

## **Preaching as Dialogue: Moving Beyond the “Speaching” of the Word**

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*Preachers within the “emerging church” champion dialogue as the future of preaching. These proposals tend to be set against traditional forms of preaching, sometimes disparaged as “speaching.” Yet, dialogue as an element of the sermon might not be as radical as some suspect. This paper looks to the homiletic past as well as to its future in order to encourage ways to understand and utilize dialogue within biblical preaching without compromising the sermon’s nature as proclamation.*

Preaching can seem a little one-sided, particularly when the listener disagrees with what the preacher is saying. In the early years of my ministry I decided that I would preach directly to an area of controversy in the life of the church. It wasn’t really a fair fight. I had the pulpit, which meant that I had all the power. One man was particularly upset about what I had to say. “That’s not true,” he screamed, shaking his fist at me as he stormed out of the room.

I suppose that this was a form of dialogue, though I don’t offer it as one of my better moments in preaching. It does, however, illustrate the problem listeners can have with monological sermons. The listener has no way in. If the sermon is safe and all are in agreement, there might be little problem, but if the preaching is a little more adventurous in its intent and there is potential for dissension, the listener is shut out.

This is one of the reasons so many find our preaching wanting. Preaching that ignores the listener will not seem relevant to the very ones the preacher wants to reach. Perhaps the time has come to encourage greater dialogue in the preparation and presentation of our preaching as a means of involving listeners more fully in the process.

### **The Potential for Dialogue in Preaching**

The current interest in dialogue results, in part, from a broader cultural move toward a greater sense of inclusiveness and a deeper sense of humility among those who would speak to others. Postmodern winds have blown away the overconfidence felt by many public speakers, leaving in its wake a more tentative and open stance to listeners. This softer, more Socratic approach to communication may be less familiar to preachers, but it has now become a preferred means of knowledge acquisition (Phillips 2001, 1-35).

This approach is being championed within the “emerging church” as a way to be more authentic in the preaching that we offer. In contrast to the “speaching” practiced by traditional preachers, these emergent preachers are looking for more of a relational approach that engages the listener

in a process of sermon co-creation (Pagitt 2005, 22). Doug Pagitt, for example, is championing something he calls “progressional dialogue” as the way of the future for preaching.

It works like this: I say something that causes another person to think something she hadn’t thought before. In response she says something that causes a third person to make a comment he wouldn’t normally have made without the benefit of a second person’s statement. In turn *I* think something I wouldn’t have thought without hearing the comments made by the other two. So now we’ve all ended up in a place we couldn’t have come to without the input we received from each other. In a real way the conversation has progressed (Pagitt 2005, 24-25).

At its best, this kind of communication is democratic, humble and has the potential for an exponential impact. Whether it is preaching, remains open to debate. Many preachers will find it difficult to go this far, perhaps because of principle, or perhaps because of the cultural expectations developed in our churches. There are several reasons, however, why a heightened attention to dialogue would be a welcome thing for biblical preachers.

Dialogue is welcome because *the listener matters*. Pagitt says that “our preaching ought to change depending on who’s there (Pagitt 2006, 36).” The sermon is not about the preacher and his or her opinions. In the communication transaction between God and the listener, the preacher is the least significant player, except in the preacher’s own role as a listener to God. The listener has dignity in the communication process (Anderson 2006, 70-73) and must be respected for her or his right to dissent or to enhance the sermon through insight or application that she or he is better positioned to provide. This is a means by which we “make ourselves responsible and responsive to the patterns of experience and understanding that people bring” to the sermon (Howe 1963, 34).

Increased dialogue in preaching would help us deal with *power and authority* issues in our preaching. Sermons that are *given* from the pulpit can tend toward a popish kind of power that gives a sense the sermon cannot be challenged or discussed (McClure 1995, 32). Authority in the sermon is then located in the place of the pulpit and in the person of the preacher rather than in its proper location, which is the Word of God. Pagitt’s concern on this point is well taken:

Speaching also creates a belief that even in the presence of dozens, hundreds, even thousands of other Christians, there are a select few who know God’s truth and who get to tell others about God. There is hardly a preacher who wants her hearers to leave with the notion that they must access the truth of God through the preacher. But that is precisely the message speaching perpetuates: The pastor has the authority to speak about God, and you don’t. When communities are convinced they are better off with a unified understanding of God that is best articulated by trained presenters, we end up with people who cannot translate what they hear in church to the way they live their lives (Pagitt, 29).

I find that the Baptist in me resonates with this concern. The sermon belongs to the people who as believers serve as priests to their own interest under the Chief Priest, Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus is the only mediator of a person’s faith. The preacher, then, who oversteps his or her authority, makes it difficult for the listener to hear from God, own what is said, and

ultimately apply its truth in life. Preachers, in short, need to get themselves out of the way. God is speaking. The place of the preacher is not as the eloquent and authoritative orator. It is as a fellow-listener, struggling to understand and to help others do the same. Dialogue can encourage this.

Dialogue is also useful in preaching as a way of *enhancing community* within the congregation. Dan Kimball, in his definitive description of the practice of the emergent church sees the sermon as an act that integrates the life and worship of the community together. “A lot of the preaching,” he says, “takes place outside of the church building in the context of community and relationship (Kimball 2003, 175).” Whether inside or outside of the church, dialogue requires we learn to listen well, not only to God, but to each other.

### **Ways to Engage in Dialogue in Preaching**

Dialogue in preaching is not new. Whether we want to go as far as Pagitt in terms of a major reconstruction of the sermon form, there are several ways to encourage a more dialogical approach. Many of these things have long described the best in biblical preaching. I am not, then, so much championing a new thing as I am encouraging a refocus on an aspect of our preaching that might be under-utilized. The following themes would help us increase or enhance the level of dialogue in our preaching of the Bible:

**Induction:** I have long been struck by Fred Craddock’s observation that if most listeners have any place in the traditional sermon it is as “javelin catcher” (Craddock 2001, 46). Craddock’s solution was to encourage an inductive form of preaching that begins with the needs and concerns of the listener and moves toward a biblical solution. Whether a sermon is entirely inductive, sermons that respect the listener’s perspective are definitively dialogical.

**Discussion:** It is in the small group movement where dialogue truly reigns and as far as I am concerned, if the intent of the group leader is to help people hear and respond to God through the Scriptures, he or she is preaching. However, even in the traditional sermon, there could be room for some discussion. I once heard Bill Hybels at Willow Creek Community Church stop his sermon and take questions from the floor. If he can do it in a church of that size, it might be possible for the rest of us as well. We could learn here from some of the teaching techniques normally reserved for the Sunday School classroom. Asking questions, utilizing incomplete questions, and other such techniques invite the response of those who listen.

**Anticipation:** I think it important that preachers work to discern those problems and sticking points that listeners will bring to the things they hear from us. Having understood what is going to get in the way of the listener’s positive response, I am suggesting that we might learn to speak with their own voice, anticipating the objections and giving voice to them in words listeners will recognize as their own.

**Application:** A sermon is never complete until the listener applies it. That is to say that the sermon is more than what the preacher says. It may be that the presentation of the sermon may be one-sided, but the truth is that the listener is participating whether it is evident or not. Listeners sift what they hear, retaining things that strike them as meaningful and intending those things that seem to them to be powerful in their life. So then, whether or not there is *audible* dialogue, there is *internal* dialogue for the listener at least. Preachers can encourage more of this by focusing on application.

**Interviews and Testimony:** Inviting specific people to the platform at strategic points in the sermon to interview and give testimony are an excellent way of involving people in the process. Such people endorse the things the preacher says from the perspective of the listener. The interviewee becomes a kind of proxy for the rest of the listeners who feel a greater sense of inclusion as they listen.

**Collaboration:** Increasingly, preachers are looking to others to enhance the process of sermon preparation. I have heard of pastors who gather together monthly to listen to each other's sermon plans. Others bring together teams of people from within the church – the preaching pastor meets with the powerpoint designer, the worship leader, and other trusted people to talk the sermon through in conversation. By this means, the sermon becomes the product of a wider dialogue than just what happens in the preacher's mind.

**Conversational Delivery:** Enhancing a sense of dialogue can be as simple as adjusting the tone of the delivery. A sermon in the grand style that feels heavy and authoritative discourages participation by the listener. Simply changing from the second person to the first person plural makes a remarkable difference. When the sermon is spoken from a we/us perspective, listeners feel more helpfully engaged. Joseph Devito says that effective conversations are open, empathetic, positive, immediate, satisfying, and expressive (Devito 1996, 158). Sermons that take that tone come across as winsome and inviting of the listener's engagement and involvement.

**Note-Taking:** Listeners can be encouraged to participate in the sermon through the taking of notes. Fill-in-the-blank handouts can be helpful as long as they are not too prescriptive. There are many ways to record one's response to the Word of God. Some people like to take detailed notes on the sermon outline. Others prefer a more personal journal-like written response. Still others find value in purposeful doodling, storyboarding the sermon as it progresses. Instead of note-books, perhaps we could give out sketch-books or modeling clay to those so inclined.

**Evaluation:** Offering the listener opportunity to evaluate the sermon is another way of giving an opportunity for dialogue if only after the fact. While preachers can find this intimidating, we will give the opportunity not only to help us improve our skills, but also to give the listener a meaningful channel through which they can share the things they are thinking about what they have heard.

**Accessibility:** Not many years ago in the churches that I preached it was common practice for the congregation to sit down politely after the final hymn so that the preacher could

make his way to the back door so as to shake the hands of everyone there. Sheer numbers make this impractical in many churches today. I feel a certain loss in this. Some of the best dialogue I have had with people is in the immediate aftermath of listening to the sermon. Whether or not the preacher stands at the door, it is important that the preacher is accessible somehow to hear from those who have listened. Deliberate channels of communication need to be made available to the people or they will feel distanced and personally irrelevant.

### **The Limits of Dialogue**

So far, this paper has been largely positive in its encouragement toward finding ways, perhaps incremental, to enhance the dialogical nature of our preaching. There are, however, limits.

While dialogue invests authority in the various participants, this investiture is not always warranted. I remember asking my father about the adult Sunday school class in our church when I was still a boy. Not being of sufficient age, I had never been able to attend, but I was curious as to what happened there, given the size and popularity of the class. “A lot of pooled ignorance,” was my father’s evaluation. While wisdom is sometimes gained through an abundance of counselors, sometimes more voices simply add to the noise.

Effective dialogue requires the intention of a focused leader who comes purposefully to the event with the idea that we will learn specific things. It may be the discussion surprises with insight not anticipated, but this does not obviate the preacher from the obligation to lead. Preaching is, in many ways, a leadership function and the best preachers come prepared to lead the people to an understanding and application of the things that God is saying in his Word. It is not just a matter of “winging it,” trusting the learning outcomes to the serendipitous responses of the group. Preachers need to lead intentionally. They need to come with an agenda. This is what we mean by proclamation. Preachers are pro-claimers, which is to say that they have a message in mind and they intend to be persuasive.

It may be that the traditional form of the sermon might be more efficient in this regard than a more open dialogical approach. A well-conceived monologue allows the preacher to control communication such that the impact of the message is intended and deliberate. The best preachers come purposefully with something to proclaim. Limiting dialogue can ensure that the sermon remains locked into the purposes the speaker has in mind without straying off topic toward interesting irrelevancies or even to an alternate or dangerous understanding of the nature of the truth.

For example, the last many years have seen the development of an interest in dialogue between religions. It is felt that through such open conversation, greater understanding can develop that can only be productive in the pursuit of the common ends desired by spiritually concerned people everywhere. This dialogue, made possible by technology and our “shrinking planet”, is seen by some to be essential given the increased proximity of human beings to each other. “In the past it was possible, even unavoidable, for most human beings to live out their lives in isolation from the vast majority of their fellows, without even having a faint awareness of, let

alone interest in, their very existence (Swindler 1990, vii).” Now we find the peace of the world depends upon an increased dialogue between partners who are accustomed to hostility.

Dialogue, in these cases, could keep us from killing each other. It could also have the effect of changing us in ways not imagined. Certainly, there is a possibility that changes could be warranted and to fear dialogue simply because we are afraid of the possibility we could be altered by it is to betray a weakness of conviction and a nagging sense our faith won’t stand the scrutiny. Further, to engage dialogue dishonestly, without an openness of heart and mind toward the other seems neither fitting nor fair. Like a stalled labor negotiation, little accommodation can happen until all parties are willing to put the core issues on the table.

John McClure is not intimidated by the prospect. In his offer of an “other-wise” approach to homiletics he counsels a complete “deconstructive erasure” of the current approach to preaching so as to let our sermons “be transformed by a profound awareness of the proximity of preaching’s ‘others’ (McClure 2001, xi).” Of course, this is why many have problems with the postmodern turn in preaching. Giving listeners their voice seems risky when there is so much at stake. Dialogue doesn’t feel safe to people committed to their convictions.

Still, one senses value in a humbler, more honest form of preaching. Surely the future might allow for a greater sense of interplay. Perhaps the solution can be found in a reconsideration of who it is that engages in the dialogue. Preaching is a conversation between God and listeners. The preacher simply serves to lead this discussion. In fact, the preacher is one of the listeners, subject to the message just like everybody else. God values dialogue with his creatures, though it is more in the nature of an interchange between a father and his children. The father cares what the child thinks, but it is hardly a dialogue between equal partners.

The gospel is not designed by focus groups. Preaching, if it is to be proclamation, speaks truth *to* listeners. Proclamation is not co-created. It is declared. All voices are not equal in the homiletic dialogue.

### **The Listener Wants In**

Dialogue in preaching may feel new, but the method is at least as old as Plato (Thompson 1969, 15). Still, it is unlikely that the dominant form of preaching is going to change any time soon. Published proposals for fully dialogical sermons go back to the 1960s and 70s (Conley 1973), pre-dating Pagitt by more than thirty years. If we cannot bring ourselves to a dramatic change in pulpit style, we could, at least, give greater room for the listener’s participation in the process.

Leonard Sweet is looking for ways of doing church that are more participatory. “The people want in,” he says. “They want out of the bleachers and onto the court (Sweet 1999, 218).” Surely, this is not unreasonable. Preaching is, after all, about the listeners and their response to God. Sermons are too often written in the absence of the listener. Perhaps that is why they are so quickly forgotten.

Let the listener in. Sermons belong to listeners more than they belong to preachers.

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