

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

The traditional sermon is in danger of losing its audience if steps are not taken to reach the multi-media saturated congregation that exists today. Changes in culture and technological advances have created a congregation that has an extremely limited focus of attention. Additionally, people are becoming accustomed to presentations that are not only auditory in nature but also utilize multiple senses simultaneously. Very few adults spend large amounts of time using primarily one sense in an organized group, except in one setting: the church's Sunday morning message.

In most churches today, the typical message is delivered orally from the pulpit with the use of nonverbal hand gestures and facial expressions. Preachers develop a delivery style very early in their ministry and seldom vary from what is comfortable or expected from them. People expect a verbal discourse when they hear the term 'sermon'. The potential monotony of this approach has caused many in this media-driven society to dread lengthy sermons. It is possible that if parishioners really communicated to their

pastors about their lack of attention during a message, many pastors would feel inadequate.

The tension and balance between preaching adequate content and keeping the congregation's attention is an important aspect of successful preaching. Most sermons do not lose their effectiveness because of the pastor's lack of preparation or effort. It is in the communication of the message that most people's attention is lost. At the same time, attention alone does not equate with a successful message. A pastor could use multiple illustrations and humorous anecdotes but not have enough valid content to truly proclaim the gospel message. However, when proper content is presented, and the pastor keeps the attention of his or her flock, retention of the material should result. Additionally, the pastor hopes that the retention of sermon concepts and ideas leads to a life-change within each individual.

The attention of the people is vital to effective preaching in the decade of the 1990s and beyond. The prevalence of multi-media presentations to which the average person is exposed on a daily basis provides some insight into what captures his or her attention. Variety must be a part of each pastor's homiletical arsenal. Pastors can no longer tacitly assume that purely spoken communication accomplishes all that can and should be addressed in preaching.

This need for variety is further demonstrated by God's interaction with humankind. God, throughout history, has used various approaches to communicate to humankind. One glance at His creation removes all doubt that God purely communicates through auditory revelations. His supreme example, Jesus Christ, was a master teacher/preacher who utilized multi-media approaches.

Studies in education during the past thirty years have revealed new insights into how people learn and process information. Several learning styles have been identified in research. Some people learn primarily by hearing; some learn primarily by visual interaction; still others learn by actually doing projects.

Most pastors fail to fully engage visual and kinesthetic learners in their auditory deliveries. A more intentional approach by the pastor to consider learning styles in the sermon can increase attention to and retention of sermon content. This approach should be seriously considered by pastors today because it is theologically grounded and has the potential to increase cultural relevancy.

Setting

The proposed research project took place at Valley Fellowship Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Valley Fellowship began in 1980 and had an average Sunday morning attendance of 371 at the time of the project. The church had two Sunday

morning adult services. The church, which was interdenominational and charismatic, was socio-economically diverse with the largest percentage of the families being lower-middle class. The church was ethnically diverse, yet was predominantly white. Three full-time pastors and four part-time workers were employed by the church.

The most common type of message at the church included a large selection of Scriptures which were usually incorporated into a topical message. The sermons were usually forty-five minutes in length. However, at times they had been as short as thirty minutes or as long as one hour. In an average week, casual conversational questions about the message that were presented to parishioners two or three days after the service revealed a very low level of recall for the content of the sermon. No intentional evaluative tool was ever used by the pastors to determine which messages seemed to be more effective than others. The pastors, from time to time, solicited responses from each other about how the sermon appeared to be received. However, no systematic planning was adopted to determine what seemed to be helpful and what seemed to be effective.

Statement of the Problem

The delivery of the speaker, the choice of Scripture or topic, the length and structure of the message, and the selection of illustrations all impact the effectiveness of a

message. Most pastors labor over their messages for hours each week as they seek to inspire their congregation and expand the kingdom of God. Few pastors, however, consciously and intentionally attempt to identify just how much of what they are saying is truly imparted to memory by the church attendees.

Pastors often overlook two areas of sermon preparation that can enhance their ability to be more effective communicators of Scripture. First, the minister seldom considers the need for a variety of approaches and deliveries. Second, pastors fail to engage all the learning styles present in the congregation on a routine basis. A more intentional attempt by the pastor to incorporate sermon material and to consider learning styles that engage the entire congregation can increase the retention of sermon content.

Research in the psychology of learning has produced significant material that can improve the effectiveness of most preachers. Drs. Rita and Kenneth Dunn identify a myriad of elements of learning that determine how a person can process information at an optimal level.¹ Of the elements they present, one element that can dramatically change the preacher's effectiveness is called the perceptual element. The perceptual element identifies how a person most readily assimilates material. This element is identified by Marlene

¹Rita Dunn, Kenneth Dunn and Donald Treffinger, *Bringing Out the Giftedness in Your Child* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1992), 137-161.

LeFever, a well-known Christian educator, as a person's learning preference.² Three learning preferences are presented by LeFever in her educational literature, although there are some who identify several additional ones. Auditory learners are those who process information primarily through hearing. Visual learners process information through seeing. Tactile, or kinesthetic, learners learn through action. The old proverb, "I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand," sheds light on the different ways information is assimilated.³

Although educational research has discovered major differences in how people learn, the field of education has remained predominantly auditory in its approach to teaching. According to LeFever, 90 percent of teaching is auditory in nature.⁴ In the adult Sunday morning message, the percentage most probably is even higher.

Throughout a person's early growth and development, shifting between learning styles is frequent and expected. By the sixth grade, most students develop a preferred learning preference and are extremely resistant to changes

²Marlene LeFever, "Understanding Learning Styles," in *Christian Education: Foundations for the Future*, ed. Robert Clark, Lin Johnson, and Allyn Sloat (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 338.

³Howard Hendricks, *The 7 Laws of the Teacher* (Atlanta: Walk Thru the Bible Ministries, 1987), 81.

⁴LeFever, 339.

in that style. According to LeFever, 70 percent of all students will exhibit a clear preference for a particular learning style. It would not be unusual to find a group of people that are comprised of 20 percent auditory learners, 40 percent visual learners, and 40 percent kinesthetic learners.⁵ This information can have a profound impact on ways to improve the adult sermon.

Research has indicated that active retention of material is dramatically increased when more than one sense is utilized. In a study reported by Terry Hall, this premise is supported convincingly. When a subject was taught through purely verbal communication, only 70 percent could recall the material three hours later. Only 10 percent of the audience could recall the material three days later. When the audience was exposed to visual material alone, 72 percent could recall the material three hours later. After three days, the percentage dropped to 20 percent. The use of both the verbal and the visual approach together improved the percentages dramatically. When both approaches were combined, 85 percent could recall the material three hours later and 65 percent could recall it three days later.⁶

⁵LeFever, 339.

⁶Donald Regier, "Audiovisual Support for Your Teaching," in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Teaching*, ed. Kenneth O. Gangel and Howard G. Hendricks (N.p.: Victor Books, 1988), 197.

According to Hall, 83 percent of learning occurs through sight. In the same study, 11 percent of learning is attributed to hearing.⁷ Howard Hendricks reports that psychologists believe people only have a potential of remembering 10 percent of what they hear. When seeing is added to hearing, the potential increases to 50 percent. When doing is added to the other two learning styles, the potential reaches 90 percent.⁸

The implications from this information on learning styles should interest the pastor who is concerned about increasing sermon retention in his or her congregation. Unfortunately, however, few pastors have intentionally incorporated educational psychology into their sermon preparation. The past two generations in America have gone through radical changes in technology and society. As a result, the span of attention is steadily decreasing as the year 2000 approaches. Many influential professors of preaching have discussed the declining interest in sermons in their homiletical texts. Yet, each writer affirms the need and the mandate to continue proclaiming God's message through the sermon.

John R. W. Stott, a respected preacher and leader, claims that the pastor cannot assume that his or her

⁷Regier, 196.

⁸Hendricks, 81.

congregation desires to listen or is even able to listen to the traditional sermon.

When they are accustomed to the swiftly moving images of the screen, how can we expect them to give their attention to one person talking, with no frills, no light relief and nothing else to look at? Is it not beyond them?⁹

He argues that, although people are in this condition, the sermon is still a necessary aspect of the worshipping community. He adds, however, that the preacher must fight for the attention of his or her listeners.¹⁰ The modern preacher is challenged to use "variety, colour, illustration, humour and fast-flowing movement."¹¹

George Sweazey, a professor of preaching who wrote an important preaching text in 1976, makes insightful observations as he discusses the various structures a sermon can take. He discusses the issue of visible objects within the sermon to enhance interest and effectiveness. He notes some opposition from traditionalists about the use of visual aids in preaching. Many argue that the use of objects upset the reverence of the service.¹² Sweazey concludes, however, "the

⁹John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 75.

¹⁰Stott, 75.

¹¹Stott, 76.

¹²George Sweazey, *Preaching the Good News* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1976), 91.

fact that sermons are so much confined to the sound of one voice can be attributed less to reverence and fitness than to lack of creativity."¹³ He blames the lack of creativity in sermons on an unconscious support of tradition and on the comfort level of pastors in the auditory arena.¹⁴

The hypothesis was that an intentional inclusion of visual objects within an adult message would increase the retention of sermon content. From the information presented, the problem that was addressed was that pastors of churches in general are not considering the various learning styles of their congregation in the delivery of their sermons. As a result, much of what is said in the sermon is quickly forgotten. Certain questions about methodology and procedure are discussed in later chapters of this report. Some questions generated by the hypothesis, however, should be addressed presently. The term 'visual objects' refers to concrete, physical examples that are presented from the pulpit. An example would be the demonstration of a potter's wheel within a sermon about Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house, recorded in the Bible. The word 'sermon' refers to the Sunday morning message at Valley Fellowship Church. 'Adult' denotes any person present in the service who is eighteen years of age or older. 'Memory retention' refers to the ability of a parishioner to recall or recognize specific

¹³Sweazey, 91.

¹⁴Sweazey, 91.

material at a specified time after the service.

'Sermon content' refers to the main points of the pastor's outline and the general thesis of the message.

James Cox, a respected preacher and professor, notes that the attention and interest of the congregation are crucial to effective preaching.¹⁵ He concludes that a thirty second television spot, in theory, could have more impact than a thirty minute sermon.¹⁶ The reason he believes this to be possible is because "the medium, the message, and the audience are more compatible."¹⁷ Although the average pastor spends more time and energy on traditional sermon preparation than on innovative approaches, Cox believes other mediums of preaching should be explored.¹⁸ This project attempted to explore the impact of intentionally trying to connect the medium, message, and audience into a cohesive bond that produced retention of important material.

Background and Significance

Numerous factors were at work in bringing the writer to the problem at hand. The writer grew up in a preacher's family. Jerry Simon, his father, was a missionary and pastor

¹⁵James Cox, *Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985), 179.

¹⁶Cox, 256.

¹⁷Cox, 256.

¹⁸Cox, 257.

for almost thirty years. He was a person who loved to preach. For most of his ministry, he preached three messages a week. Due to his position, the writer was exposed to hundreds of sermons during childhood. Some of Simon's sermons caught and held the author's attention. Other sermons were not memorable. At Simon's death in 1993, his son reflected not only on his father's life but also on his preaching. A handful of messages was brought to his memory. Most of the messages had one common characteristic: a visual object had been part of the message. Additionally, as the writer reflected on sermons heard during seminary and in other contexts, visual aids tended to be a recurring theme of messages that were remembered.

The writer would be characterized as a visual learner. From birth, the writer struggled with poor eyesight and was even told by doctors that he would be blind by the time he reached the third grade. God has supernaturally helped the author to retain his sight. Although the author's sight is not perfect, his dominant learning style has developed into a very visual approach. The author's experience and preference have heavily shaped the focus of this project.

Readings and conferences have also shaped the author's view of the preaching task. Conferences from Walk Thru the Bible Ministries have greatly impacted the author's approach to teaching and learning. Bruce Wilkinson and Howard Hendricks are two educators who seek to engage their audiences

through multiple senses. Much of their material has been used by the author in children's chapels, Bible studies, and youth services with favorable results. The author has also experimented with various approaches in preaching that engaged the congregation in using multiple senses with solid results. However, before this project, he had not systematically tried to identify and evaluate exactly what is taking place.

The project was selected because of its ability to study and quantify the effects of visual aids in preaching as it relates to retention of material. The project assisted Valley Fellowship Church in identifying how well the sermons were being remembered. While an increase in retention of material may have seemed a lesser priority for the church, it was still a significant goal. Greater satisfaction from the sermon time was also a positive result. At the same time, a more intentional involvement in the learning process was evident. A greater awareness of personal learning styles and an appreciation for varying methods was accomplished. Finally, evaluative tools were used in the process of the study that allowed the congregation to give constructive comments to the pastoral staff.

In a larger sense, this study has the potential to positively impact other pastors who are seeking better ways to convey Scripture. The project can provide quantitative data to help support the premise that learning style theory

is an important part of sermon preparation. From a cursory look at three knowledgeable preachers who were noted earlier (Sweazey, Stott, and Cox) it can be seen that the problem of attention in sermons is not exclusive to Valley Fellowship.

All preachers should know that the changing society is effecting their listener's ability to focus attention on the message. This project sought to identify one variable that could positively affect the changing congregation. The study will hopefully prod others into doing further research on various approaches to the sermon as well as incorporating learning style theory into sermon preparation.

A few terms in the study need further defining. First, an official definition for a learning style is "the way a student perceives things best and the way he or she processes or uses what has been presented."¹⁹ 'Multiple senses' refers to the use of more than one of the five senses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. A 'primary mode' or 'modality' is used to refer to a person's primary learning preference. A 'secondary mode' or 'modality' is the second most prominent learning preference used by an individual in processing information.

Every effort was made to assure that the testing and methodology used were in keeping with accepted quantitative research for Doctor of Ministry projects. However, there were limits and uncontrollable aspects of the study that

¹⁹LeFever, 334.

should be identified. First, the study did not seek to attempt to provide a comprehensive answer to the problem of inattention in sermons. It only sought to identify one variable that can have an impact on the retention of a message. Neither did the project seek to permanently establish an exclusive approach to preaching. It was only an attempt to add variety and to seek to find if it had a positive result in the church.

Several uncontrollable elements were present in this project. The work of the Holy Spirit could have drastically altered the hearts and minds of the pastor and congregation with no prior notice and with exceptional results. The project methodology allowed room for a sovereign move of God in a service that could have affected the reliability and validity of the test. Additionally, it can be assumed that the project can be implemented elsewhere with similar results. However, a universalizing of the results would be inappropriate when considering that the study was being limited to one church. The commitment of the volunteers to the study was an additional concern. Attrition or lack of cooperation could have affected the timely gathering of important information.

Numerous assumptions should be presented to help the reader understand the writer's basis. First, the Holy Spirit is the one who ultimately determines the effectiveness of any preaching. The Holy Spirit is active in each

Christian's life and He guides the pastor in the preparation and delivery of sermons. From impromptu to manuscript preaching, He is the ultimate factor. Second, a pastor who is well prepared spiritually and mentally to deliver sermons is honored by God and better equipped to be a useful messenger. Third, traditional approaches, just for the sake of tradition, are not necessarily good. Fourth, a majority of people come to church with a willingness to actively receive the message from the pastor. Finally, most people have a preferred learning style that helps them process information.

The problem was the lack of retention in sermon material. The proposal was that visual stimulation would make a marked difference in the retention of the material. The author had biblical, historical, and theological material that helped him clearly articulate a theology of ministry that supported the hypothesis and assisted in finding a solution.