

Listening to the Word of God

“Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us”
(Acts 10:33, *NIV*).

No need to shake yourself awake. This is not a dream. Every preacher yearns for people to come to church anxious to hear a message from God’s anointed messenger. This usually does not consistently happen. However, as preachers, there are ways that we can prepare our people to hear the life-transforming Word of God.

Preparing People to Hear the Word

Preaching is the highlight and heart of the church service. This should be reflected in the way we organize services. When the service is overloaded and insufficient time is given for preaching, it is silently transmitted that preaching is low priority. Such churches could be rightfully accused of being carnal, and in danger of spiritual decline.

Kenneth Barney in an article entitled “How Shall They Hear without a Preacher” said, “It is clear what happens when preaching time is crowded into the waning minutes of a congregation’s attention span in a service dominated by lengthy preliminaries. The service’s heart has been weakened and left barely beating, the people’s spiritual health impaired. Balance is destroyed, the weight put in the wrong place.”

He goes on to suggest that “the preacher should go to the pulpit while the spiritual tide is still rising, not after it has crested and is receding. The tide should keep rising during the message and reach its peak at the altar call.”

What causes the flow in the service to recede right before preaching? Here’s a short list:

1. Boring announcements, presented by someone who has spent little time in preparation.
2. The pastor rebuking the congregation right before turning the service over to the guest speaker.
3. Taking an offering and then quickly turning the service over to the preacher.
4. Giving a long, flattering, introduction. Worst still is making introductions of everyone on the platform. There may be a place and time for such but not right before the preaching. If you are looking for a brief, yet powerful introduction, why not try this one? “Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us” (Acts 10:33, *NIV*).
5. Making lighthearted comments and jokes right before the preaching event.
6. Announcing that the congregation will eat together right after the preaching. That will work on their stomachs but not on their hearts.
7. Turning things over twenty minutes before the scheduled close of the service.

It is imperative that the service is turned over when it is a spiritual high. When it seems appropriate for preaching, let it happen, regardless of what remains to be done with the normal routine. A move of God does wonders for bringing the anointing on a preacher. It breathes life into a sermon outline of dry bones. Get in the habit of following the lead of the Spirit, and not regimented programs.

Pastors should be concerned with the entire service and the way it flows. It is possible to organize the preliminaries: Bible reading, praises and worship, choir, special songs, and testimonies so they flow together, are timely, and lead up to the preaching of the Word of God.

When time is wasted it means the preacher is coming to the pulpit when the people are tired spiritually, emotionally, and physically. It is not fair to the preacher, the message, or our God. Another enemy is routine. People get used to the mechanics.

People Preparing to Hear the Word

Preachers occasionally retreat home feeling they are a failure, assuming their sermon lacked anointing. Sometimes, it isn't the preacher who has fallen short; it is the congregation who has failed to listen.

Cornelius used a military term "commanded" (Acts 10:33) in speaking to Peter. John MacArthur said, "He understood that when the Lord spoke it was a command demanding obedience. He was ready to receive his orders from the Lord."

Hear the Word. Then do it!

We should be doers of the Word, and not hearers only.

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:22-25, *NIV*).

The *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* provides this word of instruction, "Christianity is a religion of action. As important as it is to listen (cf. James 1:19), one must not stop there. Doing must follow listening." Let us avoid becoming a "hearing-but-not-doing man."

James 1:18-25 provides important steps in hearing the Word of God. It explains what we should do before, during, and after hearing the Word.

1. Be swift (quick, prompt, ready) to listen to God's Word (verse 19). See Romans 10:17. Faith, believing, and salvation are results of hearing preaching. (Preacher, remember there can be no hearing without preaching.)
2. Rid your life of filth and evil. The word picture here is stripping off dirty clothes. We cannot have progress in our spiritual lives if we are unwilling to reject and forsake sin (verse 21).
3. Receive (accept) the Word of God (verse 21).
4. Humbly yield (give way to, or submit) to the Word of God.
5. Allow the Word to be engrafted (implanted, planted) in the soil of your heart (verse 21).
6. Obey the Word of God (verse 22). Become a doer. Hearing, reading, and studying God's Word has no benefit if we do not obey. The *Life Application New Testament Commentary* says, "God's Word can only grow in the soil of obedience."
7. Do not forget the Word of God (verse 25). Hide it in your heart (Psalms 119:11).

"Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice" (Ezekiel 33:30-32, *NIV*).

Donald S. Whitney, "How to Make Every Sermon Count" provides three tips for better concentration:

1. Get enough sleep. If you go to church sleepy on Sunday morning, what will be the side effect? You will be drowsy.
2. Take notes. This helps focus attention on the preaching. It also assists burning the idea into your brain. You can also record your thoughts and how the preaching applies to your life.
3. Sit near the front. This helps minimize distractions. When sitting at the back you have a full view of people talking, sleeping, and moving around.

Let us also add:

4. Attend the pre-service prayer session. This will help you get in touch with God, and prepare your heart for what God wants to do through His Word. Come to church expecting to hear from God. "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD" (Psalms 122:1). If you come to church expecting nothing the service will likely measure up to your expectations.
5. Do not get involved in stressful activities before church. It is hard to focus on the service and hear from God if you just had an argument with your wife or friend.

6. Train your family to listen to God’s Word by asking them questions about the preaching after service. Ask, “What did your Sunday school teacher teach this morning? What did the pastor preach? What were his key points? What illustrations did he use?”
7. Prepare for preaching by taking an active part in every part of the service. Participating in the worship service causes us to focus on the greatness of God. We worship God for who He is—His attributes or character, and for what He does—His work or actions.
8. Always switch off your mobile phone (if you have one) when you enter God’s house. A phone ringing in the middle of preaching is distracting to everyone—the preacher included.

Study Questions

1. What is the highlight and heart of the church service? _____

2. What idea is transmitted when the service is overloaded and there is little time for preaching? _____

3. What could we call churches that give little time to preaching? _____

4. What are the churches that give low priority to preaching in danger of? _____

5. What happens when preaching time is crowded into the final moments of the congregation’s attention span? _____

6. List four things that cause the flow of the service to recede right before preaching. _____

7. When should the service be turned over to the preacher? _____

8. How can a pastor organize the service so that it flows properly? _____

9. What is another enemy of the service? _____

10. Preachers sometimes feel their sermons lack anointing. At times it is not the preacher's fault. Who then can be blamed? Why? _____

11. What does participation in the worship service cause? _____

12. Why do we worship God? _____

13. What is the impact of a cell phone ringing in the middle of a sermon? _____

14. According to James 1, what are three (of the seven) steps in hearing God's Word? _____

15. Briefly mention Whitney's three steps to better concentration. _____

