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HONING THE CONGREGATION TO BE ATTENTIVE TO
EXPOSITORY PREACHING AT FIRST BAPTIST
CHURCH NEW LEBANON, OHIO

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PREFACE

A project of this scope must begin with acknowledgements. I could never have reached this academic and ministerial milestone without the immense help of faithful mentors, friends, and family.

My father in the faith, Aaron Johnson, must be at the top of the list of acknowledgments. He provided opportunities for me and spurred me to action more times than I can count, and always with the encouragement “Hallelujah, what a Saviour!” He never wanted his hearers to walk away saying “What a preacher!” but rather “What a Saviour!” I hope that I have learned that lesson well, and may this work build on his influence that many would hear the gospel and declare the same. I am equally thankful for Randy Kuhn for his constant encouragement and faithful preaching. At a time when I was overwhelmed with work, church, and family responsibilities, Pastor Randy was always there to offer a word of encouragement, exhortation, and wisdom. Many of my fondest ministerial memories are with him. Next, I would like to thank Dave Snyder; it is because of him that early in my faith, I grew, learned how to encourage others, and became emboldened. I rejoice in the way that God has used him and grown his family. As iron sharpens iron, I could not have asked for a better counterpart.

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My deepest gratitude extends to my beautiful wife, Tina, for her hard work and support during this writing journey. Thank you for taking care of the children when they did not need me, for your foresight in telling me when I needed a break because they *did* need me, for setting up and defending my workspace, and for doing all of it with love and hope along the way. Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all! You truly are the best!

Hallelujah, What a Saviour!

Canyon Shearer

Dayton, Ohio

May 2020

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The preaching at First Baptist Church New Lebanon (FBCnl) is intended to be Christ-focused, biblically grounded, and disciple-making. But, no matter how good or focused the preaching is, or how many people attend, the congregation must hear the Word of God in order to be not only hearers but doers also (Jas 1:22). For example, during the preaching of Ezra in Jerusalem, the prophet notes, “The ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the law” (Neh 8:3).¹ And when Paul spoke to Lydia, “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). The first-century church ministered the Word with great effectiveness, not only because God was blessing the powerful preaching of his Word but also because God was opening the ears of the people to hear: “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And *the crowds with one accord paid attention* to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. . . . So there was much joy in that city” (Acts 8:5-6, 8; emphasis added). The Ethiopian eunuch, before his conversion to Christ, exclaims, “How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). Therefore, it is imperative that the preacher at FBCnl not only preach faithfully but also teach his people how to be attentive to listening to the Word preached.

Context

First Baptist Church New Lebanon is an established church located in the southwest corner of Ohio. The church has about 250 regular attenders every Sunday in

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references come from the English Standard Version.

two services. The church has been served by many pastors, most recently by Stephen Betts as lead pastor, with Kris Sinclair as pastor of worship and discipleship. The mission statement of the church is to “Glorify God by Working Together to Make Disciples who Change the World.” FBCnl—by location and providence—has Dayton, Ohio, as its ministry setting.

Dayton was a powerhouse of innovation and manufacturing only thirty years ago, but restructuring and globalization led to the city’s falling from its former prominence.² Following this decline, drug use in the area has become an epidemic. Dayton saw an increase in drug overdoses by 34.7 percent from 2016 to 2017,³ and the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention named Dayton as the number one drugged out city of 2014.⁴ Because of the prevalence of illegal narcotics, FBCnl ministers to and among very poor and destitute people. Dayton was also the site of a devastating tornado outbreak in the spring of 2019⁵ and a mass shooting in the summer of 2019.⁶ There is no dearth of ministry opportunities for the congregation at FBCnl.

FBCnl operates several service ministries, including a foster support group called “Foster the Village” that also serves to nurture a fostering mentality among the congregation, a free community meal on Wednesday nights, a volunteer-staffed nursery

²Samuel R. Staley, “Dayton, Ohio: The Rise, Fall and Stagnation of a Former Industrial Juggernaut,” *New Geography*, August 4, 2008, <https://www.newgeography.com/content/00153-dayton-ohio-the-rise-fall-and-stagnation-a-former-industrial-juggernaut>.

³Robert G. Carlson, Linna Li, and Raminta Daniulaityte, “Montgomery County Poisoning Death Review: 2010-2016,” *Public Health-Dayton and Montgomery County*, June 1, 2017, http://www.mcadamhs.org/gifs/pdfs/Montgomery%20Co%202016%20PDR%20Final%20Rept%20V2.2%206%201%2017_FINAL.PDF.

⁴Chris Stewart, “Dayton Tops List of Drugged-out Cities,” *Dayton Daily News*, May 24, 2016, <http://www.mydaytondailynews.com/news/crime--law/dayton-tops-list-drugged-out-cities/lksAhrYPd21Gjct8Wg9SsK/>.

⁵Cornelius Frolik, “13 Tornadoes Confirmed from Monday’s Storms,” *Dayton Daily News*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/tornadoes-confirmed/P4FKSjO8QAsg4qo17vyYCO/>.

⁶Bonnie Meibers, “Oregon District Mass Shooting: What You Need to Know This Morning,” *Dayton Daily News*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/oregon-district-mass-shooting-what-you-need-know-this-morning/ulW8nBiteRYq1kBQObZMyK/>.

during services so that childcare is free, and a “Clothes Pin Trailer” (a clothing source that focuses on season-specific clothing). The church recently became an agency (food source point) of the Dayton Food Bank network; the church also hopes to open several small free pantries in different neighborhoods. The FBCnl congregation sacrifices time, money, and resources to run these programs aimed at opening doors in the community to share the love of Christ, bring people into the church, and prepare them to likewise minister to others.

FBCnl supports two missionaries and an orphanage in Haiti. Support comes through financial giving, through regular offerings, and through fund drives during events like Vacation Bible School (VBS). Approximately ten members make annual trips to visit Haiti to share their faith, work in the orphanage, host a VBS, preach in neighborhood churches, and deliver supplies from the United States. Smaller groups visit Haiti throughout the year to do specialized work at the orphanage. Members are called upon to faithfully support the work in Haiti.⁷

Discipleship Groups provide a staple of FBCnl’s disciple-making efforts. Approximately sixty people are involved in a Discipleship Group. Discipleship Groups meet throughout the week and focus on Scripture memorization, basic doctrine, and principles of hermeneutics. Small Groups are another means of discipleship. These groups generally meet on Sunday mornings and work through a curriculum based on the Scriptures that will be preached during the sermon with a deeper emphasis on obeying the command of God in the selected texts.

FBCnl seats approximately 250 in the sanctuary. Until mid-2018, the average Sunday attendance of 200 people filled approximately 80 percent of the seats. Thus, a second service was implemented. Attendance rose slightly in response to the increased seating capacity. A new foyer, under construction, with an expected mid-2020 completion

⁷The 2019 mission trip was diverted to Costa Rica due to political unrest in Haiti.

date, will allow for more room for mingling before and after the sermon. Prior to the sermon, three to four worship songs are led by the worship leader, and announcements are made. The pastor preaches through sections of the Bible, carefully expositing the Word of God to the congregation in a contiguous and understandable way. In 2017, Betts preached through the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), from the Epistle to the Ephesians on what the church is to be, through Exodus 1-13, and what Christmas means to the Christian. In 2018, he preached a topical series on “How Not to Ruin Your Life” and then from Exodus 14-40. In 2019, he preached through the book of Mark. Following the sermon, one or two songs are sung while an offering is taken, and then a benediction is given. The Lord’s Supper is observed once a month, usually the first Sunday of every month.

Despite the great work being done by many within FBCnl, some still remain impervious and unaffected by the preaching of God’s Word. The majority of work is accomplished by the same minority of members. Some members only attend Sunday services, and they never or rarely participate in ministry to the community or participate in Discipleship Groups or Small Groups. Others show no fruit in keeping with repentance. An effort to better know and care for the flock was undertaken in early 2019 by asking all members to reaffirm membership, and over 1200 absent members were cleared from the membership rolls. Those who reaffirmed their membership, as well as every visitor and regular attender, have a continuing need to be taught to *hear* the Word of God, or hear *better* and *act on* what they have heard, as well as to lift up a concerted prayer for God to soften the hearts of the church and community to respond rightly to the Scriptures. Once God has opened their ears to hear, then they will heed the exhortations from the pulpit, their group leaders, and their individual Bible reading.

Rationale

The preaching from the pulpit of FBCnl is faithful and true. It calls for the

congregation to repent from sin and believe the gospel, to love one another, to serve Christ, to heed the Word, to pray regularly, and to make disciples. Listeners who hear and do the Word are productive Christians who bring forth a multitude of fruit. However, not all who sit under the teaching heed the teaching or obey it in their lives.

The vision of this project was to encourage the congregation to be attentive to the Word and, in so doing, to fulfil the ministry of Christ in New Lebanon, Ohio, and to the ends of the earth. When the congregation hears the Word and acts upon it—including but not limited to fostering children, supporting those who are fostering children, staffing the free Wednesday meal, working in the nursery and other classroom ministries, volunteering at the food and clothing donation sites, sending funds and other necessities to Haiti, going to work among the people in New Lebanon, Dayton, and Haiti, not neglecting to meet together in Discipleship and Small Groups, and actively bearing one another's burdens—Christ will be glorified.

The preaching at FBCnl is powerful, compelling, and true because it expounds the truth of God's Word. If the entire congregation listened attentively to the Word of God at FBCnl, they would truly glorify God by working together to make disciples who change the world. This project taught the congregation to listen so that they may publish the peace of Christ to the world and receive all of the blessings that Christ promises in this life and the life to come.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to hone the congregation at FBCnl to be attentive to the preaching of the Word in order to be motivated to strive for the upward call that they have in Christ Jesus.

Goals

Three goals determined the completion of this project. The first goal focused on the assessment of the congregation and how well they gave attention to the hearing of

the Word prior to the implementation of the project. The second goal was meant to teach the congregation to place an emphasis on the importance of hearing the Word before, during, and after hearing the Word of God. The third goal measured the effects of this emphasis and determined whether the congregation was any more equipped to listen and obey the Word than before the project began.

1. The first goal was to assess the current level of effort a member of FBCnl puts into understanding and employing the preaching that he or she hears.
2. The second goal followed the first goal and was to hone the congregation to prepare their hearts before, during, and after the sermon to hear and do the Word. Such honing was executed by using a handout that detailed six principles for improving the congregation's church experience.
3. The third goal followed the second and was to measure an increase in the level of the congregation's comprehension of the sermon and in the degree to which the sermon spurs on the congregation to obey the Word.

Once these goals were measurably accomplished, the congregation at FBCnl was equipped to be attentive to the preaching of the Word. The next section details the research methodology and instruments used to measure each of these goals.

Research Methodology

Three goals were partially met during this project to accomplish the purpose of developing the congregation to be attentive to hearing the preaching of the Word.⁸ The first goal was to assess the current level of effort a member of FBCnl put into understanding and employing the preaching that he or she hears. Prior to changing or introducing anything in regard to this project, a pre-project survey (see appendix 1) was administered to Small Groups on Sunday morning prior to beginning the second goal of this project. Completed surveys were stored in a locked cabinet until the third goal concluded and processing commenced. This survey entailed the degree to which

⁸All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in this ministry project.

congregants felt they benefitted from the average sermon they heard at FBCnl and how they responded to the Word of God. This goal was considered partially met when forty-six members completed the survey.

The second goal was to increase the congregation's attentiveness to hearing the Word of God through a handout called *Six Simple Ways to Improve Your Church Experience* (later referred to as the *Simple Listening Handout*; see appendix 3). The congregation was instructed to focus on one method per week; reading ahead or applying other methods outside of their assigned week was not discouraged. However, the congregant was instructed to intentionally accomplish one method per week and accomplish all methods within the six weeks. Each of these methods has subsets listed under it, which were provided to give a span to the technique. Congregants were instructed to not be limited by or to the subsets as long as they accomplish the main method. These methods are as follows:

1. Before the Service
 - A. Prayer
 - B. Read the Word
2. During the Service
 - A. Take Every Thought Captive
 - B. Take Notes
3. After the Service
 - A. Revisit
 - B. Apply

This second goal was considered partially accomplished at the end of six weeks when all of the project participants attempted had attempted at least one of each of these six principles (i.e., the method subsets).

The third goal was to determine whether the congregation had been honed to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. A post-project survey (see appendix 2)—nearly identical to the pre-project survey—was administered to the same Small Groups the Sunday after the sixth principle was assigned. This third goal was considered partially

met when (1) eighteen members had completed the post-project survey who had also completed the pre-project survey and (2) a t-test of the pre-project and post-project surveys showed an increase in the attentiveness to the hearing of the Word of God among congregants.

Design Overview

The project was accomplished over eight weeks according to the schedule in table 1.

Table 1. Design overview

Week	Date	Action
1	Sept 29	Speak to Groups / Accomplish Pre-Project Survey / Distribute Simple Listening Handout
2	Oct 6	Handout Emphasizes Prayer
3	Oct 13	Handout Emphasizes Reading the Word before the Sermon
4	Oct 20	Handout Emphasizes Taking Every Thought Captive
5	Oct 27	Handout Emphasizes Taking Notes during the Sermon
6	Nov 3	Handout Emphasizes Revisiting the Sermon afterwards
7	Nov 10	Handout Emphasizes Applying the Sermon Application
8	Nov 17	Post-Project Surveys / Processing

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

Certain terms used throughout the project are defined below in order that readers understand these principles.

Expository preaching. Expository preaching has many definitions, yet we do an injustice to the church if we cannot define expository preaching simply. The simplest, yet strikingly accurate, definition of expository preaching comes from John Broadus, as summarized by Thomas McKibbens: “Preaching *from* the Bible [rather than] preaching *about* the Bible.”⁹ The distinction of preaching *from* the Bible indicates that it must also

⁹Thomas McKibbens, *John A. Broadus: Shaper of Preaching*, Shapers of Southern Baptist

be preached *to* the hearer. Therefore, I define expository preaching as determining the message from the text, faithfully conferring the meaning of the text, and applying the content to the congregation.¹⁰

Expository listening. Expository listening is the process of actively listening to a sermon to hear the message, discerning how it calls the hearer to action, and ensuring that it is true to the Scriptures. Its opposite would be passive listening, or assuming that the sermon is merely intellectual and does not call for action or assimilation. John Calvin gives one of the best exhortations regarding expository listening: “We have not come to the preaching merely to hear what we do not know, but to be incited to do our duty.”¹¹ Thomas Watson, writing on the Ten Commandments, explains that failing to listen attentively to the sermon is tantamount to breaking the Fourth Commandment.¹²

Two limitations applied to this project. First, as the context section explains, this project addressed a church that was already—to some degree—hearing and doing the Word. Unlike many churches where the congregation may see the preacher as delivering a monologue, the congregation at FBCnl largely understands that God is speaking to

Heritage Series (Nashville: Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1987), 5 (emphasis original).

¹⁰Not to oversimplify, John Broadus said much more about expository preaching. As McKibbens notes, “Broadus was less concerned that preachers teach a system of doctrines than that they proclaim the experience of Christ.” McKibbens, *John A. Broadus*, 5. McKibbens continues, “[Broadus] was an avowed enemy of rampant spiritualizing and irresponsible allegory Broadus was a decided enemy against show and arrogance in the pulpit” (2). Finally, according to McKibbens, “[Broadus] forced preachers to say what a passage actually meant. To do otherwise, he claimed, was inexcusable” (4). Dan Phillips gives another succinct definition of expository preaching focusing on the message of the text: “Remember: Scripture meant one thing before you were born, means the same now, and will mean the same, should you die. Preach *that* meaning.” Dan Phillips, “While You’re Waiting, a Brief Thought on Preaching,” PyroManiacs, March 19, 2010, <https://teampyro.blogspot.com/2010/03/while-youre-waiting-brief-thought-on.html> (emphasis original). Albert Mohler offers an equally good definition of expository preaching: “Every text does have a point, of course, and the preacher’s main concern should be to communicate that central truth. In fact, he should design the sermon to serve that overarching purpose. Furthermore, the content of the passage is to be applied to life—but application must be determined by exposition, not vice versa.” R. Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 19.

¹¹John Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, in *Corpus Reformatorum* (Halle, Germany: C. A. Schwetschke et filium, 1895), 79:783, quoted in Joel R. Beeke, “Calvin’s Evangelism,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15, no (2004): 75.

¹²Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 92.

them and calling them to action through the preacher. Therefore, the results may not be as dramatic as they may be at other churches. Second, the accuracy of the pre-project and post-project surveys depends upon the willingness of the respondents to be honest about their spiritual lives. To mitigate this limitation, the respondents were assured that their input would be kept anonymous except for the purpose of comparison. To protect anonymity in the survey, congregants were assured that their identity would not be known to anyone other than me and that their identity was needed only so that surveys could be directly correlated. In the event that congregants were weary of giving their name, they were given the option to put the same identifier on both surveys (such as their initials) to ensure that correlation would be possible. Each survey was prefaced by a short introduction regarding the importance of honesty and accuracy for the work being done.

Four delimitations were placed on the project. First, the principles for being attentive to the hearing of the Word were narrowed to six. Many would argue that there are dozens—even hundreds—of principles for being a better listener. In order to not overwhelm the congregation with methods, a broad overview of being a better listener was presented to them in six principles. The second delimitation was that the project implementation was accomplished over a consecutive eight-week timeframe. This constraint gave adequate time to accomplish the second and third goals while limiting other factors from skewing the final results. Third, because of the possibility of children being present in the congregation when the surveys were disseminated, the results were limited to congregants over the age of eighteen. Each survey required an age to be listed; surveys with ages less than eighteen or left blank were excluded. Fourth, the effectiveness of the emphasis on hearing the Word was limited by the constancy of attendance and adherence to the six principles. If the participants did not attempt all six of the methods, in which effort is made to emphasize listening to the Word, it would be difficult to measure the benefit of the emphasis. To mitigate this limitation, the post-survey differed from the pre-project survey only in that it asked which, if any, of the previous Sundays

were missed and whether the congregant applied all six principles of the project curriculum.

Conclusion

Many of the great preaching events in the Bible contain direct mention of God working in the congregation so that people will listen to the Word. The preacher must realize that his listeners must be attentive to the Word in order to be changed by it, hearers must understand that they must listen and act on what they are hearing, and both must recognize that since the power in preaching and the ability to understand come from God, they must humbly rest on him. Paul summarizes this point most saliently: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor 1:18). This chapter has examined this necessity in the context of FBCnl and has laid out a project which increased that congregation’s attentiveness to the hearing of God’s Word. Chapter 2 examines several passages where the attention of the audience was a decisive factor in their hearing and responsiveness to God’s Word, and chapter 3 details how influential pastors and theologians throughout history have approached expository listening as well as how churches can train their congregations to be attentive to the hearing of God’s Word.

CHAPTER 2
THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR
THE CONGREGATION TO BE ATTENTIVE TO
EXPOSITORY PREACHING

The faithful preaching of God’s Word is not a monologue to take or leave as the congregation sees fit but is the very Word of God (i.e., God making his appeal to the congregation through the preacher), which the congregation must receive attentively. Scripture is replete with commands to hear, listen, hearken, understand, heed, and respond in obedience and faith. The preacher is called to preach, but Paul clarifies that it is in a persuasive, appealing, and imploring manner meant to lead the hearer to reconciliation with God (2 Cor 5:11-21). Thomas Keir identifies the ever-present theme of hearing as follows: “It is important to note that the Bible seems to lay as much stress on the responsibility of the hearer as on that of the preaching.”¹ In even a cursory examination of these biblical commands, it becomes apparent that no single work could examine all of the commands to be attentive to the Word, so this chapter examines four seminal events in Scripture where a preacher preached and the audience was attentive: (1) the preaching of Ezra to the returning exiles, (2) the preaching of Paul in Philippi and the conversion of Lydia, (3) the preaching of Christ after his resurrection, and (4) the preaching of Philip to the people of Samaria. These events each focus on a different emphasis to the response: (1) Ezra’s preaching focuses on the response of the people; (2) Paul’s preaching focuses on the work of God to open hearts; (3) Jesus’s preaching focuses on the theme of Scripture; and (4) Philip’s preaching focuses on the power of the Word.

¹Thomas H. Keir, *The Word in Worship: Preaching and Its Setting in Common Worship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 4.

These points will be examined from the Scriptures, beginning with Ezra’s message.

The People Were Attentive to Ezra (Neh 8)

In the year 445 BC, Ezra stood before the people on a prepared platform and read from the Word for half of the day, which led to the people’s understanding and responding to the sermon. When Ezra stood before the returned exiles and opened the Word of God, they were receptive to what God had said through him, receiving the Word with expectation, attentiveness, worship, and joy. Ezra had been preaching for approximately thirteen years prior to this event; on this day, his sermon produced a response in the people that lasted for years, and indeed, the style of preaching has been emulated even to today. Robert L. Dabney says of this passage, “It was under Ezra that preaching assumed, by divine appointment, more nearly its modern place as a constant part of worship We shall seek in vain for a more apt and scriptural definition of the preacher’s work than is contained in these words.”² Contrariwise, it must be noted that much of the response to this event was outside of the normal ministration of Ezra, for he had “set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:10) for over a decade without such a strong response. The defining power of this event was not in the preacher but in God’s spurring the people to respond to the Word.

Receiving the Word with Expectation

Days before the event of Ezra’s sermon, there was a growing expectation to hear the Word of God. This anticipation appears in two ways: (1) a wooden platform had been erected for the purpose (Neh 8:4), (2) they told Ezra to bring before them “the Book of the Law of Moses” (vv. 1-2)—both of which took some time to prepare and

²Robert L. Dabney, *Evangelical Eloquence: A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1999), 23.

accomplish.

The pulpit on which Ezra stood was large enough to accommodate him and thirteen others and was built in the public square near the Water Gate. The location was carefully chosen to identify that the Word—not the temple—was the emphasis of the day and that all of the people were welcomed to attend and hear it. H. G. M. Williamson notes that Ezra “chose both to read the Law in an easily accessible public place away from the sacred precincts of the temple so that none might be barred from attending, and to associate laymen with the whole enterprise.”³ Further, Williamson cites H. L. Ellison to say, “In the choice of site we have Ezra’s deliberate proclamation that the Torah was greater than the Temple and its sacrifices, indeed that the Torah as such was above anything [the temple] might contain.”⁴ In the modern setting, the congregation should recognize that they have built two platforms for the reading of the Word: a physical platform and a spiritual platform. First, the congregation should be encouraged that their tithes and offerings have built (or rented) and maintained the physical space in which the preacher is able to read the Word of God aloud and that the people are able to gather to hear it. Second, the congregation should understand that they are part of a spiritual temple, the church, which exists to proclaim the Word of God and make Christ known. These platforms lead into the second way in which the people in Ezra’s day expected to receive the Word: in the request for a learned and faithful minister to expound the Scriptures to them.

Whatever incited the people’s desire to hear the Word in Ezra’s day is not explicitly stated in Scripture. Whatever it was (i.e., the faithfulness of God to bring the exiles back to Israel, the rebuilding of temple and walls, the rising of a strong leader in

³H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary 16 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 297.

⁴Henry L. Ellison, *From Babylon to Bethlehem: The Jewish People from the Exile to the Messiah* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1976), 47, quoted in Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 287.

Nehemiah, the overcoming of the naysayers, or a combination of these), the people were ready to hear and respond to the Word and thus called on a faithful minister in their midst to read the Word. James M. Hamilton Jr. exhorts the modern preacher to persevere based on the expectation of the people:

The people want Ezra to bring the book. He set out to change the world by studying Scripture (Ezra 7:10), and look what the Lord has done! The walls are rebuilt and the people want the Bible. Ezra has been serving the Lord faithfully in the land since he returned in 458 BC. Now Nehemiah arrives in 445BC, and the fruits of Ezra's own preparation and faithful ministry begin to be seen. Are you persevering now so that when the time comes and people want you to open God's Word to them you will be ready?⁵

The modern audience should come to the preaching with an expectation to both learn and be motivated to serve Christ. They must trust and know that the one preaching to them has yielded his life to the Lord and set his heart to faithfully teach the Scriptures. They must expect to hear from God through the preacher and respond as though God himself had opened the heavens and had spoken directly to them. T. H. L. Parker, after examining the writings John Calvin and comparing them to differing views of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, emphasizes the importance of the faithfully preaching God's Word: "Preaching is the Word of God because the preacher has been sent and commissioned by God as His ambassador, the one who has authority to speak in His name."⁶ Further, Paul Washer introduces his most famous sermon this way:

Because if I correctly interpret this passage of Scripture that I'm going to give you, it is as though God was speaking through a man. And your problem will not be with me, it will be with God and His Word. So, the only question that really has to be decided here this afternoon is, is this man before us a false prophet? Or is he telling us the truth? And if he is telling us the truth, then nothing else matters except conforming our lives to that truth.⁷

⁵James M. Hamilton Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 152.

⁶T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2001), 57.

⁷Paul Washer, "Shocking Message" (sermon preached at Youth Evangelism Conference, Montgomery, Alabama, 2002), quotation preserved by Tim Challies, "What Made Paul Washer's 'Shocking

When the people come to the preaching with expectation to receive the Word of God, they will be more likely to respond to the message from God spoken through the preacher. Steven Lawson retells a story about George Whitefield that shows Whitefield was readily aware that many come to the preached Word without an expectation to hear:

“If I had come to speak to you in my own name, you might rest your elbows upon your knees, and heads upon your hands, and sleep; and once in a while look up and say, ‘What does this babbler talk of?’ But I have not come to you in my own name. No, I have come to you in the name of the Lord God of Hosts, and”—here he brought down his hand and foot at once, so as to make the whole house ring—“and I must and will be heard.” Everyone in the house started, the old father, who always slept, among the rest. “Aye, aye,” continued the preacher, looking at him, “I have waked you up, have I? I meant to do it. I am not come here to preach to stocks and stones; I am come to you in the name of the Lord God of Hosts, and I must and will have an audience.”⁸

The audience should not come out of compulsion or boredom but with an anticipation to hear from God and respond.

With every sermon they hear, the congregation must understand that they are part of the preaching event (i.e., it is not a monologue or an entertainment) and that they are called to hear and respond; thus, they must invest their time and efforts to be ready to hear God speak when he does so through his messenger. Derek Thomas agrees that the success of Ezra’s sermon was vested in the response of the people: “We also note their personal involvement; it was they who told Ezra to bring the Book of the Law of Moses and not the other way around. The initiative was theirs. They had a desire to hear the Scriptures. They wanted to know what the Bible said, and they were prepared to sacrifice their break from manual labor to discover it.”⁹ After the people prepared the way for the Word to be preached, they received it with open hearts and minds.

Message’ So Very Shocking?,” Challies (blog), April 10, 2018, <https://www.challies.com/vlog/what-made-paul-washers-shocking-message-so-very-shocking>.

⁸Steven J. Lawson, *The Evangelistic Zeal of George Whitefield* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2013), 95-96. Original story found in Joseph Belcher, *George Whitefield: A Biography* (New York: Philadelphia, 1857), 376.

⁹Derek W. H. Thomas, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 326.

Receiving the Word with Attentiveness

When Ezra read the Word from the platform, it was to an expectant people who were ready to be moved by the message they would receive. It is no surprise, then, that they were ready to pay attention when the Word was opened. James Montgomery Boice summarizes their attention as follows: “The people showed extraordinary reverence for the Law, for they rose in respectful silence when Ezra opened the scroll. When he prayed, they responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ and worshiped God. As the account unfolds, we discover that the reading of God’s Law led to national revival.”¹⁰ Their attentive spirits can be seen in the length of the sermon, in the response and follow-up to the sermon, and in who was present for the sermon.

A prime indication of the people’s willingness to hear the Word of God comes in the length of the sermon and the continued studies that followed the initial event. The people were not simply fulfilling a religious duty to hear the Law read but were hearing it in order to understand it and respond to it. At the conclusion of the first day, there was “great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them” (Neh 8:12). Derek Thomas contrasts what a modern audience might think of Ezra’s preaching: “If we are weary with twenty-five- to thirty-minute sermons, we will barely understand what kept these folk in Jerusalem riveted for six hours.”¹¹

But the sermon was not merely six hours; it was a multi-day event, with “the heads of fathers’ houses” returning the next day to continue the study (vv. 13, 18). The initial reading only whetted the people’s yearning for the Word to be preached and understood. Today, a church should not schedule a six-hour meeting and expect it to bring national revival, for the hearing of the Word—for Ezra and the people of post-exilic Israel—became a lifestyle that continued long after the initial sermon. Matthew Henry

¹⁰James Montgomery Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expository Commentary, Boice Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 90.

¹¹Thomas, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 328.

identifies that the people of Israel were prepared to hear the Word and were motivated to understand it better so that they could teach others:

We have here the people's renewed attendance upon the word. They had spent the greatest part of one day in praying and hearing, and yet were so far from being weary of that new moon and sabbath that the next day after, though it was no festival, the chief of them came together again to hear Ezra expound, which they found more delightful and gainful than any worldly pleasure or profit whatsoever. Note, the more we converse with the word of God, if we rightly understand it and be affected with it, the more we shall covet to converse with it, and to increase in our acquaintance with it, saying, How sweet are thy words unto my mouth! Those that understand the scriptures well will still be desirous to understand them better. Now the priests and the Levites themselves came with the chief of the people to Ezra, that prince of expositors, to understand the words of the law . . . , that they might instruct in the words of the law; they came to be taught themselves, that they might be qualified to teach others.¹²

The Word riveted the attention of all who were present and led them to respond to and treasure the Scriptures. It is vital in a modern setting to note that it was not merely the scribes or the priests (i.e., the scholars or the pastors) who were attentive to the Word but all who could understand.

A tragic amount of preaching today is catered only to adults while the children and the youths are merely entertained or educated in ways that will not matter for eternity. This age discrimination was not so in Ezra's audience, for the Law was read "in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law" (Neh 8:3). Children should be listening to the sermon as soon as they are able to understand. This idea was not something new that the people of Ezra's day contrived but a continuing theme in the Scriptures. Williamson quotes Derek Kidner, who says, "The Law had always envisaged 'a wise and understanding people,' taught from childhood not only the words of God but what the words and rituals meant."¹³ Thomas concurs: "They gave genuine attention to

¹²Matthew Henry, *Joshua to Esther*, vol. 2 of *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 847.

¹³Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 114, quoted in Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 288.

what was being said. No sleeping eyes. No glancing at watches. No daydreaming. The audience consisted of men, women, and children—“all who could understand what they heard” There is no hint of special youth activities. Everyone was expected to be there. Everyone was expected to listen.”¹⁴

Hamilton seeks to introduce a similar lifestyle into the church today: “It’s not a bad thing for children to sit in church with their parents and hear the Word of God. In fact, it might be good for them to learn to sit still and quiet in church, for them to see their parents worshipping, and for them to hear the Scripture read and preached.”¹⁵ William Tyndale had a similar vision of youths being able to grasp the lofty concepts of the Bible. According to John Fox, on one occasion, Tyndale defended his translation efforts to a Catholic divine by pledging, “If God spared his [Tyndale’s] life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he [the divine] did.”¹⁶

Ezra’s sermon teaches that modern congregants should be so desirous of hearing the Word preached that they are not concerned with the length of the sermon, that they should be continuing their studies throughout the week, and that the sermon is not limited merely to the scholars and religious leaders but should apply to all who are capable of understanding. This desire will lead to them receiving the Word with worshipful hearts.

Receiving the Word with Worship

The people who called for Ezra to read the Word did so from a heart of worship to recognize who God is and what he had done in their lives. They did not call

¹⁴Thomas, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 327.

¹⁵Hamilton, *Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah*, 154.

¹⁶John Fox, *Fox’s Book of Martyrs: A History of the Lives, Sufferings, and Deaths of the Early Christian and Protestant Martyrs*, ed. William Byron Forbush (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 178.

on Ezra out of a superstitious rite to somehow entreat God's favor, but in order to understand and exalt God for who he is. This understanding is seen in their prayer, their response, and their humility. Stan Evers says of their approach,

Prayer and praise directed to "the great God" (8:6) prepared the hearts of the Jews to receive God's Word. Before Ezra read the Law he invoked God's blessing on those present. They responded with a fervent chorus of "Amen! Amen!," which means, "Yes, Lord, let it be." They enthusiastically worshipped and lifted up their hands towards heaven as a token of their utter dependence on God for his mercy. "Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground," an expression of their humility in the presence of the almighty God.¹⁷

Williamson recognizes the same emotions: "'Amen! Amen!' (repeated for emphasis) expresses their concurrence in Ezra's words; the raising of their hands demonstrated their sense of need and dependence; their prostration demonstrated both their worship as stated, and humble adoration."¹⁸

The modern congregation must be reminded that worship exists beyond the songs that they sing and extends to—and is even eclipsed by—the preaching and hearing of God's Word. The preacher must also not be afraid to preach convicting messages, for exalting God often requires the humbling of hearers so that they can recognize their dependence on God for life and salvation. Evers identifies that the joy that resulted from Ezra's sermon was necessarily preceded by the conviction that the people of Israel felt:

The weeping of contrition preceded the rejoicing of pardon ([Neh] 8:9-10). Thomas Watson, a seventeenth-century Puritan pastor, remarked that he found two things difficult in his preaching: firstly, "to make the wicked sad"; and secondly, "to make the godly joyful"! The day of the assembly was "sacred to the Lord" (8:9); the occasion was solemn but not inhibiting, hence the command of Nehemiah to the congregation: "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks" (8:10). Godliness and gloom are not inseparable twins!¹⁹

Henry emphasizes the relationship between the people's weeping and their joy: "Observe:

¹⁷Stan K. Evers, *Doing a Great Work: Ezra and Nehemiah Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1996), 160.

¹⁸Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 289.

¹⁹Evers, *Doing a Great Work*, 161.

After they had wept they rejoiced. Holy mourning makes way for holy mirth; those that sow in tears shall reap in joy; those that tremble at the convictions of the word may triumph in the consolations of it.”²⁰

Most importantly, the modern congregation must be exhorted to worship God for his truth and mercy, not as an endeavor to bribe God or fulfill some sacrament. Worshipping God while receiving the Word will lead to a godly joy that endures.

Receiving the Word with Joy

The rejoicing of Ezra’s audience followed their understanding that they had utterly broken God’s laws. After their conviction, the Levite’s calmed the people by reminding them that the “joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8:10). Instead of languishing in their sin and shame, the people of Israel responded in repentance, faith, and obedience to God. Their joy was borne out of understanding that God would not leave them nor forsake them, that their great conviction was not punitive but transformative, and that God extends mercy to the contrite and the humble. Henry quips on how understanding the joy of the Lord improves repentance: “Holy joy will be oil to the wheels of our obedience.”²¹ In the New Testament, when the apostles were beaten and charged not to speak in the name of Jesus, they were filled with a similar joy that emboldened their teaching and preaching that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 5:40-42). When a person rightly understands who God is and how he has demonstrated his love for his people, the reception of the Word becomes a matter of obedience that produces a long-lasting joy.

John Gill recognizes the joy of Ezra’s audience—an audience still waiting for a Saviour from heaven—and he exhorts modern believers that the joy of Ezra’s audience

²⁰Henry, *Joshua to Esther*, 847.

²¹Henry, *Joshua to Esther*, 847.

should be dwarfed by the joy they (i.e., modern believers) should have in their full understanding of the gospel of Christ: “Whereby they better understood their duty, and in what instances and in what manner it was to be performed; how much more reason is there for joy and gladness, when the Gospel, and the doctrines of it, are clearly known and understood?”²² Therefore, in joy and gladness, this study now transitions to the New Testament example of Lydia being granted attentiveness.

Lydia Was Attentive to Paul (Acts 16)

Many of the conversion accounts in the New Testament are accompanied by various signs and wonders. While these are true and helpful records, the modern preacher dare not rely on nor attempt to conjure signs and wonders, lest he look like a charlatan and the power of God seem to rest on miracles. The hearing of the Word is the only prerequisite for being attentive to the Word, which is a work of God: the power of the preached Word is especially portrayed in the conversion of Lydia in Philippi. Lydia heard the Word, the Lord opened her heart, and she was converted. Paul and his fellow laborers preached to several women on this day, but only Lydia is recorded as being converted—the defining power of this event was that God opened her heart to be attentive to the Word.

Hearing the Word

Multitudes have heard the Word preached but have been unaffected by it. Jesus Christ spoke of the Word being like a seed that was sown and the heart being like the soil; some seed found hard and worthless soil, and some seed found hearty soil (Mark 4:1-20). The heart that is prepared for the seed will produce fruit and represents the heart opened by God. Richard Baxter laments the fact that not everyone who hears him preach would

²²John Gill, *Chronicles to Psalms*, vol. 3 of *Baptist Commentary Series* (Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 145.

heed the Word and be saved:

Multitudes will not be brought to understand what we say. When we talk of redemption, sanctification, and salvation, they hear us as if we spoke Greek or Hebrew to them. And under our teaching they grow old in sottish, grossest ignorance Multitudes have such dead and hardened hearts, that, when we tell them that they must shortly be in heaven or hell, as they are here prepared, we speak almost as to blocks, or men asleep: they feel not what we say, as if they did not hear us. We are bid to cry aloud and tell them of their sin and danger, and yet we cannot get them to regard and feel Alas, how many thousands are there whom we could never persuade to consider with deep and serious thoughts what will become of their souls when they are dead, nor seek to be resolved of it from the infallible Word of God!²³

Even one of the most salient calls for preaching recognizes that not all who have heard will respond. As Paul says, “So faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Rom 10:17), but immediately he asks, “Have they not heard? Indeed they have” (v. 18). The preacher must recognize two things: (1) God uses preaching to save souls, and (2) the best preaching is in vain for the conversion of souls, unless God works.

In Philippi, God used the preaching of Paul to convert Lydia. Henry notes that in the conversion of Lydia, there were not only “conversions that were effected by miracle, as Paul’s, but some that were brought about by the ordinary methods of grace, as Lydia’s here.”²⁴ The preacher must not grow faint in his preaching, for it is the means by which God has and will save many. Daniel Doriani reminds the preacher that he is a means by which God delivers salvation and that the preacher is not the Saviour:

A preacher is like a spiritual midwife, not giving birth but offering assistance as God creates spiritual life through the word. Like the midwife, the preacher is superfluous if all goes well. Men and women do come to faith by reading the Bible alone in dorm rooms, military barracks, or isolated cabins. But complications arise; people need assistance. So they need interpreters to mediate the ancient text message to modern audiences that have difficulty seeing its relevance.²⁵

²³Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter: Selected Treatises* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 537.

²⁴Matthew Henry, *Acts to Revelation*, vol. 6 of *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 166.

²⁵Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 59.

As poignant as Doriani's illustration is, the preacher must also note that the best preaching cannot bring spiritual life if God does not open hearts.

It is tragic to consider that Judas Iscariot heard most of the sermons of Christ and yet still betrayed him and is lost for eternity. Many will perish in their sins despite being under excellent and true preaching from the Word of Life. The revival hymn "Brethren, We Have Met to Worship" identifies this issue and exhorts the congregation thus:

Brethren we have met to worship
and adore the Lord our God;
Will you pray with expectation
As we preach the living Word?²⁶
All is vain unless the Spirit
Of the Holy One comes down;
Brethren, pray and God's great blessing
Will be showered all around.²⁷

The church should pray with all of its power that people will listen to the Word preached, that God will open their hearts, and that they will be saved. The mark of a leader worth following, according to Hebrews 13:17, is that they are ready to give an account "with joy and not with groaning." If God were not working in the spirit of men and opening hearts, then all the preacher could do is languish and groan in the spiritual ruin wrought by the hardness of people's hearts.

God Opens Hearts

But God does open hearts. Lydia is a prime example. Paul was sent to Macedonia expressly because he saw in a vision that the Macedonians were in great need

²⁶These lyrics are from 1825; other versions have revised the lyrics to read, "Will you pray with all your power, while we try to preach the Word?" and "Brethren, pray, and holy manna will be showered all around." While the meaning remains similar, I prefer the 1825 version for the expectation that the true Word is preached, instead of a vain hope based in "trying to preach," and for the expectant blessing of God's Spirit, rather than an obscure reference to manna, which was not given because God's people entreated it.

²⁷George Atkins, "Brethren, We Have Met to Worship," in *25 Most Treasured Gospel Hymn Stories*, by Kenneth W. Osbeck (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 27.

of help (Acts 16:9-10). Their need of the gospel was dire because they had neither church nor synagogue but more crucially because their hearts were by nature closed against heaven. Gill says of the heart of the unconverted,

[Lydia's heart] was before shut and barred, with the bars of ignorance, hardness, and unbelief . . . [The natural heart] is bolted and barred with unbelief, and walled up, and even petrified and hardened with sin, and is guarded and garrisoned by Satan, and its goods are kept in peace by him: and this had been the case of Lydia; but now the Lord opened her understanding, and put light into it, which was before darkness itself . . . Not Lydia herself, nor the Apostle Paul, but the Lord opened her heart; Jehovah the Father, who commanded light out of darkness; Jehovah the Son, who has the key of the house of David; Jehovah the Spirit, who convinces of sin, righteousness, and judgment.²⁸

God is able to open hearts at any time and under any circumstance, but here it must be noted that he opened Lydia's heart when she heard the preaching of the Word. One must not presume that one can force God to work, but one must also recognize that God works through the preaching and hearing of his Word. The congregation must attend to the preaching of God's Word in prayer, hope, and expectation that God will open their hearts and make them attentive, like Lydia, to the things of Christ. The preacher must fervently pray that his preaching will be used by God to confront and convert sinners.

Most of all, Christians must not despair because they cannot open someone's heart or force him or her to believe; instead, they must find solace in the fact that God does save many through the preaching of his Word. Scripture leaves readers wanting for the details of such a miraculous message when it does not record Paul's sermon—or even which text he preached—that wrought such miraculous work in Lydia's life. But Paul later explains that it is the corpus of the sacred writings that “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:15-16). One

²⁸John Gill, *John to Galatians*, vol. 8 of *Baptist Commentary Series* (Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 296.

may easily surmise that Paul received this revelation from Christ's example.

The Disciples were Attentive to the Risen Christ (Luke 24)

Unless God opens the heart, the Word of Christ remains veiled, but when God acts, all of Scripture points at Christ. The preacher and the hearer must have a thorough reliance on God for his Word to do the work that he intends it to do. This principle is found saliently on the day of Christ's resurrection recorded in Luke 24, first, in the conversation Jesus Christ has with Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, and second, in his appearing to the disciples in Jerusalem. In both instances, Jesus scolded them for their unbelief and doubt, explained to them that the Scriptures tell of him, and then opened their eyes and minds to understand.²⁹ The disciples needed their minds to be opened by a divine act of God (much like Lydia), but the defining point of this event was that Christ himself exegeted the theme of Scripture, that the entirety thereof is about himself, culminating in his death and resurrection.

The Scriptures Are Veiled

Paul said, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing" (1 Cor 1:18). He also said, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (2:14). Therefore, it is no surprise that Christ rebuked Cleopas and his companion for their lack of discernment, saying, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25). Nor should it be a surprise that Christ said to the rest of the disciples, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" (v. 38). All people are disinclined from understanding God's Word, but these disciples had spent a great deal of time with Christ and were expected to know his

²⁹It is important to note that Scripture speaks of the heart, eyes, ears, and mind as needing to be opened to see Christ (see, e.g., Job 33:16; Pss 119:18, 146:8; Acts 16:14; Luke 24:45; 2 Tim 2:25-26).

Word. Leon Morris chides Cleopas and his friend (and by extension the rest of the disciples):

The words fall short of being a compliment, and show that the two had done less than might reasonably have been expected Jesus goes on to point out that the root of the trouble was their failure to accept what is taught in Bible prophecy. The prophets had spoken plainly enough, but the minds of Cleopas and his friend had not been quick enough to grasp what was meant.³⁰

Morris continues that perhaps the trouble was that they had believed only the part of the Bible that they liked: “They had no doubt seized on the prediction of the glory of the Messiah, but it was quite another thing to take to heart the prophecies that pointed to the darker side of his mission.”³¹ Modern-day congregants must be sure they are not only believing what is comfortable and comforting to them but all that the Scripture says. R. Kent Hughes agrees: “Certainly they believed the prophets, but just as certainly they did not believe all that the prophets had said.”³²

All who do not submit to the Word of God are wasting their lives and missing sweet fellowship with God because a veil lies over their eyes. Paul goes so far as to say that if the rulers of Christ’s day had understood the wisdom and glory of Christ, they would not have crucified him (1 Cor 2:7-8). The glory, wisdom, and blessing of Christ are secret and hidden from many, and Christians seek to make these things plain to the perishing so that they may be saved. Hughes mourns for the blinded disciples and all who fail to understand:

What grief they would have been spared if they had only known and believed God’s Word to begin with. If we find ourselves hurting and despairing and do not find that Scripture speaks to our condition, it is not because the Bible has failed us, but because we do not know it well enough. We cannot be profoundly comforted by that

³⁰Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to St. Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 338.

³¹Morris, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, 338.

³²R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 408.

which we do not know.³³

The preacher and the congregation must lament that so many—including, at least in part, themselves—are missing the consolation and joy of God because they are not attentive to the prophecy and promises of the Word of God. The disciples had spent three years hearing Christ speak about himself from “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44), and yet they still fled and wept when Christ was arrested, flogged, and crucified. If such men needed Christ to open their hearts and minds to understand the Scriptures, how much more so do modern-day sinners?

God Lifts the Veil

The disciples’ understanding came as a direct result of Christ’s opening their eyes and hearts to what the Scriptures said. Hughes identifies the contrast thus:

A spiritual veil had covered their understanding, so that on two occasions when he had foretold his death we read, “It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it” (Luke 9:45), and again, “The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about” (Luke 18:34; cf. 2 Cor 3:13-16). But on Easter night the blinders were removed as the Holy Spirit opened their minds! What a dynamic combination—the Holy Scriptures illumined by the Holy Spirit.³⁴

Paul says, “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (2 Cor 3:16). He also says, “Only through Christ is it taken away” (v. 14). It is imperative that one recognizes that God has the power to illuminate the entirety of Scripture, and Christ gives the example of which Scriptures point to him.

All of Scripture Points to Christ

In both conversations in Luke 24, Christ expounds to his hearers that all the Scriptures concern himself (vv. 27, 44). Christ began with Moses and continued through all the prophets to demonstrate who he was and what he must do; Luke explains that he

³³Hughes, *Luke*, 410.

³⁴Hughes, *Luke*, 416.

accomplished this exegetical feat twice. The point was clear—the main theme of Scripture is Christ and him crucified. As Hughes states, “There is no part of Scripture that does not bear its witness to Jesus.”³⁵

It is imperative that one recognize that Cleopas and his companion had started to understand the fullness of scriptural prophecy before their eyes were opened. They said, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (v. 32). Today, the preacher may fully describe Christ and his work to an unbeliever—with no discernable evidence of the Word being received—before the unbeliever sees Christ. Christians are not wasting their time to speak truth to a person who seems to have no interest in the living Christ. As Hughes explains,

As the incognito Christ was expounding the Scriptures, the two had come to see the plausibility, and indeed the necessity, for the Passion and Resurrection. Now they began to understand why the tomb was empty. I think they were divinely kept from recognizing Christ so they would base their understanding of the Resurrection squarely on the Scripture and not on experience. A privileged experience such as this, if not grounded in the Word, runs the danger of becoming a privatized, eccentric interpretation. The couple on the road, however, were in no such danger. Their belief in the Resurrection rested on the Scriptures before they saw Christ!³⁶

People who have not yet believed should be attentive to the Word in the hope that God will somehow open their eyes and make sense of the things they have heard. Paul Washer tells of a dying man to whom he witnessed who sought salvation for many hours while trying to understand the truth of Scripture, but the man did not experience its power until the Holy Spirit finally opened his heart.³⁷ A servant of the Lord must, as the apostle Paul says, “be kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of

³⁵Hughes, *Luke*, 416.

³⁶Hughes, *Luke*, 410.

³⁷Paul Washer, “Regeneration vs Decisionism” (sermon preached at Deeper Conference, First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Georgia, October 17-18, 2008).

the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Tim 2:24-26).

The passages that Christ used are hidden from modern readers, and rightly so, for all of Scripture points to him, and one would plausibly diminish the rest of Scripture by exalting some super-text chosen by Christ. The preacher may faithfully preach a Christ-centered sermon from any passage, and God may use any passage to convert a lost sinner. History is replete with testimonies of salvation from some of the most improbable passages.³⁸ Morris expands on the study that Christ undertook on the road to Emmaus and later to the other disciples:

Jesus began a systematic Bible study. *Moses and all the prophets* formed the starting-point, but He also went on to the things that referred to Himself *in all the scriptures*. The picture we get is of the Old Testament as pointing to Jesus in all its parts. Luke gives no indication of which passages the Lord chose, but he makes it clear that the whole Old Testament was involved. We should perhaps understand this not as the selection of a number of proof-texts, but rather as showing that throughout the Old Testament a consistent divine purpose is worked out, a purpose that in the end meant and must mean the cross.³⁹

The most important distinction of Christ’s opening the Scriptures to his disciples is that it formed the basis for them to do what Christ said it must do, “that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:47-48). Today, Christians have the same duty to proclaim Christ from all of the Scriptures to all of the nations. The rest of the New Testament expounds regularly on Old Testament events to show Christ as the perfect fulfillment of types and shadows, and the modern-day preacher should never think that he has run out of texts to proclaim Christ.

The disciples did have their eyes and minds opened, and they went on to

³⁸My own grandfather was converted to Christ by the Sadducees’ question about the resurrection in Matt 22:23-33. He was a practical atheist because he could not conceive of how he would be married to two women in heaven whom he loved deeply (the first having died during childbirth) and because he did not understand the bride as Christ’s church and Christ as the resurrected bridegroom until this passage was opened to him. My own testimony relies heavily on the book of Esther, as it showed me that the Bible is a book of real history and not a book of fairy tales or intangible spiritual ideas.

³⁹Morris, *The Gospel according to St. Luke*, 339 (emphasis original).

preach the gospel—a mission that is still being undertaken by the church today. As the Word is preached, there are many who believe but also many who oppose Christ proclaimed. One example is Philip’s preaching in Samaria and being opposed by a powerful magician.

The Crowds Were Attentive to Philip (Acts 8)

Soon after Christ ascended and sent the Holy Spirit, a great persecution arose against the church and led to the early church’s taking the gospel outside of Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit did many great works in those days, but precious few of the testimonies remain. One such testimony exalts God’s Word for the resultant joy it brings into the lives of those who listen to it. It begins when “Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ” (Acts 8:5). In Samaria at that time, another man was doing great works, a magician named Simon, who called himself “Great” (vv. 9-10). As was common in those days, the Holy Spirit was doing great signs through Philip (v. 6). Although both Philip and Simon the Magician did great works, and the people were attentive to both, it was Philip’s preaching of the Word that brought joy to those who heard it. The preacher must focus on the truth of the Word for his hearers to have joy. The defining point of this event is that in the midst of ungodly signs and wonders, the truth of the Word shone through and transformed the people.

Signs and Wonders

Scripture is silent on the details of Simon the Magician’s signs and wonders. However, Scripture is not silent on Satan’s being able to perform signs and wonders through people: “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false” (2 Thess 2:9-12). Therefore, it is no surprise that Simon was able to perform miracles that for years had amazed the people

of Samaria (Acts 8:11). Irenaeus of Lyon, writing a century later, postulates that Simon's signs and wonders were "exorcisms and incantations. Love-potions . . . and charms . . . [employing] familiars and dream-senders."⁴⁰ Regardless of whether Irenaeus's testimony is true, based on the testimony of Scripture, it is undisputable that Simon the Magician was a contender for the attention of the people in Samaria.

Scripture does give an overview of Philip's signs and wonders: "Unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed" (Acts 8:7). Simon saw these signs and great miracles and was amazed (v. 13), though he certainly did not relent from practicing his own magic or from seeking to gain new tricks. Earlier in Scripture, Moses had faced similar opposition from the magicians of Pharaoh who copied several of his miracles and thus vied for the attention of Pharaoh (Exod 7:8-13, 19-22; 8:5-6). However, the magicians eventually conceded that the works of Moses were more powerful than their own and were the true power of God (8:17-19).

In modern times, Christians are bombarded by the false signs and wonders of the Word of Faith movement, bedazzled by the computer-generated imagery of the motion-picture industry, and bewitched by the claims of conversion from people who walk not according to the Scriptures but quote the Bible like they have a faith in Christ. John MacArthur points out that Simon claimed to be someone great and that the people called him the power of God: "That title shows that Simon claimed deity for himself."⁴¹ Seeing the works of Philip, Simon seemingly believed in Christ. But despite his outward belief, baptism, and association with Philip, Simon proved to have no inward knowledge of Christ or his Spirit. Despite the obvious false nature of his conversion (Acts 8:21, 23),

⁴⁰Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Christian Literature, 1885), 1.23.4 (*ANF*, 1:348), <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.ii.xxiv.html>.

⁴¹John MacArthur, *Acts 1-12*, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 240.

his audience did not stop paying attention to him, and Irenaeus describes him as the father of heresies “from whom all sorts of heresies derive their origin.”⁴² Many heresies that were first seen in Simon continue even to today, deceiving multitudes and diverting their attention from the Word of Life.

The Word Is Greater Than the World

As the gospel was spreading throughout the world, so was the heresy of Simon. Irenaeus tells that after Simon was rebuked by Peter, he applied himself not to repentance but to his dark arts, even to the point that “he is said to have been honoured with a statue [by Claudius Caesar], on account of his magical power.”⁴³ An obvious war between sorcery and the gospel had begun in Samaria that rages to this day, influenced all the more by the blindness of the people to discern true from false works. MacArthur points out that Simon was zealous in his war not because he knowingly forsook the gospel but because “like many charlatan magicians of his day, Simon probably believed in his powers. That he may not have been a conscious fraud rendered him even more dangerous and believable.”⁴⁴ Many religious leaders have felt that they were preaching truth, but they were actually leading many astray. As Solomon warns, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Prov 14:12; 16:25). It is the preacher’s duty to ensure that he is preaching truth, but equally important is a discerning congregation—trained to hear the Word of God—who will reject false messages. Because Philip faithfully preached the truth, and the people of Samaria listened to him, the gospel transformed lives in Samaria.

Despite the works of Simon having been many years in Samaria, the gospel was that to which Philip’s works pointed; thus, “there was much joy in that city” (Acts

⁴²Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.23.2 (ANF, 1:348).

⁴³Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.23.1 (ANF, 1:348).

⁴⁴MacArthur, *Acts 1-12*, 241.

8:8). The Word brought a lasting joy to the people. Without the Word, all of the people who were healed from lameness, demon possession, blindness, and even death would taste death in the future and face the judgment of God. But true joy comes by reconciliation with the true Great God who has made peace through the blood of the cross. Simon and Philip had performed great spiritual miracles, but only the preaching of Christ through Philip brought joy. This joy was not based on temporary signs that validated God's power in the world but on the Word to which those miracles pointed. As Charles Spurgeon remarks, "Now, there is no text in all the Bible which tells you to make the work of the Holy Spirit the foundation of our confidence."⁴⁵ The Word that Philip preached brought joy to the Samaritans, not the works he did, though they were numerous.

Today, the congregation and the preacher must focus on the Word of God rightly preached. Adding attractions to the preaching may bring more people to hear it, but the attractions will never bring lasting joy. Only the Word can produce an abiding joy by introducing people to Jesus and quickening their souls. Before his crucifixion, Jesus promised, "You have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:22). The Word is the foundation of faith in Christ and must be the source and anchor of people's hope. If they are only amazed by signs, then when signs fade or fail, so will their faith. Jared Wilson warns, "What you win them with is what you win them to."⁴⁶ There are many who seek to do signs and wonders and fail to preach Christ and implore people to be saved. However, one must not make that mistake, for it does no lasting good to the community or

⁴⁵Charles H. Spurgeon, "Sermon 898: A Word with Those Who Wait for Signs and Wonders," (sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, October 31, 1869), Answers in Genesis, October 31, 2011, <https://answersingenesis.org/education/spurgeon-sermons/898-a-word-with-those-who-wait-for-signs-and-wonders/>.

⁴⁶Jared C. Wilson, "10 Reasons Easter Giveaways Are Unwise," Gospel Coalition (blog), March 1, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/jared-c-wilson/10-reasons-easter-giveaways-are-unwise/>.

individuals. Of such preachers, Adrian Rogers laments, “We ought to be kind and make our communities better; but if we do not preach the Gospel, all we do is make the world a better place to go to Hell from.”⁴⁷ Preachers must never cease to preach Christ and him crucified—even if they are blessed to have the church’s resources and the working of the Holy Spirit to see attendant signs with their preaching—in order to bring true blessing and joy to their hearers.⁴⁸

The Word Brings Joy

Simon’s magic was great, but it never sparked joy. Any sign or work that does not bear spiritual fruit is temporary and fleeting. MacArthur notes, “Simon’s magical arts were no match for Philip’s Spirit-given power. Through Philip’s ministry, a revival broke out in the city.”⁴⁹ Followers of Christ must rest on Christ’s promise that “I chose you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (John 15:16). Abiding fruit—fruit that lasts in persecution, in famine, in nakedness, and every hardship—is the only thing with which one can be satisfied, not a manufactured happiness that depends on health, prosperity, or well-being. The way to abiding joy is not through signs and wonders, pharmaceuticals, or fleeting pleasures but through the Word preached, received, and obeyed.⁵⁰ John Piper presses his hearers in the same direction: “I believe that if we as a church formed the habit of conscientiously preparing our hearts for hearing God’s Word, the Lord might speak with such power that amazing changes would come into our

⁴⁷Adrian Rogers, “The Gospel of Grace” (sermon outline), Love Worth Finding, April 4, 2018, <https://www.lwf.org/sermon-outlines/the-gospel-of-grace-1>.

⁴⁸The working of the Holy Spirit is obviously superior to what church finances can garner, but the church must not discount the power of community service, such as food pantries, clothing closets, home repairs, child care, free meals, and community fairs, to bring people to hear the gospel.

⁴⁹MacArthur, *Acts 1-12*, 243.

⁵⁰In his brief biography of C. I. Scofield, Warren Wiersbe reveals that this connection, found in Acts 8:5 and 8:8, was what birthed Scofield’s study Bible. Warren Wiersbe, *50 People Every Christian Should Know: Learning from Spiritual Giants of the Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 251.

lives for God's glory and for our joy."⁵¹

An ever-present temptation exists to look for joy outside of the Word. Such erroneous zeal is dangerous because there is no lack of places to look, but none of these will satisfy the soul or glorify God, for he grants joy through his Word. Spurgeon, while preaching about the dangers of looking to signs and wonders, points his hearers to the received gospel, quoting a portion of a hymn by Albert Midlane:

Soon that voice will cease its calling,
Now it speaks, and speaks to thee;
Sinner, heed the gracious message,
To the blood for refuge flee;
Take salvation,
Take it now, and happy be.⁵²

Today, one must strive to hear and respond to the Word for the salvation of one's soul and so that the Lamb who was slain would receive the reward of his suffering. In Christ alone, there is true and lasting joy. The preacher must preach a message worth hearing (i.e., one that rightly expositions the Word), and the congregation must listen to, respond to, and obey the Word so that they may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they may have life in his name (John 20:31). Lawson encourages the church to focus on the right preaching of the Word of God: "Every great movement of God in church history has been ushered in by a renewed commitment to solid preaching of the Word. If we are to see a spiritual awakening in our day, the church must recover the primacy of preaching."⁵³

Conclusion

These four passages clearly show that the need for listening to the Word is as

⁵¹John Piper, *Take Care How You Listen* (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2012), 36.

⁵²Spurgeon, "Sermon 898."

⁵³Steven Lawson, "A Passion for Preaching: An Interview with Steven J. Lawson," *Tabletalk Magazine*, June 1, 2014, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/passion-preaching/>.

imperative as the need for preaching the Word. While this chapter has only focused on four passages, the church must recognize that the Scriptures are replete with similar commands and narratives describing the need to listen and respond to the message. These four passages provide a good introduction to how the church hears and listens: (1) Ezra shows that the congregation must be attentive to the preaching of God's Word through God's messenger (Neh 8); (2) Lydia demonstrates that the congregation must be reliant on God to open their hearts (Acts 16); (3) the disciples show that the believer must see Jesus, his crucifixion, and his resurrection as the main theme of Scripture (Luke 24); and (4) Philip illustrates that the congregation must understand the primacy of the Word in order to experience lasting change and joy (Acts 8). When the church is attentive to the hearing of the Word, they may fully expect to know Jesus better, serve him more faithfully, and be effective in every good thing they have received in him.

Many throughout church history have recognized this need. Therefore, chapter 3 examines their testimonies, warnings, and encouragements to be attentive to the preaching of God's Word.

CHAPTER 3
HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS AND PRACTICAL
APPLICATIONS FOR THE CONGREGATION TO
BE ATTENTIVE TO EXPOSITORY
PREACHING

Many of the great preachers of history have recognized that congregations need to be trained to be attentive to hear the Word and that a preacher cannot merely preach a faithful sermon but, instead, must move his people to action by the Word of God understood and applied. This chapter examines the historical foundations and applications from a number of sources. It begins by examining the perceived lack of resources that address listening and the necessity for teaching the church to listen. Then, the responsibilities of the preacher and listener will be examined. This section follows the divisions suggestions by Joel Beeke of *before*, *during*, and *after* the sermon;¹ however, these divisions are expanded on beyond the scope of his book. This chapter expands on both the role of the congregation (i.e., to listen) and the role of the preacher (i.e., to teach to listen), as these responsibilities are often overlooked.

Lack of Focus

In his lectures, Charles Spurgeon devotes an entire session to the preacher capturing and keeping the attention of his audience. He introduces the subject like this: “Our subject is one which I find scarcely ever noticed in any books upon Homiletics—a very curious fact, for it is a most important matter, and worthy of more than one

¹Joel Beeke, *The Family at Church: Listening to Sermons and Attending Prayer Meetings* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 8.

chapter.”² Despite an excellent lecture (and a spackling of sermons on listening), Spurgeon did not improve much on the perceived lack of information on expository listening, as evidenced by those who have commented on the disparity since Spurgeon’s ministry.

Fifty years after Spurgeon, T. H. L. Parker agreed that there was a dearth of material on expository listening. In his study of John Calvin’s preaching, he notes, “Homiletic textbooks rarely have much to say on the attitude and duty of the congregation in regard to preaching. Calvin, however, speaks as much about the place of the congregation as the work of the preaching.”³ Parker notes many places, as discussed later in this chapter, where Calvin addresses the listening duty of the congregation; however, many of his lessons have been overlooked and forgotten by modern expositors.

Ken Ramey, sixty years after Parker made his observation, identified the same problem and wrote *Expository Listening* in order to rectify the lack of resources. Upon reading Ramey’s book, John MacArthur said, “I have a couple shelves full of books about expository preaching, all aimed, of course, at pastors. This is the first book I’ve ever read that offers insight and instruction for laypeople regarding how to listen to expository preaching.”⁴

Joel Beeke also perceives a lack of resources on expository listening, as evidenced by his endorsement of Ramey’s book: “Many books have been written on how to preach well, but surprisingly, few have been published on how to listen well.”⁵ Further, in his book *The Family at Church*, he says the following concerning expository listening:

²Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to His Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1945), 103.

³T. H. L. Parker, *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2001), 61.

⁴John MacArthur, endorsement for *Expository Listening: A Practical Handbook for Hearing and Doing God’s Word*, by Ken Ramey (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Biblical Resources, 2010).

⁵Beeke, endorsement for *Expository Listening*.

“This book is my humble attempt to expand on this overlooked biblical theme of the listener’s responsibility in preaching.”⁶

Jay Adams is another author/preacher who addresses the lack of expository listening. At the beginning of *Be Careful How You Listen*, he laments, “Nowhere today can you find information—books, courses, or otherwise—about how to listen to a sermon so as to get the most out of it. Indeed, no one seems to be concerned about training Christians in the fine, but difficult, art of listening.”⁷ Despite his monumental effort to address and remedy the problem, he notes that there is still a woeful lack of resources written or read on the topic of audience attention. In his endorsement of Ramey’s book, Adams emphasizes the lack of resources on expository listening and stresses that no single volume will be the panacea for the lack of focus on it: “*Expository Listening* meets a neglected need in the life of the church. There cannot be enough emphasis placed upon the need for effective listening in the pew.”⁸

Certainly, this need persists for the modern church despite the fact that Calvin, Spurgeon, Parker, Adams, Beeke, Ramey, and others have spoken and written on the topic profusely. The importance of expository listening has not waned, and in an era where competitors for attention are growing technologically by leaps and bounds, preachers must strive to gain and keep their congregation’s attention as well as teach them how to listen.

Necessity of Focus

The old adage quips, “If a tree falls in the forest and no-one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” The eternal implications are minor in answering such a

⁶Beeke, *The Family at Church*, xiv.

⁷Jay Adams, *Be Careful How You Listen: How to Get the Most Out of a Sermon* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2007), 12. This book was originally published as *A Consumer’s Guide to Preaching: How to Get the Most Out of a Sermon* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991)

⁸Jay Adams, endorsement for *Expository Listening*.

question, but much more importantly, one can ask, “If God’s Word is preached among the people and no one has ears to hear it, will anyone be saved?” Or as Paul asks, “How then will they call on him in who they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Rom 10:14). Many great sermons have fallen on deaf ears, and many itching ears have rejected sound teaching to accumulate for themselves teachers who will preach worldly messages (see 2 Tim 4:3), but because there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved, it is the preacher’s duty to awaken his congregation and pray that God would do a work in them.

Stephen Betts uses Mark 1:21-28 to emphasize that a man can sit in church for many years under uninspired and unbiblical preaching and still not be saved.⁹ It is a tragedy for a person to sit in church and not hear the Word of God. It is also a tragedy for a preacher to preach a biblical message without making every human effort for it to be heard by and impact his hearers. Adrian Rogers warns Christians sitting in the congregation, “The Devil would just as soon send you to Hell from the pew—as from the gutter!”¹⁰ Thomas Watson agrees: “Dreadful is their case who go loaded with sermons to Hell.”¹¹ Andrew van der Bijl’s sister, Matia, annoyed him prior to his conversion by saying, “Some people have the whole Bible in their heads and not one word of it in their hearts.”¹² Anyone who has spent any time in evangelism and has asked people why they believe they are going to heaven has heard more than once that many people believe they are Christians simply because they go to church. Many have attended churches where

⁹Stephen Betts, “The Authority of Jesus” (sermon preached at First Baptist Church New Lebanon, Ohio, March 10, 2019).

¹⁰Adrian Rogers, *What Every Christian Ought to Know* (Nashville: B&H, 2005), 110.

¹¹Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity* (Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1972), 380, quoted in Beeke, *The Family at Church*, 21.

¹²Andrew van der Bijl, *God’s Smuggler* (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1967), 16.

they have not heard of Christ, either as their own fault, or the fault of the preacher.

At no time should a preacher or congregation neglect hearing the Word of God. It is not enough for a preacher to simply speak truth or for people to sit in a place where there is the preaching of God's Word. The preacher must preach with authority; pray before, during, and after the sermon event; exhort his congregation, and hold them accountable. Hearers must prepare their heart, listen attentively, and put into action what God calls them to do. John Piper warns that it is a sin to fail to listen, posing dangerous consequences: "Don't be cavalier in the hearing of God's Word week after week. If it is not softening and saving and healing and bearing fruit, it is probably hardening and blinding and dulling."¹³ Further, George Whitefield emphasizes the sin of hearing the Word without any effort to understand with this exhortation: "Come to hear them, not out of curiosity, but from a sincere desire to know and do your duty. To enter His house merely to have our ears entertained, and not our hearts reformed, must certainly be highly displeasing to the Most High God, as well as unprofitable to ourselves."¹⁴

Spurgeon likewise warns his audience to be listeners rather than onlookers:

If, indeed, you do look at anything except Christ, it may be the Holy Spirit will never strive with you again, your conscience will become hardened, and you being given up to your idols, will perish, utterly perish, under the sound of the gospel, perish with the light of the gospel shining in your eyes, perish from the serpent bite while the brazen serpent is lifted high, perish from thirst when the water of life runs rippling at your feet, because you are not content to stoop down and take it as God presents it to you.¹⁵

John Calvin also alerts congregants to the vanity of listening to a sermon without a prepared heart, saying that the truths presented will "only strike the ears and present

¹³John Piper, *Take Care How You Listen* (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2012), 2.

¹⁴George Whitefield, "Directions How to Hear Sermons" (sermon), quoted in Ramey, *Expository Listening*, 50.

¹⁵Charles H. Spurgeon, "Sermon 2512: Hearing with Heed" (sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, April 11, 1897), Answers in Genesis, July 2, 2018, <https://answersingenesis.org/education/spurgeon-sermons/2512-hearing-with-heed/>.

themselves to the eyes, without producing the least effect upon the mind.”¹⁶ How tragic it would be for someone to preach sermon after sermon to congregants who do not listen or receive the truths that are presented.

Teaching a congregation to listen and respond to expository preaching—though vital to their salvation and spiritual growth—is not a feat that can be accomplished in one sermon, one Bible study, or one doctoral program; it requires trained hearts and ears that are made effective through practice (see Phlm 6). Dan Dumas points out that the goal of preaching is not merely to have a good sermon, or even to have an attentive audience, but rather to train up the congregation to go out and preach to others so that their hearers may likewise hear and respond to God’s Word. Dumas states, “The goal is never to have one guy in the church who knows how to read his Bible and how to use it to have an impact [on] people’s lives. Local churches should brim with people equipped to use their Bibles in their own lives and that of those around them.”¹⁷ The goal is not to have a preacher who preaches powerful sermons or a congregation who merely listens to sermons but to transform congregants into sanctified saints of Christ who obey him in all of their lives.

Sidney Greidanus points both hearer and preacher to the glory of Christ as the goal of preaching by quoting Martin Luther:

In his last sermon, preached February 14, 1546, Luther reiterates one more time: “The right sort of preacher should faithfully and diligently preach nothing but the Word of God and seek His glory and honor alone. The hearer likewise should say, ‘I do not believe in my pastor, but he tells me of another Lord whose name is Christ; Him he declares unto me, and I will listen to his words so far as he leads me to this true master and preceptor, God’s own Son.’”¹⁸

¹⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 4.14.8, quoted in Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 49.

¹⁷Dan Dumas, “Introduction: Expository Ministry: A Comprehensive Vision,” in *A Guide to Expository Ministry: Guide Book No. 3*, ed. Dan Dumas (Louisville, KY: SBTS Press c/o Communications, 2012), 11.

¹⁸Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 123, quoting Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol.

Listeners obey the Word of God when they obey the Word of God expounded. Christ speaks to his multitude of followers through his Bible, though he is one shepherd, and their call is to hear his voice and follow him. In like fashion, Christ regularly puts many under the authority of one pastor on earth—in the form of local churches.

The importance of listening is illustrated in the number of ministers God calls in relation to the number of congregants. The shepherd must give a clear Word from God, but many ears must receive it. God give pastors and preachers to edify the flock (Eph 4:11-12). In nature, a shepherd may regularly care for dozens of sheep; therefore, it is no surprise to see the vast number of commands in the Bible referencing the need for the spiritual flock to listen to the preacher. Ramey summarizes this point well: “The number of listeners far exceeds the number of preachers and even more so when you realize that the Bible says more about the listener’s responsibility to hear and obey the Word of God than it does about the preacher’s responsibility to explain and apply the Word of God.”¹⁹ If the preacher and congregation are negligent in their duties, they will fail to exalt Christ, who calls and commissions.

The difference between listening to a sermon in order to hear and respond and listening to a sermon merely as a rite or entertainment cannot be overstated. Benjamin Franklin was an admitted lover of entertaining sermons and once fell in with a heterodox preacher named Samuel Hemphill. It was soon revealed that Hemphill was plagiarizing all of his sermons. Rather than rebuke him or seek a truthful preacher, Franklin wrote, “I stuck by him, however, as I rather approved his giving us good sermons composed by others, than bad ones of his own manufacture.”²⁰ Franklin admitted that the man was already under close scrutiny by local church leaders because of his erroneous doctrine; it

51, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 392.

¹⁹Ramey, *Expository Listening*, 3.

²⁰Benjamin Franklin, *Wealth and Wisdom: The Way to Wealth and the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: G&D Media, 2019), 152-53.

was not until later that his plagiarism was revealed. Yet, Franklin attended the preaching to be a spectator of the preacher rather than a hearer of the Word of God.

Calvin once counted hearers and spectators as different members of the audience: “I preached on the Lord’s Day, which, as it was commended among the people by the acceptance of all the brethren, had many who were either hearers or at least spectators.”²¹ Physically, people can sit in church and audibly hear a sermon, but without God working, they will experience no internal spiritual change.

The necessity to teach the church to listen is instrumental in ensuring that the congregation is being transformed by the power of God’s Word and that it is spurring them towards further holiness, softening their hearts, and equipping them to obey the commands of Christ so that they may take the Word of Eternal Life to those who otherwise would not hear of Christ’s saving work. The preacher and the listeners have roles to play in preparing the congregation’s ears, hearts, and minds to receive the Word of God, and these can be honed long before the sermon starts.

Before the Sermon

The Holy Spirit is more than capable of opening the ears of anyone at any time and of giving a biblical message to a preacher in an instant, but it is unwise to presume on the Spirit to miraculously make up for laziness or lack of diligent exertion to preach and/or hear the sermon. Both the preacher and the hearers have roles to play in the preparation for the congregation to hear the Word of God. If there is no Word of God preached, then hearers will have prepared in vain, so the preacher’s responsibilities are examined first.

²¹Aimé Herminjard, *Correspondance des Reformateurs dans les pays de langue francaise*, vol. 5 (Geneva: n.p., 1543), 111-12, quoted in Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 30.

As the Preacher

The pastor has many duties, but none so great as that of preaching. Indeed, if the apostles placed such an emphasis on preaching as to appoint deacons (Acts 6:2-4), then the modern preacher must focus his attention on preparing both his sermon and the ears of his hearers. He must protect these priorities by delegating responsibilities that would distract him. He must know the Word of God, know his people, pray for his people, receive the Word himself, properly exegete the passage, and remove physical distractions so that he can aptly present the Word of God to his congregation.

Simply stated, the most important thing a preacher can do before the sermon is *prepare* to preach the Word of God. As referenced earlier, there are many books dedicated to how to preach faithfully, so this chapter does not address this aspect of sermon preparation. However, it must be noted that the preacher will have a much more attentive audience if they expect that he has something to say to them personally in an engaging, truthful, and beneficial way. Paul House encourages preachers to “approach any biblical text with the assurance that it is something their congregations need.”²² David Jackman likewise warns against surface-level preaching that will bore congregants and lose their attention: “So much preaching is bland and predictable because there has been no move toward studying the text beyond its general themes and familiar ideas to the uniqueness of this particular Word of the Lord.”²³ The preacher must prepare to preach the biblical text faithfully and with the authority of God for the audience to learn to listen and be expectant that they will hear not from a man but from God.

Next, the preacher must address the spiritual warfare that will occur in his church. He does so in two ways: he must know his people, and he must beseech God for

²²Paul House, “Written for Our Example: Preaching Old Testament Narratives,” in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 25.

²³David Jackman, “The Hermeneutical Distinctives of Expository Preaching,” in Ryken and Wilson, *Preach the Word*, 15.

power and grace in serving the church as his ambassador. The pastor should know his audience and understand whether they are in need of milk or meat, correction or encouragement, or comfort or tribulation. John Broadus suggests that the best way to determine these needs is through pastoral visitation, counseling, and social gatherings.²⁴ Then, he must pray that his congregation would receive the Word of God with gladness, treasure it up in their hearts, and be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

The preacher must also recognize that there is a spiritual war for his attention even before he ascends to the pulpit. Parker exhorts the preacher thus: “The first obedience must come from himself, for he has no right to command the people anything which he is, at the least, not trying to obey himself.”²⁵ Further, Jackman points out that the Word must be received by the preacher just as well as it must be received by the congregation.²⁶ The preacher may be blinded concerning the depth and/or main point of the text, so he needs to train himself to avoid presuppositions that move the sermon in a direction of which the original author(s) would not approve. Soft sermons, moralized applications, and incorrect exegesis may be as effective at preventing hearers from listening to God’s Word—despite open ears—as them not listening at all. The preacher should give himself enough time to allow for distractions and further study, and he must understand that the sermon he is preparing to preach may be the difference between life and death, blessing and cursing, for his congregation.

The preacher should select a text from the Bible and rightly interpret it so that he might preach it in the power and authority of God, rather than selecting a topic or opinion and supporting it from the Bible.²⁷ If the preacher hopes to train his congregation

²⁴John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 34.

²⁵Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 59.

²⁶Jackman, “Hermeneutical Distinctives of Expository Preaching,” 13.

²⁷I am not against topical preaching, but the text—rather than the topic—must drive the

to listen to the Word of God, then he must be careful not to include frivolous, opinionated, or worldly speech that can be ignored. Christ warned that a man will give an account for every careless word he speaks (Matt 12:36), and James concurs, saying that not many people should become teachers for they will be judged with greater strictness (Jas 3:1). Calvin magnifies this requirement: “Those who teach must be able to protest in very truth that Jesus Christ speaks by their mouth.”²⁸ In preaching the Word of God, the preacher must also understand that though the battle is spiritual—that is, the prince of the power of the air (see Eph 2:2) may use physical means to steal away attention.

The preacher must be cognizant to both the spiritual and the physical barriers to hearing a sermon. A simple physical distraction may be the means by which Satan snatches the Word from congregants’ minds or blocks the Word from being heard at all. Spurgeon references a church that is too hot, cold, or stagnant as being a hindrance to hearing the Word and gives the reasonable recommendation, “Pray that the windows of heaven may be opened, but begin by opening the windows of your meetinghouse.”²⁹ Ray Comfort, in speaking of preaching on the streets, identifies these distractions by stating, “Select a place that . . . is away from the noise of the street, a fountain, or machinery.”³⁰ Some distractions can be removed, but at what cost? The children can be removed to a separate classroom, but that defeats Ezra’s point in Nehemiah 8:2 about all who can understand being attentive to the sermon (cf. Matt 19:14). Andrew van der Bijl and Al Janssen, in speaking to a shrinking congregation, give these encouraging words: “In my experience there is nothing more exciting than young people studying the Bible

sermon.

²⁸John Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, in *Corpus Reformatorum* (Halle, Germany: C. A. Schwetschke et filium, 1895), 53:7, quoted in Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 49.

²⁹Spurgeon, *Lectures to His Students*, 105.

³⁰Ray Comfort, “Tips for Open-Air Evangelism: Part 1,” Living Waters (blog), January 19, 2018. <https://www.livingwaters.com/tips-for-open-air-evangelism-part-1>.

together.”³¹

So, instead of removing all distractions, especially such as would harm the unity of the congregation, Spurgeon recommends identifying and addressing distractions (such as a slamming door or a temperature issue that cannot be easily remedied) in order to redirect attention back to the Word.³² Distractions must be mitigated if possible.³³ It is not the primary intention of this section to identify distractions that may arise, but each preacher must be cognizant to distractions that may include—but are not limited to—flickering lights, microphone feedback, slamming doors, areas of stale air, congregants who constantly fail to silence their mobile devices, members who continually excuse themselves mid-service, and echoes in the sanctuary space. Some distractions may be easily remedied, while others may require large time and financial sacrifices within the congregation, but the value of an audience’s attention cannot be overstated—both in this life and the life to come.

As he prepares to preach, the preacher must believe and be passionate about the truths he is sharing, and he must desire for his audience to hear the Word. A preacher who merely prepares to transmit information will bore his audience, tempt them to succumb to distraction, and model to them that the Word of God is not worthy of rapt attention. A simple physical distraction that could have been easily mended may be the attention thief that leaves sinners in the darkness and bondage of their sin. The congregation must likewise be prepared to overcome distractions that the preacher cannot mitigate or foresee or whose responsibility did not rest on him.

³¹Andrew van der Bijl and Al Janssen, *Secret Believers: What Happens When Muslims Believe in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Open Doors International, 2007), 79.

³²Spurgeon, *Lectures to His Students*, 107.

³³I once officiated a wedding on an unseasonably warm spring day, and the chapel’s air conditioning was still off for the season and could not be turned on. Some thoughtful person had provided a small electric fan to move the air, but it rattled and produced a great deal of white noise. The fan would have been a terrible distraction, so prior to the start of the wedding, some of us in attendance were able to prop open two sets of doors, which allowed for enough airflow to make the short ceremony bearable and quiet.

As the Hearers

Hearers have a great responsibility, both spiritually and physically, to prepare for the sermon. With the Holy Spirit working miraculously, people may occasionally be able to arrive at church disheveled and unprepared and still benefit from the sermon; but, one should not presume upon God's miracles. Rather, hearers can do a few practical things to prepare their hearts—like soil prepared to receive seed (see Jer 4:3)—to hear God's Word. Spurgeon offers the following admonition to hearers:

We are told men ought not to preach without preparation. Granted. But we add, men ought not to hear without preparation. Which, do you think needs the most preparation, the sower or the ground? I would have the sower come with clean hands, but I would have the ground well-plowed and harrowed, well-turned over, and the clods broken before the seed comes in. It seems to me that there is more preparation needed by the ground than by the sower, more by the hearer than by the preacher.³⁴

If a sower casts seeds on unprepared soil, he is unlikely to reap a great harvest, so it is imperative that hearers are prepared to hear God's Word when it is preached. They may prepare in the following ways: hunger for righteousness, prayer, Bible reading, confession of sin, regular church attendance, gratefulness and expectancy, tithing, fellowshiping with and ministering to and with the church body, and setting the sermon apart as a special time to hear from God.

Spiritually, Ramey identifies that people should be reading and meditating on God's Word every day, praying throughout the week, confessing sin, and then coming to church with expectancy.³⁵ All of these things are useful, but the most important part of the spiritual preparation of hearers is that they have a hunger for God's Word; naturally, preparation to listen will be non-existent without a desire to hear the Word of God.³⁶

³⁴Spurgeon, "Sermon 0420: Abram and the Ravenous Birds" (sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, November 24, 1861), quoted in, Ramey, *Expository Listening*, 34.

³⁵Ramey, *Expository Listening*, 36-40.

³⁶At the time of writing this, I had a very specific congregant in mind who came to the preaching only to appease his believing wife; he regularly napped during the sermon, was reticent to discuss afterwards, and showed no spiritual fruit.

Ramey's suggestions are likely to help in developing this hunger, but I would posit that the most important way that people can prepare to hear God's Word is to recognize the glory of the Saviour and their personal need of salvation.

The Word constantly speaks on this need and remedy, so one of the best ways that hearers may prepare to hear the Word of God preached is to know the Word of their Saviour. If the pastor makes his text available before he preaches, then it is beneficial for hearers to read through it and consider it throughout the days leading up to the sermon. Sometimes, this reading may be of a passage that hearers have never heard before, or it may be one that they have heard many times before and therefore feel that they understand. Regardless of hearers' perception of the text, Daniel Doriani recommends humbly approaching every passage in order to be more attentive to Christ in the Scriptures: "I probably do not believe this passage as purely, as radically, as I should. I probably do not understand this passage as fully as I should. Therefore, I probably need this text to correct my understanding and deepen my faith."³⁷

Next, hearers should pray regularly, specifically, for themselves, their pastor, and their church. Parker expands on the importance of prayer, saying, "Before, then, they attend church, and when they come there, they must pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal to them Jesus Christ in the Gospel, and, in an attitude of humble trust and obedience, await what God will say to them."³⁸ Listeners should also know their fellow church members and their needs and struggles, then they should devote themselves to praying that God would speak to those members as well. Praying for these things will invest listeners spiritually in the preaching of God's Word, help to prepare their hearts to hear, and give them a love for the Word, the pastor, and the church, which are all gifts given through the

³⁷Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 67.

³⁸Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 64.

gospel.

Congregants should be grateful for the opportunity to hear and read God’s Word, which is not a grace that is available to all. Matthew Henry recognizes as much: “To have the Holy Scriptures with us, and helps to understand them, is a very great mercy, which we have abundant reason to rejoice in. Bibles and ministers are the joy of God’s Israel.”³⁹ God may use a congregation’s prayers for their pastor so that they have an investment in the sermon (i.e., a spiritual platform lifting up their preacher), not as something they are holding cheaply or are receiving without cost or effort. Likewise, in Ezra’s day, a physical platform was erected for the preaching of the Word. Thus, hearers ought to recognize that in a very real sense, their tithes and offerings are providing an arena for the preaching of God’s Word—in investing in the upkeep of the church building and in supporting their pastor. Hearers ought to prepare themselves physically as well.

“The puritans said we should dress our bodies for worship and our souls with prayer,”⁴⁰ says Beeke, who emphasizes the physical portion of preparation. Besides dressing for church, he also advises getting enough sleep on Saturday night, not rushing on Sunday morning, and removing distractions as much as possible from the worship service.⁴¹ Ramey speaks on these as well but also adds that a person should be constant in church attendance and reduce media intake.⁴² The number of distractions that may beset church members are far more numerous than I can address, but listeners should be cognizant that physical distractions can be as effective in closing their ears as spiritual ones. People may be helped by making an effort to dress up for church rather than wearing common clothing, not for the sake of appearance as some have said (i.e., a

³⁹Matthew Henry, *Acts to Revelation*, vol. 6 of *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 847.

⁴⁰Beeke, *The Family at Church*, 5.

⁴¹Beeke, *The Family at Church*, 6-7, 15.

⁴²Ramey, *Expository Listening*, 41-43.

white-washed tomb) but for the sake of readying their minds to the fact that what they are doing is not their everyday routine. This practice could easily become legalistic and should not be required since Scripture gives no such mandate. Then, they should be in church regularly so that their minds are prepared to hear a Word from God when they walk into the church. They should train their minds to focus by reading books, considering deep thoughts, and avoiding activities that reduce their attention span. They should be careful to remove distractions from their personal lives and allay distractions within the church. A church should have a dedicated maintenance person (or persons) or a dedicated building facility trustee (or trustees), but every member should be attentive to the needs of the church and help the pastor and other church leaders be cognizant of distractions and even address such issues throughout the week, such as replacing lightbulbs, painting nurseries, cleaning restrooms, and fixing sound-systems, so that distractions are removed from other members. These practices—like giving tithes and offerings and praying for the pastor—provide hearers with opportunities to invest in the church and anticipate hearing from God during the service.

Once the preacher and hearers have prepared for the sermon event, then it is time to focus on what God has to say to his church through his preacher and the preached Word.

During the Sermon

The preaching of the Word of God is the means by which God builds and strengthens his kingdom. Therefore, during the sermon it is imperative that all who endeavor to listen and preach do so to the best of their ability and recognize that it is God who works through them to publish his peace to the world. Preacher and listener alike must know that there is eternal life in Jesus Christ alone; as Peter once declared, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Both the preacher and the hearers have roles to play.

As the Preacher

The preacher must preach expositionally, from the Bible, faithful to its message, pointing to the cross, in a way that the audience will understand, calling for a response from them, all the while trusting in the Holy Spirit to work through the message and messenger. Scripture must be the central point of the sermon and press for action in the hearers. The preacher must know and love the passage he is preaching. This passion will capture and keep the audience's attention and convince them that they are hearing from God. Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays speak of the importance of the preacher applying himself to not only what he will preach but also how he will preach: "What a tragedy to spend countless hours developing a Bible-based sermon only to lose the attention of the congregation in the first few minutes of your delivery."⁴³ In order to preach the Word with authority, the preacher must trust in God's Word and his Spirit with the expectation that the sermon has an eternal value to those who listen to it. When the preacher is faithful to the text, he will teach the congregation that there is nothing to be missed or ignored in the sermon, and he will hone their listening skills to hear from God. Every point and verse will speak, and they will not have opportunity to ignore it as the whim of the preacher; instead, they will receive it as that which it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in believers (1 Thess 2:13).

The preacher's faithfulness, both in preaching and hearing, is helped by his being accurate not just to the message but also to the tone of the text. Adam Dooley and Jerry Vines explain, "Faithful exposition requires discerning and declaring the spirit of holy writ."⁴⁴ The preacher should not manufacture emotion; on the contrary, he should understand and believe the text so well that the emotion of the text is transmitted through his preaching. Peter Adam rebukes many preachers, saying, "Our preaching does not

⁴³Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Preparing, Developing, and Delivering the Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 27.

⁴⁴Adam Dooley and Jerry Vines, *Passion in the Pulpit: How to Exegete the Emotion of Scripture* (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 114.

have to be as unemotional, dry, unimaginative and uninvolved as we can make it

The Bible shows us that truth can be passionate.”⁴⁵ Broadus agrees: “The text should indicate not only a central concern of the message, but something of its tone also.”⁴⁶

Philip Robert, in examining the passion behind the preaching of George Whitefield, gave this exhortation:

The real meaning of His oracles may be honestly given, and yet their true spirit neither caught nor conveyed. . . . He is the Spirit of power, and of grace, and of love, as well as the Spirit of truth and wisdom; and therefore He is but half copied in preaching, when only his *meaning* is given. . . . The words of the Spirit are spirit and life; and therefore the *soul*, as well as the substance, of their meaning is essential to faithful preaching. They can hardly be said to be the words of the Holy Ghost, when they are uttered in a spiritless or lifeless mood.⁴⁷

The emotion should not be manufactured or detract from or complicate the preaching of the Word; rather, it should match the original tone of the text to supplement it and give a sense to its weight and meaning.

Because the message is so valuable, there is a temptation to oversimplify the verbiage and presentation in order that everyone in the audience can easily grasp it. This enticement to strive for complete mental assent is detrimental to the growth of the audience. The preacher should not make the message easy to grasp; rather, he should encourage his hearers to delve into the truths of Scripture’s complex ideas. Beeke addresses the preaching of Jesus and summarizes it thus: “He used metaphors, hyperbole, and other figures of speech. Running the risk of being misunderstood, He refused to spoon-feed those who were following Him.”⁴⁸ Peter likewise speaks of Paul’s writings as sometimes being difficult to understand (2 Pet 3:15-16). This reality can also be seen in

⁴⁵Peter Adam, *Speaking God’s Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 169.

⁴⁶Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 33.

⁴⁷Philip Robert, *The Life and Times of the Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (New York: D. Appleton, 1838), 205 (emphasis original).

⁴⁸Beeke, *The Family at Church*, 7.

the preaching of Ezra: (1) it is noted that many young people are present (Neh 8:2); (2) yet in the follow-on sermon in Nehemiah 9, there are lofty concepts, contextual references, and hard truths; so (3) when Ezra read, others gave the sense (8:7-8).

A preacher does a congregation a disservice by coddling them, oversimplifying the message, and seeking to remove the work of the Holy Spirit to open hearts and minds. Tedd Tripp quotes his son on childrearing, and his statement is equally true of a congregation that needs to be brought up in the Lord: “I want to give my children large truths to grow into, not airy truths to outgrow, but large truths to grow into. I want to give them a vision of the greatness, the grandness of God that as toddlers they can’t even possibly fully grasp but they will grow into the understanding of what those things are.”⁴⁹ Seeing the congregation as a growing entity—full of old believers, new believers, and unbelievers—will also give the preacher an opportunity to interact with his audience and provide multiple ways to address their consciences so that they may listen, understand, and respond.

The preacher must call for a response. It is more than possible to simply convey spiritual truths or theological statements without calling the congregation to repent to something. John Calvin captures this thought well: “We have not come to the preaching merely to hear what we do not know, but to be incited to do our duty.”⁵⁰ The audience should not be stuffed full of information without an exhortation to apply it to their lives and be doers as well as hearers. Sometimes, the application is exceedingly clear (e.g., “Repent and believe”; Mark 1:15), but other times, the application may be to wrestle over how a text applies in a certain situation. Haddon Robinson uses David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11) as an example to show that two people may hear the same sermon

⁴⁹Tedd Tripp, “Our Guest Tedd Tripp,” Sid Roth: It’s Supernatural, April 15, 2016, www.sid-roth.net/2016/04/15/our-guest-tedd-tripp/.

⁵⁰John Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, in *Corpus Reformatorum* (Halle, Germany: C. A. Schwetschke et filium, 1895), 79:783, quoted in Joel R. Beeke, “Calvin’s Evangelism,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15, no (2004): 75.

and be convicted in completely different ways: “This is the principle, and the principle is clear. How this principle applies in our lives may differ with different people in different situations That application may disappoint many congregations because they like to be told exactly what to do.”⁵¹ In doing so, the audience is drawn into engaging with the text instead of listening to a monologue.

Spurgeon echoes many of these thoughts on the responsibility of the preacher to engage his audience. While it may not be the preacher’s fault that the audience is not prepared to listen, it is the preacher’s duty to command attention from the pulpit. Spurgeon especially attends to the importance of engaging the audience through stories, illustrations, and interaction so that children (I would also add adults) are engaged:

When children are not quiet in a meeting it is often as much our fault as theirs. Can you not put in a little story or parable on purpose for the little ones? Can you not catch the eye of the boy in the gallery, and the little girl downstairs, who have begun to fidget, and smile them into order? . . . I own that I have no right to attention unless I know how to command it.⁵²

A preacher cannot easily anticipate when his audience’s attention is going to be lost or what distractions may arise, so he must be actively involved with his audience in preaching, not giving a monologue or reading a speech.⁵³ While engaging with his audience, he will encourage his listeners to pay attention and interact with the message.

As the Hearers

“Your pastor should not be the only one working hard during the sermon.

⁵¹Haddon Robinson, “The Heresy of Application,” *Preaching Today*, October 2006, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/skills/2006/october/80--robinson.html>.

⁵²Spurgeon, *Lectures to His Students*, 104.

⁵³While preaching a sermon on Rom 5, I had utterly lost my audience of about twenty-five high school students. I realized that almost no one was listening by the end, so I concluded that “if where sin increases, grace abounds, then we should go and sin all the more so that grace may further abound” (cf. Rom 6:1). The statement had the desired effect: one student—possibly the only student paying attention—verbally objected. His objection piqued the interest of everyone else, and then I clarified, “By no means! How can we who have died to sin still live in it?” (6:2). Nearly a decade later, students still remember that sermon and application, yet it would not have happened without a discerning listener.

Everyone in the pews should be actively engaged in hearing the Word,”⁵⁴ exhorts Dumas. The Word of God preached is the means by which God grants faith (Rom 10:17), yet not all who hear obey (10:18), which has been a problem from the time of Moses “even down to this very day” (11:7). Lest listeners fail to obtain what they are seeking, they must labor to understand the preached message.

During a sermon, hearers have the duty to listen, discern, grasp, prepare to act, and respond, all while relying on the Holy Spirit to move and empower them to accomplish these things. The matter of first importance is to hear the Word preached. This priority requires a commitment to attend sermons regularly. None are so cut off from the Word of God as those who make no effort to seek it out and whose ears are blocked from hearing by physical aloofness. The promise of Romans 10:8 (cf. Deut 30:14) that “the Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” is the opposite of those who do not know the Word and who are far from it. Regular sermon attendance in itself (as well as the benefit of seeing and imitating the preacher and the congregation) may help congregants become more attentive to hearing the Word. James Baldwin remarks on the importance of imitation, which can often be more powerful than mere commands: “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”⁵⁵ In order to hear the Word of God, it is imperative that congregants make every effort to physically attend the preaching of God’s Word.

Attending physically, listeners then must make every effort to be attentive spiritually; it is more than possible to sit under the preaching of a sermon and not receive anything that was said. Spurgeon laments, “They attend the chapel but do not attend to

⁵⁴Dan Dumas, “On the Edge of the Pew: Expository Listening,” in Dumas, *A Guide to Expository Ministry*, 65.

⁵⁵Quoted in Scott Cooper, *I Don’t Want to Go to Church: Practical Ways to Deal with Kids and Religion (Whether You’re Religious or Not!)* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 36.

the preacher.”⁵⁶ To be attentive to the sermon, listeners must take every thought captive and identify distractions within themselves; wandering minds will miss the message.⁵⁷ Hearers whose minds wander should quickly repent and focus their attention back on the sermon, and they should make every effort afterwards to understand what they missed in the sermon, if possible. In order to keep the mind from wandering, the congregation should listen with engaged and discerning ears.

When hearers are invested in the message and expectant that something of use is going to be presented to them, then they are much more likely to hear it. Spurgeon uses the reading of a last will and testament as an illustration of focusing attention: “Do you see that brother of the testator? The lawyer has just read the clause about one hundred pounds that is left to him. The old man has his ear-trumpet up to his ear till he hears that piece. And now that he will pass on to, ‘my nephew Thomas,’ down goes the ear-trumpet, for the old man does not care what is left to Thomas.”⁵⁸ Listening to God should pique the congregation’s interest in the same way, except the voice of the preacher should be the listeners’ cue to open their ears and hearts.⁵⁹

Hearers must recognize that as the Bible is preached, they are listening to an ambassador of Christ. In grasping the sermon, hearers should do their best to understand. The old adage says that the Bible is shallow enough for babes to play in but deep enough

⁵⁶Spurgeon, *Lectures to His Students*, 106.

⁵⁷I was guilty of letting my mind wander recently: I had been listening to a wonderful message on being fully committed to serving Christ from 1 Kgs 19:19-21, but at the end of the sermon, I let my mind wander and was only roused from my distraction when several people around me stood up. Afterwards, I learned that the invitation was for those who needed prayer because they were still holding on to their past and attempting to integrate it into their Christian life. But, at the time of the invitation, I had completely stopped listening to the preacher and had no idea why a number of people had stood up or how I should respond.

⁵⁸Spurgeon, “Sermon 2512.”

⁵⁹Similarly, when I was an avionics expeditor (a sort of task-manager) on the F-22 for the United States Air Force, for a few minutes each morning, I would mete out tasks to waiting ears. Of the twenty or so personnel I addressed each morning, most of my message was lost to them. However, when I said someone’s name, their ears would perk up and their pen would voraciously record every detail I gave them, then—when I called someone else’s name—their pen would stop, and my voice would fade from their focus. They had heard, engaged, and discerned the portion of my message that was important to them.

for scholars to drown; therefore, hearers should realize that if they are going to begin to plumb the depths of the Bible, they must be prepared to understand and think deeply on the passage at hand. Parker, commenting on Calvin, expands on this idea and masterfully connects the congregation's grasping of the message with the importance of their reliance on the Holy Spirit:

Therefore the people must not imagine that they are able to understand everything that is said to them. They are quite unable to understand anything of the Gospel unless the Holy Spirit enlightens them. Before, then, they attend church, and when they come there, they must pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal to them Jesus Christ in the Gospel, and, in an attitude of humble trust and obedience, await what God will say to them. "We have not the spirit to understand anything pertaining to the spiritual kingdom of God . . . , but our Lord will give us understandings in all things, that, as He gives us His Word, so He will open our eyes and ears, and will not only give us intelligence but will also so form our hearts that we shall follow Him when He calls us."⁶⁰

If hearers seek to understand the message and recognize the Holy Spirit as an ever-present help, they will be prepared to reject what is untrue, unhelpful, or contrary to God. Listening with a discerning spirit is as important as listening to the message.

Many warnings have come from the prophets, the apostles, saints throughout history, and Christ himself as to the prevalence of false teachers and false messages. Hearers would be remiss to ignore this danger and fail to consider that what they hear may not be the truth. Listening requires holding to the truth and rejecting falsehoods. As Spurgeon warns, "Be careful what you hear—hear the truth and only the truth. It does seem to me as if some people say, 'Here is a place of worship. There is sure to be a sermon, let us go in and hear it.' Ah! but all that is preached is not Gospel and it is not all hearing that will be valuable to your souls."⁶¹

Hearers can sharpen their discernment by opening their Bible with the preacher

⁶⁰Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 64. Quotation from John Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss, in *Corpus Reformatorum* (Halle, Germany: C. A. Schwetschke et filium, 1895), 59:114.

⁶¹Spurgeon, "Sermon 2512."

and ensuring that what is preached is what is written. They should also listen for clichés that sound biblical but contradict Scripture. If the Bible is not preached, or if the messenger is preaching something antithetical to Scripture, then hearers should seriously consider whether they need to find somewhere that is the Bible is preached faithfully. If listeners sit under a solid biblical preacher, they are likely to hear things with which they disagree or that sound harsh to them; however, they must determine whether these disagreements are with the Word or with their own passions (see 2 Cor 6:12).

By listening to discern, hearers will grow in their love of the truth, and Christ’s prayer (i.e., “Sanctify them in the truth, your word is truth”; John 17:17) will be in the process of fulfillment. Parker warns against accepting everything that is put forward as the Word of God: “For if one accepted everything that was said, there would be no distinction between the liars and false prophets who seduce men’s souls, and the true ministers of God.”⁶² MacArthur expands on the dangers of listening without a discerning ear by relating it to the dangerous and disgusting things a child might put in his or her mouth:

A small child will stick almost anything into his mouth, touch anything he can reach, go anywhere he can manage to crawl—with no concept of what is good for him and what is bad, what is helpful and what is dangerous. The mature adult, on the other hand, has developed considerable discernment. He is careful about what he eats, what he does, where he goes. The same principle operates in the spiritual realm.⁶³

The discernment of mature believers comes through the constant practice of *both* listening *and* obeying the gospel by sharing it verbally and through action.

Hearers should come to the sermon with an expectation that God is going to speak directly to them. Beeke recommends asking the following question as the sermon

⁶²Parker, *The Oracles of God*, 63.

⁶³John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody 1983), 134.

commences: “How does God want me to be different on account of this sermon?”⁶⁴

Expecting a message from God through the sermon will cause hearers to seek to understand and grasp God’s message, even when it is difficult to understand because of the depth of the subject or it is not well preached. Congregants must listen to the applications exhorted by the preacher as well as any applications the Holy Spirit kindles within them from the passage apart from the sermon. Paul prayed for his friend Philemon, not that in the hearing of the Word he would be blessed but in the doing: “I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ” (Phlm 6). Listeners ought to have an idea of how they will apply the sermon before they leave the preaching event.

In listening, a congregation benefits not only themselves but their preacher as well. A preacher who has a receptive congregation will have an easier time joyfully ministering to them as he draws confidence from their focus, boldness from their obedience, and blessing from his participation in their spiritual lives. James M. Hamilton Jr. exhorts the congregation,

“The people listened attentively.” Do you do that? Let me encourage you to listen attentively to the reading and preaching of the Bible. Honor the Lord by your close attention to His Word. Listen closely for the sake of your own soul. And here’s another reason to listen closely that may not have occurred to you: as a preacher standing before people and speaking God’s Word, it is encouraging to see the faces of people who are locked into the message. Here are three good reasons to listen attentively to the reading and teaching of the Bible: (1) to honor God, (2) for your own soul, (3) to encourage the preacher.⁶⁵

After the preacher has preached and the congregation has listened, the effort to understand, digest, and apply the sermon is just beginning.

⁶⁴Beeke, *The Family at Church*, 11.

⁶⁵James M. Hamilton Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah*, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 155.

After the Sermon

The sermon may immediately induce conviction, emotion, passion, remorse, or any other number of things, but the lasting fruit will come after the sermon. A spiritual battle rages for people's hearts, so just a sermon well preached and well listened to can be useless to the growth of the congregation if they walk away from it and forget everything they heard (see Jas 1:22-25). Likewise, the preacher may be pained by an audience that seems to never do anything with the preached Word. John Flavel languishes under this reality:

Sin and Satan unravel almost all we do, the impressions we make on our people's souls in one sermon, vanish before the next. How many truths have we to study! How many wiles of Satan, and mysteries of corruption, to detect! How many cases of conscience to resolve! Yea, we must fight in defense of the truths we preach, as well as study them to paleness, and preach them unto faintness.⁶⁶

As previously mentioned, both the preacher and the hearers have duties to perform after the sermon.

As the Preacher

Concerning every facet of the sermon, the preacher's reliance on the Holy Spirit to work is vital to the congregation's growth. Just as the farmer plants a seed and knows not how it grows, so also must the preacher leave growth up to God. Henry points out the power of the Word sown apart from the preacher in this way: "The Spirit of God is carrying it on when they sleep and can do no business, or when they rise to go about other business. The prophets do not live forever; but the word which they preached, is doing its work, when they are in their graves."⁶⁷ The Holy Spirit works regeneration apart from the efforts of the preacher, but he does use the preacher to sow the seed; so, when a

⁶⁶John Flavel, *The Whole Works of the Reverend Mr. John Flavel, Late Minister of the Gospel at Dartmouth in Devon* (Paisley, UK: Weir and McLean, 1770), 8:451, quoted in Jon Bonker, *On the Ministry: Writings and Messages from the Puritans* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu, 2015), 15.

⁶⁷Matthew Henry, *Matthew to John*, vol. 5 of *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 383.

preacher finishes one sermon, he should always be cognizant of the next one.

It is imperative that the preacher does not believe that just because he has preached a text or message, his work is done. One of the preacher's roles is to repeat himself so that the Word of God is well ingrained in his congregation. Cynthia Patterson—an elementary schoolteacher by trade—states that the best way she has found to teach children and adults anything is through “rhyme, repetition, and chants.”⁶⁸ While it sounds pedantic, it does apply perfectly to feeding and shepherding the flock who need constant reminders, corrections, and exhortations to follow Christ. John Gill calls the preacher to preach often and from the Bible: “Always sow the same like precious seed, without any mixture of the tares of error and heresy; and do not deal it out in a narrow and niggardly way; do not restrain and conceal any part of truth, but plentifully distribute it, and declare the whole counsel of God.”⁶⁹ The preacher should remind often, not being afraid to repeat himself. He might cry out, “Fill me Lord, for I leak!”⁷⁰ It is prideful to think that just because a preacher has said it once, it will be remembered and obeyed by the congregation. God repeats himself and reminds his people often in Scripture; so should the modern-day preacher.

In preaching the whole counsel of God, the preacher is training his congregation to listen to the Word of God. House laments over the difficulties of preaching narratives to modern audiences because “current congregations are rarely

⁶⁸Cynthia Patterson, “Emotional Intelligence: A Different Way to Be Smart” (lecture given at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, Ohio, May 22, 2019).

⁶⁹John Gill, *Matthew to John*, vol. 7 of *Baptist Commentary Series* (Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2006), 401-402.

⁷⁰The origin of this quotation is unclear. Charles Spurgeon addresses the intent of the quote, though not the direct wording: “We are poor, leaking vessels and the only way for us to keep full is to put our pitcher under the perpetual flow of boundless Grace.” Charles H. Spurgeon, “Sermon 2160: Not Sufficient, and yet Sufficient” (sermon preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, August 24, 1890), *Answers in Genesis*, February 23, 2017, <https://answersingenesis.org/education/spurgeon-sermons/2160-not-sufficient-and-yet-sufficient/>.

trained to read and focus on long sections of the Bible.”⁷¹ He then addresses that a congregation can be trained through constant practice to hear and apply the Bible:

Those who make a habit of gaining doctrine, reproof, and correction from the Bible and from biblical preachers learn permanent patterns that they practice in order to maintain righteous ways of living. In short, they have begun to gain what God wishes them to gain from the Bible. The preacher’s task is to help hearers arrive at this point regularly and to a growing extent over a lifetime of Christian service.⁷²

This growth will rarely come easily and may require one-on-one conversations and disagreements.

The preacher should be open to conversations about the sermon. He should not be discouraged by those that critique or wrestle with his sermon because such critical engagement shows that they were not merely spectators. According to the old adage, “Throw a rock into a pack of dogs, the one that yelps is the one that got hit.” A dissenter at least heard the Word and needs further prayer and exhortation to obey God’s Word; he or she should not be dissuaded from discussing it unless such discussion is harming the faith of others (see Titus 2:10-11). Many will simply attempt to speak about what they want to speak about, so the preacher should not be afraid to redirect, saying, “I understand your thought/concern/addition,” and then asking, “But what did you think of the sermon?” Sometimes, the listener may be missing the main point of the sermon or has no intention of changing his or her life because of it, and the accountability of discussing the sermon afterwards may lead to further conviction, meditation, and growth. These conversations also benefit the preacher in that he may learn what his congregation did and did not understand (as well as where they are and are not obedient), and he may emphasize such commands of God in future sermons and conversation.

After the sermon, the preacher must continue to plan, preach, and exhort in order to disciple his flock, but for the hearers, the work of digesting the sermon they have

⁷¹House, “Written for Our Example,” 23.

⁷²House, “Written for Our Example,” 31.

just heard has only begun.

As the Hearers

Spurgeon exhorts the listener who has heard the sermon, saying, “If you would take heed what ye hear: hear retentively, endeavoring to remember the truth Do take heed that the sermon shall not be finished when the last word is spoken Let our ending be your beginning.”⁷³ The weightiness of a sermon should not be shortsighted. Hearers should not reflect on the sermon merely while it is being preached, nor for a day, nor even for a week; they ought to resolve to obey God’s revealed truth for the rest of their lives. Spurgeon reproves the idle listener, saying, “Ministers ought to finish up with the practical application—and that is where the hearer ought to begin, and he should continue to make the practical application to himself through all his life.”⁷⁴ Thinking on the sermon forever stands in stark contrast to how long many hearers currently consider the Word.

The surest time to abandon the exhortation of a sermon is directly following its delivery. It is imperative that listeners not allow their attention to be snatched away when the preacher ceases preaching. A sermon listened to can be easily forgotten if worldly affairs are allowed to take its place. Listeners should seek to discuss the sermon with someone immediately after the sermon in order to solidify the message in their minds. Lunch plans, work updates, and transient conversations may serve as the instruments by which the evil one stifles the work of God’s Word in a congregation’s life. Beeke warns, “Do not engage in frivolous, worldly conversation after a sermon. Shallow talk about politics, people, sports, or news events is Satan’s way of sending his vultures to pluck away the good seed of the Word. Instead, talk about the Bible, Christ, the soul, and the

⁷³Spurgeon, “Sermon 2512.”

⁷⁴Spurgeon, “Sermon 2512.”

eternal world as it applies to the sermon.”⁷⁵ Conversation after the sermon should focus on what God spoke through his ambassador—not how it was delivered—and on what God is commanding through his Word.

As a young and aspiring preacher, I always felt compelled to show the preacher that I was listening by offering him a few ways in which I thought his sermon could have been better. This attitude does not serve the preacher or the listener but only turns the sermon into a performance to be critiqued and graded. Likewise, the verity of God’s Word is not measured by the faithfulness of the preacher—even if the preacher is not obedient to the message he preaches—for each hearer is accountable to God’s Word regardless of its delivery. Beeke exhorts hearers to be blessed even by sermons that are lacking faithfulness or power and to not let the failings of the preacher be the means by which their ears are shut against the Word that was preached. He writes, “And when you talk about the sermon, avoid a critical spirit. Do not judge the sermon harshly. Such a spirit dampens spiritual life. Do not talk about what was missing, but concentrate on what was said. Listen with a loving spirit, turning any disappointments about preaching into petitions rather than criticisms.”⁷⁶ Avoiding a critical spirit will allow hearers to focus on the Word of God and determine how it is calling them to respond.

In concentrating on what was said, hearers must put the sermon into action. They must resolve to do their duty as revealed by God’s Word and to serve Christ, the church, and the world in the manner that will bring glory to God. This commitment often requires revisiting the sermon, both privately and with others. The two most important instances in which hearers should discuss a sermon are when it features content that they desperately need to address (and they know it) and when it contains content that they feel they do not need to address. Such revisiting is not meant simply to remember the sermon;

⁷⁵Beeke, *The Family at Church*, 16.

⁷⁶Beeke, *The Family at Church*, 16.

rather, the practice is intended so that God may convict hearers of what is lacking in their lives. Richard Baxter speaks of the benefit in the following way: “I have found by experience, that some ignorant persons, who have been so long unprofitable hearers, have got more knowledge and remorse in half an hour’s close discourse, than they did from ten years public preaching.”⁷⁷ Revisiting the sermon often requires preparing to discuss the message later. Hearers should make notes—on paper or mentally—of the things they do not understand or need to examine further. Through further meditation, the Holy Spirit may illuminate their minds with greater truths than even the preacher discussed.⁷⁸

Finally, hearers who leave the sermon and apply the Word they have just heard will be blessed in their doing of God’s Word. Once hearers know their duty, they must determine how they are going to actualize it. Sometimes, the application is exceedingly clear, but other times, it is merely a generality. Practicing discernment is one way that hearers must apply the biblical principles they have learned from the sermon. In whatever way hearers live out the sermon’s application, failure to act is not an option. Obedience to the preached Word is vital; as Calvin avers, “It is faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”⁷⁹ The number of applications from Scripture are infinite, but if hearers do not endeavor to actualize any of them, the best hearing will be in vain. Ramey explains that the listener’s duty is not over when the sermon ends: “Learning the Word is only half the challenge. The other half is living it out in your

⁷⁷Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007), 2.

⁷⁸A young man once told me that he had heard a message on the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5, specifically). After the sermon, he considered why Jesus had told people to cut off their hands or pluck out their eyes if they were the cause of sin. The young man told me that later in the week, he had realized that the hand and eye were not the cause of the sin but that the tendency of his soul was the problem, and obviously the soul cannot be removed from the man, which points at the need of God’s grace in regeneration. The preacher had not addressed this idea, but the young man arrived at the truth of the point because of the devotion to further meditate on the preached message.

⁷⁹John Calvin, *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote* (Geneva: n.p., 1547), accessed August 31, 2019, http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_trentantidote.html.

life.”⁸⁰ Adams gives this encouragement: “Improving your ability to listen to and apply biblical preaching will greatly increase the effectiveness of God’s Word working in your life to grow and mature you into who he wants you to be.”⁸¹

Both the preacher and the hearers have many responsibilities in the hearing, digestion, and application of God’s Word, but the blessings that are to be reaped far outweigh the cost. May the Lamb who was slain receive the reward of his suffering.

Conclusion

The importance of hearing the Word is established in the Scriptures, and it has been spoken of, built upon, and passed on by many great leaders of the church throughout history. A stark realization permeates their writings that there has been a woefully disproportionate amount of effort spent on preaching well as compared to listening well. However, many valiant attempts have been made to fill the need to teach the church to listen. And yet—like John Bunyan’s Slough of Despond—no matter the effort, it shall forever be a point that needs to be trod carefully by both preacher and hearer:

His labourers also have, by the directions of his Majesty’s surveyors, been for above these sixteen hundreds years employed about this patch of ground, if perhaps it might have been mended: yea, and to my knowledge, said he, here hath been swallowed up at least twenty thousand cart-loads, yea, millions of wholesome instructions, that have at all seasons been brought from all places of the King’s dominions, if so be it might have been mended; but it is the Slough of Despond still, and so will be when they have done what they can.⁸²

This project will not add much to the stability of this “Slough” if preacher and hearer do not heed the command to listen, so it is vital that readers do not simply finish and shelf this work or hear the exhortation of the Word but do nothing with it. Rather, readers—all Christians, really—should always remember that while it is fallen human nature to turn

⁸⁰Ramey, *Expository Listening*, 93.

⁸¹Adams, *Be Careful How You Listen*, 34.

⁸²John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress: An Allegory* (Grand Rapids: Spire Books, 1999), 8.

from the Word of God and let one's mind wander, grace and truth come through Jesus Christ and the hearing of his Word (John 1:17; Rom 10:17). And of these truths, preachers should frequently remind their hearers.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project was to hone the congregation at First Baptist Church New Lebanon to be attentive to the preaching of the Word in order to be motivated to strive for the upward call they have in Christ Jesus. Chapter 2 established the biblical and theological basis for being attentive to the preaching of God's Word by exegeting four passages of Scripture (Neh 8:1-12; Acts 16:14; Luke 24:25-45; Acts 8:4-11) to demonstrate the importance and result of the congregation's hearing God's Word preached and of their reliance on God to give both the message and the grace to understand it. Chapter 3 examined the doctrine, importance, and methods of expository listening from the preaching and teaching of Christian thinkers throughout history. This chapter describes the origin of the project and details the development and implementation of the project surveys and handouts. The birth of the concept is examined first. Then the design of the handout and surveys is discussed. Next, the implementation of the project is examined with regard to how participants were chosen. Then, an overview of the events that transpired is provided. Lastly, the conclusion of the project is explained, detailing how the results were tallied.

Preparation

The preparation period ranged between when this project was conceived and when it was implemented at FBCnl. This section details the history and establishment of the project as well as how the materials were developed and printed.

The Birth of the Project

This project was birthed in the summer of 2017 when I considered why the

church I had just left (Carlisle Baptist Church in Callaway, Florida) had been such an immature church despite being shepherded by a pastor, Randy Kuhn, who preached expository sermons faithfully three times a week. Many factors could have played a part, but I was determined to find the root cause. Undoubtedly, one the obvious reasons for the immaturity of the church is that it was adjacent to a military installation, Tyndall Air Force Base, and was comprised of mostly military members, who are naturally transient people. Many people were saved and discipled at Carlisle only to be transferred to other parts of the world. This fact was one reason for the puerility of the church. But that reality did not explain why so many others (e.g., retirees and non-military people) had been in the church for decades without experiencing discernable growth. I had a somber realization while reading Peter Adam's book *Speaking God's Words* concerning how many church goers had become spectators of the sermon. Adam lamented, "Our style of preaching means that the listeners are essentially passive and unable to object. They . . . give the appearance of . . . acceptance of what we say, though their hearts and minds may be very far away from the words we are saying."¹ My realization—which was as near to an epiphany as I have ever had—was that despite the congregation's sitting under godly preaching week after week, the message was not being received; preaching had become a spectator sport for many congregants. I began to realize that loving my people enough to teach them to listen was just as important as faithfully expositing the Word. As Adam declares, "To be servants of the Word it is not enough to love preaching: we have to love people."² The best prepared sermon with the most compelling arguments will have no earthly benefit unless someone pays attention.

This newfound consideration began in me a journey of exploration in which

¹Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 167.

²Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 163.

the commands of so many prophets, including Christ himself, declared the importance of hearing the Word of God. I decided to pursue this topic and see whether it would be possible to train a church to listen better or whether such a task is a predestined work of God that is only up to him and not a responsibility of the preacher. Myriads of Bible verses I read for personal or academic reasons began to illuminate for me the theme of listening. I discovered many theological works that highlighted that listening better is a skill that can and should be honed. It became apparent to me that—through the grace of God—preachers can sharpen the church to listen, understand, and obey expository preaching. I had intended to apply this project concurrently with FBCnl and Carlisle; however, the pastor of Carlisle retired his post, and in October 2018, Hurricane Michael destroyed most of the church building and displaced many of its members.

In early 2018, I met with my pastors at FBCnl, Stephen Betts and Kris Sinclair, and began the process of implementing this project at the church. My initial thought was to train the congregation through sermons, hymns, and example, but Betts felt that such training could be done better in the church's Small Groups. We left the matter up for future discussion as I continued to research the topic and prepare the best way to hone the congregation's expository listening. In September 2018, I once again met with Betts, and he had the idea to produce a handout that could be given to congregants.

This concept immediately seemed ideal to me for five reasons. First, I had never seen—even at the time of writing this chapter—a simple resource designed to train a congregation to listen to sermons better. As discussed in chapter 3, there are many sermons and books on this topic, but nothing short or pithy.³ Second, a printed handout would allow for latitude within the congregation in case someone missed a sermon or

³I discovered Christopher Ash, *Listen Up* (Epsom, UK: Good Book, 2009), long after I had designed the *Simple Listening Handout* and completed the project. While Ash's book is short at thirty-two pages, it still is more of a booklet than a simple resource, and had I discovered it earlier, I would have still proceeded with the *Simple Listening Handout*.

hymn. Third, a handout, if effective, would be easy to apportion to other congregations. An eight-part sermon series, on the other hand, would be difficult to implement at other churches. Fourth, a handout would potentially be a tool that God uses to open someone's ears to listen, as it is not the normal means by which the Word of God is communicated. While a sermon could be ignored through habit, I hoped a handout would cause someone to pause and consider how he or she listens. Fifth, implementing a handout would not impugn the pastor's reputation, whereas a sermon, lecture, or class may imply that the pastor had been negligent in his duties or had been overlooking important biblical principles.

For these reasons—and cemented by the godly counsel of my lead pastor—I decided that a handout would be the best way to implement this project. I chose to call the handout *Six Simple Ways to Improve Your Church Experience*; however, since the project's implementation, I have come to refer to it as the *Simple Listening Handout* (see appendix 3).

Handout Design

Research into how to best hone a congregation to listen led to dozens—if not hundreds—of recommendations on how people prepare themselves to hear a sermon. I determined that listing too many principles on a handout would result in two things happening: (1) it would be too intimidating for anyone to attempt, and (2) it could foster a legalistic spirit in a practitioner. The Bible mentions more than once those who question God about why he did not honor their rituals: “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?” (Isa 58:3; cf. Zech 7:3). Therefore, I endeavored to keep the principles to a minimum and emphasize that it is God's grace, as well as a desire to know more of the Saviour, that results in open ears. I was wrestling with how to design and structure the handout when I read Joel Beeke's book *The Family at Church*, which approaches the duties of a congregant in three time

periods: before, during, and after church.⁴ I saw the wisdom in this demarcation, so I decided to list the two most important principles I found before, during, and after the sermon. For example, during the sermon, I chose the principles of taking control of distractions and taking notes. Having exegeted Nehemiah 8, in which all of the people of Israel stand when the Word is read, it seemed logical that the modern congregation should likewise stand; but, after examination, I realized that that pericope seems to imply that the people's standing was the result of their attentiveness, not the source of it. Therefore, I discerned which two principles would have the greatest effect on a congregation.

I chose two principles for before the sermon (prayer and reading the upcoming sermon passage), two for during the sermon (taking every thought captive and taking notes), and two for after the sermon (revisiting the main point and applying the message). These six principles were overlaid on a bright background showing a seedling growing into a plant. This graphic was chosen for the sake of showing visually what the handout might do to a practitioner's faith. Each principle contains the address of at least one proof-text in order to ground the teaching in the Word of God, not in a modern handout. These proof-texts were chosen in two ways: (1) they clearly support the principle, and (2) they come from well-known passages so that the context may be immediately clear to a discerning reader. The second requirement inadvertently led to most of the proof-texts being found in the New Testament, specifically, in the words of Jesus. In order to diversify the addresses across the Scriptures, I decided that if another proof-text satisfied both principles, then it was substituted to show that these principles are found throughout God's Word. The reverse side provided instructions for the use of the handout and a quote from Charles Spurgeon. The Bible verses on the front and the quotation on the back were intended to show readers that the principles of preparing oneself to hear God's Word are

⁴Joel Beeke, *The Family at Church: Listening to Sermons and Attending Prayer Meetings* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 8.

rooted both in the Bible and in faithful ministers of history. The design and printing of the handout was accomplished using the software and stock images at www.u-printing.com. The price per handout was 13¢.

The size of the handout was chosen to be 6 inches tall by 4 inches wide. This size was chosen so that it could be stored in a smaller Bible and therefore could be used as a bookmark and serve as a reminder to possessors every time they opened their Bibles. The smaller size—as compared to an 8.5-inch by 11-inch piece of paper—was deemed important for the sake of keeping the handout close at hand while still being large enough to contain all the required information without using impossibly small font sizes. Similarly, a 14-point cardstock weight was chosen so that the handout would have more durability than a piece of paper. A gloss finish was chosen over other finishing options for its professional appearance and feel. A satin finish was originally considered for its receptibility to pencil and pen marks, but since the handout contains very little whitespace for taking notes, the satin consideration was abandoned in favor of a glossy finish.

The church's information was purposefully omitted from handout so that if other congregations chose to order and use it, they would not need to modify it prior to printing. On the bottom right corner of the reverse side of the handout, I included my name and e-mail address so that people who used the handout and needed to seek spiritual counsel or had a desire to utilize the handout within their church would be able to easily contact me.

The final draft of the handout was reviewed by FBCnl pastor Kris Sinclair and my wife, Tina Shearer, prior to printing. Enough handouts were ordered to accomplish the goals of this project, but in ordering, I was also cognizant that modifications to the handout may have been necessary prior to mass distribution.

Survey Design

Two surveys were developed for this project, a pre-project survey and a post-project survey. In many ways, they were identical, but the post-project survey implemented a means for gathering demographic information concerning the use of the handout. Both surveys asked for a name or a unique identifier in order that the two surveys could be matched and compared. Both asked for an age in order to gather demographic information but more so to identify congregants who were less than eighteen years of age for exclusion. I made this exclusion because I did not seek approval to run this project on minors; I expect that the results would be similar if the project was conducted with minors. The identical portion of the surveys consisted of seven questions on a six-point Likert scale that did not include a neutral option. Questions 5 and 7 were inverted to ensure that survey-takers were reading the questions closely. The questions ranged from the relevancy of the sermon, to the faithfulness of the preacher, to the congregant's response to the sermon, to the perceived effectiveness of the sermon in the congregant's life.

The questions were developed to measure three things: (1) the degree to which congregants recognized the biblical nature of expository preaching, (2) how well congregants felt that they responded to the sermon, and (3) how God was speaking to congregants through the preacher. Some of the questions were meant to measure more than one of these points. The degree to which congregants recognized the biblical source of the message was measured with questions 1, 2, and 7. These questions were based on previous sermons at FBCnl being expository in nature and assumed that the sermons preached during the project period would also be expository. They measured congregants' perceived relevance of the Word preached, their awareness of the sermon having its origin in the Scriptures, and their ability to clearly grasp the main point of the sermon. Next, congregants were given the task of grading their attentiveness during the sermon (questions 3, 4, and 5). These questions focused on whether the congregants' worldview

or actions were changed because of the preaching and how distracted they felt during the sermon. How God was speaking to congregants through the preacher was measured with questions 3, 4, and 6. These questions focused on how close participants felt to God and how much the sermon impacted their beliefs and actions.⁵ These three points were chosen to keep the survey short enough to accomplish during a Small Group while diverse enough to ensure that answers were correct samples of the group. For example, if an answer to question 3 (concerning worldview) was on the “agree” side of the Likert scale, I would not have expected question 4 (concerning actions) to be the “disagree” side of the scale.

The post-project survey asked which principles of the handout congregants attempted and how many Sundays congregants attended church out of eight. The post-project survey also asked which technique congregants felt was the most helpful in improving their listening. The pre-project survey and post-project survey were intended to be delivered eight weeks apart, with the handout implemented between them. They were designed to measure if the handout had an effect on congregants’ attentiveness. Demographic information—such as race, gender, church membership, or marital status—was not deemed relevant and was not captured on the surveys.

The surveys were printed on neon orange 8.5-inch by 11-inch cardstock. The cardstock was chosen to give the surveys a weighty and official feel. It also allowed for clear and simple marking with either a pencil or pen. The bright orange was chosen to easily identify which pieces of paper were related to the project so that they would not get taken home, misplaced, or thrown away by the survey participants once they were distributed and completed. The standard paper size of the surveys was meant to allow for a 12-point font size without running over the margins.

⁵It became apparent after the surveys were filled that question 6 (“Number of days from the sermon before I begin to feel distant from God”) had some serious flaws (see the “What I Would Do Differently” section in chap. 5).

Implementation

The implementation of this project was the time period during which the pre-project survey was issued, the *Simple Listening Handout* was employed, and the post-project survey was completed. This section details the project implementation schedule, how the pre-project survey was disseminated, how the handout was supported, and how the post-project survey finished the implementation stage.

Implementation Schedule

Implementation of the project to hone the congregation to be attentive to expository preaching commenced on September 29, 2019, and ran eight weeks until November 17. I intended to have the project implementation completed before Thanksgiving; thus, the end date determined the start date. Table 2 details the implementation schedule.

Table 2. Implementation schedule

Week	Date	Action
1	Sept 29	Speak to Groups / Accomplish Pre-Project Survey / Distribute Simple Listening Handout
2	Oct 6	Handout Emphasizes Prayer
3	Oct 13	Handout Emphasizes Reading the Word Before the Sermon
4	Oct 20	Handout Emphasizes Taking Every Thought Captive
5	Oct 27	Handout Emphasizes Taking Notes During the Sermon
6	Nov 3	Handout Emphasizes Revisiting the Sermon Afterwards
7	Nov 10	Handout Emphasizes Applying the Sermon Application
8	Nov 17	Post-Project Surveys / Processing

Pre-Project Survey

Participants in this project were all members of Small Groups that met on Sunday mornings. Several Small Groups met on Sunday nights, but based on the numbers of the Sunday morning Groups, I felt confident that I would reach my goal of fifty completed surveys by only polling the Sunday morning Small Groups. On the morning of

Sunday, September 29, Kris Sinclair and I visited nine Small Groups and explained the project to them using the Informed Consent Statement (see appendix 4). This statement informed congregants that their participation in this project was entirely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. It also explained that all of the information collected would be held strictly confidential. It then explained how to use the *Simple Listening Handout* and directed participants to focus on one method per week with the intent of finishing all six over the next seven weeks. Reading ahead or using methods out of order was not discouraged. No effort was made to discern the spiritual condition of participants. Likewise, no prejudicial efforts were made outside of ensuring that participants were adults and that they were attending a Sunday morning Small Group. Forty-six completed pre-project surveys were returned on September 29, and these surveys were kept in a cabinet until November 17.

Employing the *Simple Listening Handout*

During weeks 2-7 of the project, Sinclair made efforts to implement each of the techniques during the pre-sermon worship and after the sermon. Stephen Betts preached the Sunday morning sermon on seven of the eight project weeks. He did not purposefully address congregational listening as part of his sermons. This exclusion was partly done so that if there was an improvement in the listening of the hearers, it would be attributable to the *Simple Listening Handout* and not to the sermon. It was also partially done because the topic of listening, while present, was not the main topic of the passages that Betts preached those weeks (Mark 7:1-8:38 and Mark 9:14-32). Sinclair preached the Sunday morning sermon on one of the eight project weeks (Mark 9:1-13), and, like Betts, he did not focus on congregational listening—for the same reasons as articulated above. Beginning on October 6, the bulletin at FBCnl was updated from including only the current week's passage to also including the next week's passage for those who would like to read it before the sermon.

Seven blog articles were written to correspond to the six listening principles and to introduce the *Simple Listening Handout*; they were posted to <http://trustobey.blogspot.com>. These articles were distributed via social media outlets (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn). These articles were written to clarify the steps for those who were attempting to follow along. They also served as reminders for those who were using the handout of which technique they should be attempting that week—if they were working through the handout in descending order. These articles drew heavily from this project, but in order to stretch my own grasp of the topics, each article included a separate passage than the one listed on the handout and different examples than the ones included in the handout and/or this project. These articles had a surprisingly small readership (an average of thirty per week), and no feedback was received.

Post-Project Survey

On the morning of November 17, I visited the same nine Small Groups as on September 29 and distributed the post-project survey, encouraging survey-takers to write the same name or unique identifier as they had written on the pre-project survey. I visited these classes alone because both pastors were not available during the Small Group time. Small Group members were once again reminded that participation was voluntary and that their responses would be held strictly confidential. Small Group members were further told that if they had not completed a pre-project survey, they did not need to complete a post-project survey. Everyone was encouraged to take a copy of the *Simple Listening Handout* if they needed more or had not received one at the start of the project.

Because FBCnl has two services, one before the Small Group time and one after, some who completed the post-project survey had heard eight sermons, while others who completed the post-project survey had only heard seven sermons. There was no means of measuring this demographic on the post-project survey, though it could have skewed the results. Likewise, some Small Groups—not included in this project—met on

Sunday nights, over six hours after the sermon. These Groups were excluded from the project due to the logistics of distributing surveys to them, but their experiences could have been different since they revisited the sermon several hours after they heard it, while the morning Small Groups held discussions either immediately prior to the sermon or immediately following the sermon. One Group incorporates at least one hymn into their Small Group time, though no effort was made to identify this Group on the surveys or determine whether the singing of a hymn may have had impact on their attention to the preached Word of God.

At the completion of the project implementation period, I received eighteen completed post-project surveys back. All eighteen post-project surveys correlated to a completed pre-project survey.

Post-Implementation

Processing of the data commenced on November 17, 2019, and concluded on November 24. This processing period accomplished the organization of surveys and then the compilation and processing of data in order to determine whether the project goals had been accomplished. This section details the correlation and compilation of the surveys, then the processing of the data, and finally the polling of the two pastors of FBCnl.

Processing the Surveys

Pre-project surveys were kept together in a cabinet until the post-project surveys were received. No processing of the pre-project surveys was accomplished in any way until the post-project surveys were received. Correlating the two surveys was accomplished by my wife, Tina Shearer, who matched the names and ages of the pre-project and post-project surveys, stapled them together, assigned them a number, and then blacked out the names to maintain anonymity. Tina never looked at the survey results, and I never looked at the names. All post-project surveys did have a corresponding pre-

project survey. Twenty-eight pre-project surveys did not have a corresponding post-project survey. These surveys were destroyed after deliberation; it was determined that because the third goal of the project would use a t-test to determine success, there was no benefit to the project in having data that did not have corresponding post-project results. The uncorrelated surveys could have been used to determine the average age of the Small Group classes, but FBCnl has other means for determining these demographics. The discarded surveys also could have been used to determine the self-diagnosis of the health of these Small Groups, but this was not the intent of the survey or project, and a more appropriate survey could be developed and used for such a purpose, if required.

Processing the Data

All of the survey data was transcribed to a spreadsheet. Pre-project and post-project data were entered on a Microsoft Excel 2016 spreadsheet, with participants labeled 1-18. Answers were on a Likert scale and graded 1-6. Questions 5 and 7 were purposefully inverted to ensure that congregants were reading the survey questions before answering. Should a congregant have the same answer circled on all seven questions, it would be suspect data. This pattern was not the case on any received survey, so no surveys were questioned or excluded for this reason. The inverted scores were reversed when they were transcribed to the spreadsheet. The processed Likert scores of the seven questions were then summed and labeled as the total. Participant 6 did not provide post-survey results, so it was determined that both pre-project and post-project surveys were to be excluded from the t-test for this participant. A paired two sample for means t-test of the Likert scale was accomplished to determine whether the goal to improve congregants' attentiveness to hearing the Word of God was successfully met. Seventeen participants were included in this t-test.

For demographic purposes, several other items were processed. The ages of the participants were averaged; participant 6 was included in the average of the ages because

the answers this participant selected on the post-project survey indicated that they did attempt to use the *Simple Listening Handout*. The standard deviation of the ages was processed, and these numbers plus the ages were plotted on a bell-curve for visual processing. The post-project survey asked which method was the most helpful. The most helpful reported method overall was determined by finding the mode of all seventeen selections. Several respondents selected more than one most helpful method, despite the survey instruction “If you consider that your listening has improved since using the *Simple Listening Handout*, which of the six techniques helped the most (Choose One)?”; therefore, this number was processed twice, once with multiple selections included and once with multiple selections excluded. Participant 6 did not provide an answer and was thus excluded from both processes, though the inclusion of a null value would not have impacted the mode. Including multiple selections led to two most-helpful techniques, while excluding multiple selections led to a clear frontrunner of which technique was considered the most helpful. The number of methods attempted were summed individually to show which methods were attempted most frequently. Participant 6 did complete this portion, so their results were tallied. Finally, the number of weeks attended were averaged. Participant 6 did list the number of weeks attended, so their data was included in the average. Since the survey included a portion for remarks, remarks were transcribed to the spreadsheet. Remarks were not intended to be scores, so their presence was only for informational purposes. Because the survey promised confidentiality (“This survey will be kept *strictly confidential* unless you request a response”), and no responses were requested, the remarks were kept confidential and not included in the evaluation of the project or reprinted in this project. Should a remark have been expressly helpful or meaningful to the purpose of the project, a serious consideration would have been made to include that remark while preserving anonymity, but because the remarks were not germane to the purpose of the project, they were excluded.

Pastoral Impact Interview

Not included in the preliminary consideration for this project was how this project would impact the pastors of FBCnl. As the project progressed, I considered that just by FBCnl's pastors being more cognizant of the biblical commands to listen, such cognition may have inadvertently and immeasurably caused shifts in their preaching and teaching to put more emphasis on listening—a sort of Hawthorne Effect, which observes that a behavior may be altered by the subjects due to their awareness of being observed.⁶ Because of multiple conversations about listening to the Word, I thought it prudent to survey both pastors to determine what, if anything, they learned from the project. They were both asked the following questions:

1. Prior to this project (Honing the congregation to be attentive to expository preaching at FBCnl), how aware were you of the prevalence of biblical commands to listen? In other words, did you understand/consider how often the topic of audience participation is addressed in the Bible?
2. Prior to this project, how often did you purposefully consider the attention of the congregation as part of your sermon (or class) preparation and delivery?
3. What steps have you begun to implement since the start of this project to ensure you gain and keep the attention of your hearers?
4. How have you grown because of this project?
5. Any other remarks?

These questions and responses were delivered and answered via e-mail and transcribed to this project for use in chapter 5 during the evaluation of the project.

⁶Marcin Kazaryn, Mateusz Klupeczynski, and Jagoda Piotrowska, "How Lack of Attention Decreases Productivity?," Lab1 Insights, May 23, 2017, <https://www.lab.one/insights/how-lack-of-attention-decreases-productivity>.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this project was to hone the congregation at First Baptist Church New Lebanon to be attentive to the preaching of the Word in order to be motivated to strive for the upward call they have in Christ Jesus. This chapter evaluates the project's purpose and goals, details its strengths and weaknesses, considers what should have been done differently, reflects on the theological implications of the project, and reflects on my personal growth as well as that of my pastors.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

This project began with my wondering whether a good listener could be cultivated through the efforts of the preacher or the church. This supposition was confirmed and solidified through my reading God's Word and exegeting four passages (Neh 8:1-12; Acts 16:14; Luke 24:25-45; Acts 8:4-11; chap. 2) as well as bolstered by my reading the thoughts on the topic of expository listening by great preachers and theologians throughout Christian history (chap. 3). Based on the truths presented in chapters 2 and 3, as well as the results from the implementation of the project, it is certainly possible to hone a congregation to be attentive to expository preaching. The project's purpose originally assumed that the project would apply to professing Christians, but as the project progressed, it became apparent that the project would also be helpful to anyone who sits under the preaching of the Word of God. In other words, *anyone* can become not merely a hearer but also a doer of God's Word. In discussing with FBCnl pastor Kris Sinclair the fact that the first goal was not fully met, I said, "I still think it will still help people." He responded, "I think people are going to get saved!"

Therefore, the purpose of trying to hone a congregation of believers to become more attentive to the preaching of God's Word was a good purpose. But it is not the only thing that may have been accomplished; unbelievers could have been moved from being hearers only to becoming believers. Evaluating the goals of the project well illustrate the successes and the shortcomings of the project.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

Three goals were attempted during this project to accomplish the purpose of developing the congregation to be attentive to the preaching of God's Word. The first goal was to assess the current level of effort a congregant at FBCnl put into understanding and employing the preaching that he or she hears. This goal would be considered successfully met when it received at least fifty completed pre-project surveys (see appendix 1) from nine Small Groups that met on Sunday mornings at FBCnl. Only forty-six completed pre-project surveys were received; therefore, this goal was not successfully met. Even though less than fifty completed surveys were received, the information on them was still valid and useful, so I determined to finish the project despite failing to reach this goal.

The second goal was to increase the congregation's attentiveness to hearing the Word of God through a handout titled *Six Simple Ways to Improve Your Church Experience* (later referred to as the *Simple Listening Handout*; see appendix 3). The congregation was instructed to focus on one method per week; reading ahead or applying other methods outside of their assigned week was not discouraged. Congregants were instructed to intentionally accomplish one method per week and accomplish all methods within the six allotted weeks. This goal would be considered accomplished at the end of six weeks when each of these six principles had been performed. Whether or not a principle had been performed was self-reported on the post-project survey. This goal was partially met in that all of the principles were attempted by at least some of the post-

project survey respondents. One hundred percent of the post-project survey participants noted that they had attempted to pray before the sermon. However, only 22 percent indicated that they had attempted to read the sermon passage prior to the sermon. Only one participant indicated attempting all six of the principles. All participants attempted at least one principle. The average number of principles attempted was three (50 percent). This goal was not completely met because not every participant attempted every principle; however, it was partially met because all participants attempted at least one principle because of the handout.

The third goal was to determine whether the congregation had been honed to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. A post-project survey (see appendix 2), nearly identical to the pre-project survey, was administered to the same Small Groups the Sunday after the sixth principle was assigned. This goal would be considered successfully met when (1) at least 50 members had completed the post-project survey who had also completed the pre-project survey and (2) a t-test of the pre-project and post-project surveys showed an increase in the attentiveness to the hearing of the Word of God among congregants. Because 50 pre-project surveys were not received, this goal was not met. However, it was surprising that only 18 post-project surveys were received. All 18 of the post-project surveys corresponded to a pre-project survey. One survey was incomplete and therefore excluded from the t-test. Of the 17 complete post-project survey responses, this goal was partially met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between pre- and post-project survey scores: $t_{(16)} = 2.746, p < 0.0072$.

Further, the post-project survey also asked respondents to indicate which principle helped them the most, and 94 percent of participants indicated a principle from the *Simple Listening Handout* that had helped them. The most chosen answer was “Taking Every Thought Captive.” All six principles were chosen by a least one participant. Seventeen percent of respondents chose more than one principle.

In sum, despite none of the three goals being completely met, the overall purpose of the project—honing the congregation to be attentive to expository preaching at FBCnl—was accomplished. Future iterations of this project have room for improvement, but the project certainly had its strengths.

Strengths of the Project

This project had five major strengths that will make it an effective tool in the hands of someone seeking to hone another congregation to be attentive to the preaching of God’s Word. The first strength is the brevity of the handout that was produced. The second strength is the universal applicability of the project in any congregation. Third, the project implementation time is only a few weeks. Fourth, the project strengthens not only the congregation but also the leadership of the church. Fifth, the results of the project are not contingent on the quality of the Word preached and, in fact, may prove to be a help to deficient preaching.

The first strength of the project was the brevity of the *Simple Listening Handout*, which was created after the completion of chapters 2 and 3. This small handout can be read in less than five minutes and places a strong emphasis on readers to hone their listening skills when listening to the Word of God. The clear nature of this handout makes it easy to glance over and understand regardless of how much interest people have in the topic of listening to God’s Word. This handout can also serve as a sermon outline or sermon-series outline, and each of the proof-texts contain invaluable information on the importance of having ears to hear the Word of God. This handout can be a constant companion to sermon-goers, reminding them of their duty to be not only hearers but also doers of the Word. It also may benefit congregants completely apart from any intervention from the preacher since it is not contingent on the liturgical style or traditions of any single church.

The second strength of this project is its universal applicability to other

churches; it is not limited to SBC churches, Baptist churches, protestant churches, or even Christian churches. The Bible is replete with commands for ears to be opened, and this project could be the means by which God opens ears, both for people who are seeking to better attend to the preaching of God’s Word and those who are not seeking God in any way. Charles Love tells the story of his experience in the Jehovah’s Witness organization and how he was saved not because of some outside witness or apologetic but because he started to be attentive to the Word of God, specifically, Romans 3:23; 6:23; and 8:14.¹ During the implementation of this project, I mentioned it to a Catholic coworker and gave him a copy of the *Simple Listening Handout*, and while it has not led to his conversion, it did open doors for further conversation on what God—not a church—is saying to the world. My original project plan, to implement a sermon series, would most likely have been well received in conservative Baptist churches, but this project, as implemented, may serve to find its way into organizations and religions that do not even perceive that they have a listening problem. May this project play a part in the fulfillment of God’s promise: “I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me” (Isa 65:1; see also Rom 10:20).

The third strength of this project is that it has a short implementation period and is not limited by time constraints or the constancy of the audience’s attendance. This project spanned eight weeks, but it could be implemented in a much shorter time period. It could even be as short as handing out the *Simple Listening Handout* as a listening help, as I did at the Refuel chaplain conference at Liberty University in October 2019. Therefore, churches that do not have a unified goal to improve attentiveness do not need to invest lengthy time frames to teach their people to listen better, pastors do not need to modify their sermon planning to address listening, and congregants do not need to fear

¹Charles Love, *20 Questions Jehovah’s Witnesses Cannot Answer* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2005), 36-38.

that in missing a sermon, they may be missing the key to honing their listening skills—because the handout can work apart from extensive church planning.

Fourth, this project was meant to strengthen the congregation, but it also proved to also strengthen the pastors. After the project was completed, both Stephen Betts and Kris Sinclair were asked how they had grown because of this project. Betts cited that it “served as a helpful reminder” of his previous awareness of the importance of audience participation.² Sinclair explained that he “began to see [the importance of listening to God’s Word] everywhere.”³ He also identified that this project had helped not just his preaching but his listening as well, especially in the area of hearing from God through the preacher and hearing the truth and glory of God over and above the delivery and personality of the preacher. Betts changed his sermon development and delivery by allotting more time in each for prayer that the congregation would listen to and understand God’s Word. The most surprising and refreshing input from both pastors was that this project had increased their reliance on the Holy Spirit to quicken the preacher, the sermon, and the congregation. I had worried that it could be a weakness of the handout to cheapen the work of the Holy Spirit in every facet of listening (because the handout gives congregants work to do), so I was glad that this project drove both pastors closer to the Holy Spirit rather than away from him. This concern is addressed further in the “What I Would Do Differently” section below.

The fifth strength of this project is that it is not contingent on the quality of the sermon’s preparation or its delivery. Sinclair often quoted the adage “A mature Christian is easily edified.”⁴ Being attentive to the Word of God will benefit people even when the sermon is not expository in nature and is only loosely based on the Word of God. Paul

²Stephen Betts, interview by author, New Lebanon, Ohio, November 27, 2019.

³Kris Sinclair, interview by author, New Lebanon, Ohio, November 24, 2019.

⁴Sinclair, interview.

Washer tells how he was convicted by a sermon by notorious heretic Joel Osteen when Osteen was genuinely encouraging his people but was totally wrong in his hermeneutics and application. Washer then points to biblical passages detailing the importance of encouragement and proved that he had learned a valuable lesson from an unlikely source.⁵ Simply hearing whichever verse is preached may prove to be the spark that ignites a biblical response from engaged listeners. Or people who are wrestling with the passage before, during, or after the sermon may come to have their discernment honed through constant practice (Heb 5:14), even if the sermon is a radical twisting of the author's intent.

Weaknesses of the Project

As evidenced by the three goals being only partially met, this project had weaknesses. This section focuses on (1) the weaknesses of the implementation method, (2) the failure to better remind congregants of the *Simple Listening Handout* while the project was being implemented, and (3) the deficiencies surrounding the dissemination and collection of the post-project survey.

The first weakness of this project was the implementation method. The project was implemented to nine Small Groups at FBCnl. These nine Groups had limitations of which I was unaware of at the beginning of the project. One limitation was that many of the most active members of the church are rarely able to attend Sunday morning Small Groups due to requirements in teaching, nursery work, musical worship duties, security, and parking lot ministry. Because of these responsibilities, some of the most likely members to attempt the project were not included in the project surveys. Another limitation of these Groups is that they are scheduled to meet for one hour, so on the pre-project and post-project survey dates, each class received approximately six minutes of

⁵Paul Washer, "Four Pillars of Walking with God" (sermon preached at Grace Community Church, San Antonio, Texas, December 2, 2015).

instruction on what the project was, how to use the handout, and how to fill out the survey. Because of such limited explanation, one member explained that he had not understood the purpose of the handout and therefore had not attempted more than praying before the sermon. For this reason, he opted not to complete a post-project survey.

The second weakness was that project participants were not adequately reminded of the technique they should be focusing on during each project week. Sinclair did attempt to include each of the techniques in some way during the worship and/or sermon, but there was no direct expression, such as, “If you are following along on the *Six Simple Ways to Improve Your Church Experience* handout, this week you should have prayed before the sermon, and next week you should read the passage before the sermon. The sermon text next week will be Mark 8:1-10.” The percentage of participants who attempted each technique did drop substantially after the first project week but did not taper off. The percentage of attempted techniques, listed in the order of the handout, were 94 percent for prayer, 17 percent for reading the Word before the sermon, 44 percent for taking every thought captive, 50 percent for taking notes, 39 percent for revisiting the message, and 60 percent for applying the sermon message in one’s life.

The third weakness relates to the low number of completed post-project surveys that were collected. This weakness was in the dissemination and collection of the post-project survey. In order to limit outside variables, the project was implemented in eight weeks; this timeframe left very little latitude for the post-project survey. If people participating in the project were absent on the eighth project week for any reason, their efforts went uncounted.

What I Would Do Differently

This project could have run much more smoothly and been more effective if some things had been done differently. If I were to run this project again, I would (1) seek to mitigate the weaknesses by running the project on the two services of FBCnl rather

than on the Small Groups, (2) better implement the project to Small Groups if that were the only option, (3) improve the survey questions, (4) remind the congregation of the *Simple Listening Handout* throughout the project period, (5) allow for more flexibility in turning in post-project surveys, (6) request more demographic information, (7) include high-school and middle-school youths in the project, and (8) better emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit.

The first thing I would change would be the target group of the project from Small Groups to the main services at FBCnl (8:15 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.) on Sunday mornings. Small Groups are a valuable tool at FBCnl, but they tend to miss two vital groups of people: those who are very active in the church and those who are not very active in the church. Changing the project to apply to the two services would drastically open the sample size and reliability of the project participant sample and better capture those who are outliers to the Small Group demographic and who make up the majority of the church demographic. Implementing the project during the service would also allow for a more thorough explanation of the project to all in attendance rather than dividing the implementation time between nine Small Groups.

If Small Groups were the only option, then the second thing I would change would be to better engage congregants who were not members of Sunday morning Small Groups. This expansion would include running the project on Small Groups that meet outside of Sunday morning as well as groups that do not normally meet to study the Bible together, such as business meetings or Wednesday night meals. Further, I would attempt to take into account which service time each Small Group member meets to ensure that the post-project survey was administered after the full eight-week project rather than having some who had heard seven sermons and others who had heard eight sermons. I would also consider staggering the implementation of the project so that all nine Small Groups were not running at the same time, which would give the implementer more time to accurately ensure that each participant understood the purpose and techniques of the

project. This staggering, however, would be a hindrance to making weekly reminder announcements, so running the project on Sunday mornings during the two services remains ideal.

The third thing I would improve would be the survey questions. During the design phase, they seemed like strong, clear questions. But several surveys came back with question marks beside the circled answer on question 6, which asks about feeling distant from God. This confusion leads me to believe that these questions were not as clear as they should have been. It is also vital to note that a perceived distance from God is not an accurate gauge of a person's spiritual health (see Job 9:32-33; Mark 15:34; Rom 7:24-25). Likewise, several participants marked question 3 low on both surveys regarding their proclivity to change their worldview. This low score may have been because they were not changing their worldview because of the sermon but were strengthening their worldview. Perhaps the question should have read, "I am prompted to align my beliefs/worldview with the Word of God because of the preaching." Time and effort should be put into further developing the survey questions for clarity.

The fourth thing I would change is that I would engage the congregation on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights, during the time allotted for announcements, to remind project participants of the technique on which they should be focusing at that time period of the project. While reminders were posted using a blog during the project period, these reminders required project participants to have knowledge of and access to the blog and/or see it advertised on Facebook, Twitter, and/or Linked-In. I would also change the preparation of these blog posts to ensure that they were prepared by and scheduled to post on the first day of the week in which that a given principle was to be the focus.

The fifth thing I would change would be to allow for more flexibility in turning in post-project surveys. I cannot foresee a detriment to allowing for two weeks of post-project surveys in case someone missed the first post-project survey for any reason. I would make them available first during the Sunday morning service, then at the

Wednesday night meal, and finally at the following Sunday morning service. This expansion would allow for a more representative sample of the congregation through more completed surveys. If the number of responses was not satisfactory, then it would even be feasible to reach out to those who had completed a pre-project survey but had not completed a post-project survey in order to determine whether they had not yet had an opportunity to complete the second survey or whether they did not intend to complete one.

The sixth thing I would change would be to ask for more demographic information on the surveys. Perhaps it would have been helpful for participants to list their age and gender, to self-identify whether they considered themselves to be a believer, list the number of years since becoming a Christian (if applicable), and rank their faith on a Likert scale from weak to strong. Other demographic information may also have been helpful. The amount of demographic information gathered in the current project left many questions unanswered.

The seventh thing I would change would be to include high-school and middle-school age youths in the project. Lowering the age range would be a great opportunity to emphasize to adolescents the importance of not just hearing information—specifically, from God—but also grasping it, digesting it, reiterating it, and acting on it. I hypothesize that the impact on people in this demographic would be far greater than the average age of fifty-nine in the current project.

The eighth—most important—thing I would change would be to emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit far more than his work was emphasized during this project. Pastors Stephen and Kris were both cited earlier in this chapter as relying on the Holy Spirit more; however, I was concerned that the *Simple Listening Handout* placed too much emphasis on the responsibilities of people without emphasizing the grace required from God to fulfill such responsibilities. Future versions of the *Simple Listening Handout* will surely need to rectify this unbalance. The reverse side of the handout lists the

purpose and rationale of the handout and does include the following paragraph:

The most important thing you can do to hear the Word of God is to have a desire to hear the Word of God. This is accomplished by realizing your need for a saviour and putting your whole hope in Jesus Christ for salvation. Without the Holy Spirit working in your life and opening your eyes, ears, and heart to this need then nothing you do will help.

However, I believe serious prayer and consideration should go into this emphasis prior to the next iteration of handouts being printed and utilized.

Theological Reflections

Throughout the development and implementation of this project, many theological convictions were affirmed and grown, such as the sovereignty of God in salvation, the responsibility of humankind to obey God, and the importance of audible and written evangelism. Other theological convictions were developed through this project: the importance of commanding the audience's attention, teaching a church to listen, and—most impressively—the grace of hearing the Word of God.

As I studied and researched this project, a theme began to emerge in the fact that it is only by the grace of God that we are even able to hear the Word of God. It would be possible to be so arrogant as to think that the hearing of the Word of God were an entitlement to all humankind, that certain people paid attention to the Word of God when it was preached because of their discipline, or that certain people responded because they were wiser than those who did not respond. But the truth is that the response, the ears to hear, and the grace of understanding all come from God and are all gifts from heaven. This fact was intensified by our middle daughter, Emma Grace, who has had ear problems for all of her short life. She has a tremendous speech impediment because she has had blockages or ruptured drums when she could not hear the sounds that her mouth was making. She is often the recipient of my grace because she does not respond when called, not because of wanton disobedience but because she has not heard the call. As a father, it is difficult to watch her play with other children and realize her struggles

because she is missing much of the aural part of her surroundings. But it is so much harder when we read the Bible or sing hymns and I know that she is not hearing the Word of God as I am blessed to hear it. In his hymn “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” Charles Wesley captures the grace of hearing that God gives:

Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Savior come,
and leap, ye lame, for joy.⁶

May I never forget or cheapen the grace that so many have, while so many others are excluded from it—the simple grace of hearing the Word audibly preached in a language that I can understand and by preachers who seek to faithfully transmit the message and saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The sovereignty of God in salvation was affirmed and strengthened as I read multitudes of commands in Scripture to listen, obey, and be saved. If it is entirely of grace that anyone can hear the Word, then it must be entirely God’s sovereignty that anyone hears and responds to the Word at all. My favorite illustration on the power of the Word in God’s sovereignty is that of an acorn that finds its way between the cracks of a concrete sidewalk. The sidewalk is rock-hard and impervious to vegetation growing through it, but that one little acorn can take root in that sidewalk and within a few years reduce that rocky ground to rubble as an oak tree powers through it. As I worked on this project, I have been strengthened in my resolve to trust the Word of God to work upon even the hardest hearts, not only because I trust the Word of God but now because I know and expect the power of God to open hearts, minds, and ears so that sinners may be granted repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth.

My understanding of the responsibility of humankind to obey God grew significantly during this project. The sheer number of commands to listen lend to the fact

⁶Charles Wesley, “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, by Charles Wesley and John Wesley (London: John Haddon, 1875).

that God truly is calling people to listen. There will be a great judgment for those who heard the Word and refused to take heed. This warning also helped me to understand the fifth of the Ten Commandments—obeying parents. At the time of Adam and Eve—and again at the time of Noah and his wife—there were perfect eye-witness accounts declaring the faithfulness of God, but because someone somewhere refused to listen to the promises given by God—or to the testimonies of their parents—they have condemned their entire progeny from their time to now. Humankind has a great responsibility to seek out the truth and listen to the Word of God in whichever way it is presented.

My understanding of the importance of audible evangelism was also strengthened. There are so few public proclamations of the gospel anymore. Paul asks, “How will they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14). The necessity to proclaim Christ in the highways and hedges was further emphasized by this project, that many ears are blocked from hearing the Word of God not just by their sinfulness but also by their lack of proximity to the preached Word of God. I have asked many times before, and I need to continue to ask, “If faith comes by hearing, who have you told?”

This project helped me to develop a theology of commanding attention from the pulpit with the authority of the Word. The preacher should not just hope that someone listens; they are proclaiming the very Word of God and declaring the excellencies of the King. God does not give a neutral option to half-hear or sort-of-pay attention; hearers are either obedient in their listening or disobedient in their disregard. This clarity has helped my understanding of preaching for attention rather than for hoping that someone pays attention. I have said many times in teaching evangelists, “You need to get their attention.” But I never meant capturing or commanding attention. I considered it a gimmick or a fluke, not the requirement of both preacher and audience to focus on the Word preached. Paul’s command to Titus “Let no one disregard you” (Titus 2:15) convicted me during this project regarding commanding attention. For so long, I had thought it was a passive statement, but truly the preacher should be striving to teach the

church and command the audience to listen to what is declared.

The most lasting theological growth from this project was planted in the initial question: is it possible to train a church to listen better, or is such a task a predestined work of God that is only up to him and not a responsibility of the preacher? I have determined wholeheartedly that it is possible to train a church to listen. It requires the grace of God, but it is well within the responsibilities of the preacher to teach the church how to listen to God's Word, discern the truth, and apply the message to their lives. My ecclesiology has long been one of building one another up and bearing one another's burdens, but now it has expanded to training others how to listen to God's Word so that they may take the Word to the nations and teach others to observe all that Christ has commanded.

Personal Reflections

I took a new assignment with the United States Air Force to be within driving distance of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary with the intention of completing a doctorate there. My wife asked me a few weeks before my first class what my purpose was in pursuing a doctorate. I am glad she asked me that question because it led me to realize that my answer was far less clear than I thought it would be: I wanted to be a better preacher; I wanted to work alongside a cohort to spur one another on towards good works; I wanted to really delve into and mull over some of the great preaching books of our generation; and I wanted to be a part of the work that God is doing through R. Albert Mohler Jr. and the staff he has called together in Louisville, Kentucky. I also (half) joked that I wanted to be called Dr. Dad. None of these reasons seemed so valuable that I should sacrifice the amount of time and money that they would require, but I felt called to accomplish the goal I had set before myself. And by the grace of God, my wife supported me. The five purposes listed above have been accomplished, and I have grown much in understanding preaching, in encouraging other pastors, and in understanding and utilizing

different preaching styles and rhetorical techniques. I was encouraged more by my professors—Michael Pohlman, T. J. Betts, Hershael York, and David Prince, as well as Brian Payne, Adam Dooley, Shane Parker, and Kevin Jones—than I expected to be in ways that I did not expect to be. I was blessed to be part of the burgeoning Broadus Society at Southern, and I mourned with Michael Pohlman and others as Art Azurdia was exposed to be in serious sin.

But the way in which I grew the most was not in my original list of reasons to pursue a doctorate; rather, it was in completing my project and finding a concentrated focus in which to devote my time and energies. When I chose the project of teaching the church to listen, I was not even sure that it would be my final project but that it would be worth at least exploring for a few months until it either proved to be the right project or a better project presented itself. I also heavily considered writing a thesis on the same subject rather than a project. Having completed this project, I am stunned by the things I learned and the importance of this project in both my life and the broader life of the local churches in which I am privileged to serve. Focusing on the topic of listening to the Word of God revealed an overt theme of Scripture to which I had given scant attention in both my preaching career and seminary studies. I was also blessed to have many outlets with whom to share the importance of listening, and as I shared, the encouragement came flowing in from many brothers sharing articles, books, and techniques regarding listening well that they had discovered. Then, I was blessed to have run a project on this topic rather than writing a thesis. A thesis would have been dry and theologically accurate, but it would have missed the cultural experience that it is genuinely hard to get the church interested in listening to the Scriptures. I hope this project conveys the passion that has arisen in my heart not only to rightly preach the Word of God but also to see it received and obeyed in my hearers—to be the midwife, as Daniel Doriani put it, who helps in the

rebirth process.⁷

I also grew in my reading of many great works on expository listening to realize that though many think that teaching a congregation to listen is an overlooked topic, it has been seen, written, and preached about more than most realize. I know I was blind to the seriousness and prolific nature of the subject, not because of my lack of reading or listening to sermons but because I did not realize truly what was at stake in being attentive to the Word. When starting this project, I felt that regardless of the outcome, it would be only a topic of interest that when finished, I would move on to the next topic and continue my theological growth as I preached the Word. But having finished this project, I have realized that this dissertation will be the foundation of all my future ministry, that truly hearing the Word of God is of primary importance in people's lives regardless of where they are spiritually. I did not expect this project to have such a profound effect on me. I am glad that I have begun to plumb the depths of the responsibilities of the congregation to hear expository preaching so that I may help many to hear the Word of God as I pray that God's Word will find good soil in their lives and produce great fruit. May the end result be that the Lamb who was slain would receive the reward of his suffering.

Conclusion

This project honed the congregation at FBCnl to be attentive to the preaching of the Word in order to be motivated to strive for the upward call they have in Christ Jesus. While the goals were not met, the purpose was accomplished in the lives of many within the church because the project had many strengths—though it also had many weaknesses. This chapter reviewed how a project like this one could be run more effectively in the future and impact many with the Word of Christ. In completing this

⁷Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 59.

project, I have grown to understand God better, to command men and women to be responsible to listen, and to take the Word to unbelievers while strengthening the church. Most importantly, I have laid a foundation in my life to know that unless people hear the Word of God, they cannot have faith in Christ, and lacking faith, they cannot be saved. This project grew my awareness of the command to listen and revealed to me that many overlook this simple fact. I submit this project as a reminder to all who read it: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22).

APPENDIX 1
PRE-PROJECT SURVEY

Name _____ Age _____

1. Each sermon is relevant to me.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

2. Sermons at FBCnl are based on the Word of God.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

3. I am prompted to change my beliefs/worldview because of the preaching.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

4. I am prompted to change my actions because of the preaching.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

5. I feel distracted, drowsy, or distant during the sermon.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

6. Number of days from the sermon before I begin to feel distant from God.

0-1 2-3 3-5 6-7 7-14 14 or more

7. I clearly grasp the main point of the sermon.

Strongly Agree – Agree – Slightly Agree – Slightly Disagree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree

Remarks (Optional; This survey will be kept *strictly confidential* unless you request a response): _____

APPENDIX 2
POST-PROJECT SURVEY

Please Complete this Side First

Name _____ Age _____

Mark the principles which you attempted at least once in the last eight weeks?

- Praying Before the Sermon
- Praying for Myself
- Praying for My Pastor
- Praying for My Church
- Reading the Passage Prior to the Sermon
- Taking Every Thought Captive During the Sermon
- Taking Notes on the Sermon and/or Application
- Discussing the Passage / Message After Church
 - Immediately Following the Sermon
 - Later in the Week
- Applied the Passage to My Life

In the past eight weeks, how many Sundays did you attend church (1-8)? _____

Remarks (Optional; This survey will be kept *strictly confidential* unless you request a response): _____

Please Complete Opposite Side First

1. Each sermon is relevant to me.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

2. Sermons at FBCnl are based on the Word of God.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

3. I am prompted to change my beliefs/worldview because of the preaching.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

4. I am prompted to change my actions because of the preaching.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

5. I feel distracted, drowsy, or distant during the sermon.

Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Slightly Disagree – Slightly Agree – Agree – Strongly Agree

6. Number of days from the sermon before I begin to feel distant from God.

0-1 2-3 3-5 6-7 7-14 14 or more

7. I clearly grasp the main point of the sermon.

Strongly Agree – Agree – Slightly Agree – Slightly Disagree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree

If you consider that your listening has improved since using the Simple Listening Handout, which of the six techniques helped the most (Choose One)?

Prayer

Reading the Word

Taking Every Thought Captive

Taking Notes

Revisiting the Passage

Applying the Message

APPENDIX 3

SIMPLE LISTENING HANDOUT

Six Simple Ways to Improve Your Church Experience

Before the Sermon

1. **Pray** (1 Thessalonians 5:17)
 - a. Pray for Your Heart (Psalm 119:18)
 - b. Pray for Your Pastor (2 Thessalonians 3:1)
 - c. Pray for Your Church (2 Thessalonians 1:11)
2. **Read the Word** (Psalm 1:2)
 - a. Read the Sermon Passage (Romans 15:4)
 - b. Consider How You Should Respond (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

During the Sermon

3. **Take Every Thought Captive** (2 Corinthians 10:5)
 - a. Identify a Distraction you **Can** Fix and Fix it (Acts 16:18)
 - b. Identify a Distraction you **Can't** Fix and Determine to Not Let it Steal Your Attention (Luke 10:41-42)
4. **Take Notes** (2 Timothy 4:13 & Luke 2:19 & John 2:22)
 - a. How Would I Teach This? (Matthew 10:27)
 - b. What Should I Ask the Pastor to Clarify? (Acts 8:31)
 - c. What Should I Further Research? (Nehemiah 8:31)

After the Sermon

5. **Revisit** (Acts 17:32)
 - a. Discuss the Sermon with Someone (Proverbs 27:17)
 - b. Reread the Passage at Least Once (Acts 17:11)
6. **Apply** (James 1:22)
 - a. Be Obedient to the Sermon Application (Mark 16:20)
 - b. Encourage and/or Reprove Someone Else with the Application (Acts 13:42-44)
 - c. Confess Your Disobedience to God and Anyone Else Necessary (James 5:16)

SIMPLE LISTENING HANDOUT (REVERSE)

PUPROSE

The purpose of this card is to hone you, the hearer, to be attentive to the preaching of the Word of God in order to be motivated to strive for the upward call you have in Christ Jesus, that he may be glorified and his church strengthened.

RATIONALE

There are more commands to listen well in the Bible than to preach well, therefore a hearer must make efforts to listen well. The six principles on the reverse side of this card are intended to help you do just that. They are a summary of many biblical principles and are designed to help before, during, and after the sermon. Accomplishing these principles regularly will make you a better listener and a more effective witness.

The most important thing you can do to hear the Word of God is to have a desire to hear the Word of God. This is accomplished by realizing your need for a saviour and putting your whole hope in Jesus Christ for salvation. Without the Holy Spirit working in your life and opening your eyes, ears, and heart to this need then nothing you do will help.

This card is meant to be a help, not a guideline. You should not feel constrained by these principles, but you should be doing something to improve your listening. In order to best utilize this card you should reference it often and keep track of your progress, as this will show you where you need improvement and how God is sanctifying you.

“We are told men ought not to preach without preparation. Granted. But we add, men ought not to hear without preparation. Which, do you think needs the most preparation, the sower or the ground? I would have the sower come with clean hands, but I would have the ground well-plowed and harrowed, well-turned over, and the clods broken before the seed comes in. It seems to be that there is more preparation needed by the ground than by the sower, more by the hearer than by the preacher.”

~ Charles Haddon Spurgeon¹

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Committed to the Local Church

¹Charles. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best: Over 2200 Striking Quotations from the World's Most Exhaustive and Widely-Read Sermon Series*, ed. Tom Carter (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1988), 158. This citation was not in the original handout.

APPENDIX 4
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

To be read prior to congregants filling out Pre- and Post- Project Surveys:

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to Hone the Congregation to be Attentive to Expository Preaching at First Baptist Church, New Lebanon, Ohio. This research is being conducted by Canyon Shearer for purposes of project research. In this research, you will complete two surveys, a Pre-Project Survey and a Post-Project Survey, and implement six methods for honing your hearing that are provided via a handout. Any information you provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

The goal of this project is to increase your attentiveness to hearing the Word of God through a handout detailing “Six Simple Ways to Improve Your Church Experience.” You should focus on one method per week.

Reading ahead or applying other methods outside of their assigned week is not discouraged. However, I ask you to intentionally accomplish one method per week and accomplish all methods within the next six weeks. Each of these methods has subsets listed under it, these subsets are provided to give a span to the technique; you should not feel limited by or to the subsets, as long as you accomplish the main method.

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ABSTRACT

HONING THE CONGREGATION TO BE ATTENTIVE TO EXPOSITORY PREACHING AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH NEW LEBANON, OHIO

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This project equipped congregants at First Baptist Church, New Lebanon, Ohio to be attentive to expository preaching by implementing six simple biblical methods to listen better. Chapter 1 introduces the history and ministry context of First Baptist Church. Chapter 2 exegetes four passages of Scripture (Neh 8:1-12; Acts 16:14; Luke 24:25-45; Acts 8:4-11) to demonstrate (1) the importance and result of hearing God's Word preached and (2) the need for listeners to rely on God for both the message and the grace to understand the message. Chapter 3 examines the doctrine, importance, and methods of expository listening from the preaching and teaching of history. Chapter 4 describes the project and recounts the way in which the project was administered and compiled. Chapter 5 evaluates the results of the project with respect to the stated goals. The end goal of this project was to hone the congregation at First Baptist Church to be attentive to the preaching of the Word in order to be motivated to strive for the upward call they have in Christ Jesus as responsible and fruitful Christ-followers.

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AS, Community College of the Air Force, 2005
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