomed (*i.e.* verse-by-verse preaching, messages filled with stories, inductive structures versus deductive), it is conceivable that "a steady diet of such preaching could actually do them more harm than good. It can discourage listeners from "making their own discoveries of faith, or from trusting their own theological voices."<sup>47</sup>

But Henson and Borthwick caution educators to proceed carefully and only after specific goals have been clearly identified.<sup>48</sup> Their words are important because preaching should be done with integrity – without compromise to the literary form or genre of God's text – simply because of the needs of the learning styles of people. While sensitivity to ways of learning is essential, proclamation of biblical truth must always remain paramount.

Lastly, preachers should recognize that as sensitive as they may seek to be, they are not going to be able to satisfy everyone. It is impossible to customize any message for every individual. Awareness, adjustments and significant alterations in approaches will facilitate the listening possibilities for men and women. Using various methodologies can make a significant difference in people's listening. Yet a lingering dissatisfaction is likely to remain and everyone

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<sup>44</sup> S.S. Ellis, "Models of Teaching: A Solution to the Teaching Style/Learning Style Dilemma," *Educational Leadership*, 36(4), (1979), 274-277.

<sup>45</sup> Kenneth T. Henson and Paul Borthwick, "Matching Styles: A Historical Look," *Theory Into Practice*, 23(1), (1984), 7.

<sup>46</sup> Tisdale, 35.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Henson and Borthwick, 7.

will not benefit. But because of the efforts of the preacher, a significant number of men and women can be ministered to in unprecedented ways.

### Conclusion

The wide variety of learning styles offers preachers a significant challenge in effectively communicating the Word of God. At the same time, awareness also provides them with significant opportunities by which they can facilitate people's ability to listen to their sermons. As preachers are aware of learning styles, they can responsively craft more listener-friendly sermons which is ultimately for the spiritually good of their congregations.

When presenting the Word of God, preachers must remind themselves their work is not ordinary but that of shepherds who have been entrusted to care for their flocks. As shepherds are to be diligent and watchful, doing as much as possible to ensure the well-being of their sheep, preachers are to lovingly care for their congregations. Understanding styles of learning and responding with appropriate methods can be instrumental in achieving this pastoral objective.

Such preaching dare not simply be utilitarian but must be from the heart. Matters of eternal significance are at stake. This paper is not just an appeal to functionally respond to styles, but a genuine heartfelt call for responsive preaching. It must be from the heart of the man or woman who stands in the pulpit. As Anthony Gregorc states, "Any half-hearted attempts to change automatically short-circuits the process of growth and development."<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, preaching must ultimately be carried out under the dynamics of the Holy Spirit. The words of a man or woman that have been anointed by the Holy Spirit is a marvelous yet mysterious event to behold. And let us not forget that at the end of the day, preaching is a work of God who leads people into the truth and brings about spiritual transformation (John 14:26).

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<sup>49</sup> Anthony F. Gregorc, *Insides Styles: Beyond the Basics*, (Columbia, CT: Gregorc Associates, 1985), 206

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