



About listeners and their ability to form images

Preaching always presupposes an audience. But an important question should be asked: "Who, exactly, is the listener? How do we picture him or her?" In this and the following article we shall try to arrive at an answer to these questions.

Preaching that is adapted to the hearer

The theme addressed here is on all counts concerned with an appeal that is lately heard more and more often: it is the plea for preaching with the listener in mind. The implication is that the listener should be involved in the sermon. Since the sermon is meant for him, it is essential that he will recognize himself and his own life in what is addressed to him from the pulpit. Actually, this is quite self-evident since the Word of God is directed towards man and involves him. In various ways the Scriptures summon up a multifaceted image of man. The preaching as administration of God's Word is addressed to man and will thus, by definition, be listener-directed.¹

This should at the same time make clear that listener-directed preaching does not nullify what I, incidentally and for convenience's sake would like to call "textual-directed" preaching (i.e. preaching in which all the emphasis is on the interpretation of the text). Those who take exception to this statement, or are afraid of it, make a false contradiction as though textual-directed and hearer-directed preaching have strained relations. When things are as they ought to be, this should never happen. He who preaches in a textual-directed way will do this, if done properly, in a hearer-directed fashion. For the Scriptures introduce to us man as well.

It is of course quite possible that putting this into practice will at times meet more resistance than the theory does. For the minister who concentrates (too) heavily on hearer-directed preaching runs the risk of not fully giving the text its dues. In this event, while preparing his sermon, he is not overly concerned with a solid exegesis of the chosen text, but is concentrating especially on finding striking examples, and catchy, trendy words. In the meantime he forgets that the text itself may well contain vitally important issues, though they do not seem to have a ready or an easy appeal. Or it can happen that the text gives answers to questions that the listeners have not asked but which, nonetheless, can be of utmost importance.

Conversely, a minister who concentrates (too) heavily on preaching that is textual-directed will run the risk of not giving the listener his dues. He simply presumes that the listeners are already captivated by the text, and all he has to do is give a thorough interpretation of the text to draw in ready listeners. But he forgets that this approach (with the listener already captivated by the text) can in reality be seriously contested. When reality, as we know it, manifests itself as an adversary of God's promises in this life, it can become quite a struggle to expose the relevance of a text from God's Word for one's own life.

He who in the preparation of his sermons fails to direct himself to his audience (by not making allowance for potential questions) invites the risk of talking over the heads of his listeners. Hence, what should never happen is that hearer-directed and textual-directed preaching will be played off against each other. For, ultimately, these two approaches relate to two sides of the same issue; that is to say, preaching as a specific address coming from the Word of God for the people of today.²

Preaching that is directed to the heart

Every sermon is to be directed (via the text) to the listener. This is so, in the first place, because God addresses man in His Word. But in this connection it is important to take a view from another angle as well. I am thinking of what we confess in Lord's Day 25 (Question and Answer 65) of the Heidelberg Catechism where we read:

(Q.)...*where does this faith come from?*

(A.) *From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel...*"

It is quite evident here that preaching as the ministry of the Spirit³ is to be directed to the heart of the listener. The word "heart" points here to the very centre of a human being, the invisible centre of life in its totality. It is man's innermost place from which his entire life is taking on its shape. Preaching is directed to the heart as the location where the Spirit is working faith.

A prime characteristic of preaching is therefore that it aims for the heart. The sermon that is hearer-directed issues from and is closely connected with the sermon that is textual-directed. Being directed to the heart now deepens this kind of sermon. God the Holy Spirit is here in particular concerned with the heart of the hearer.

Once more, it is not helpful to introduce here a contradiction that, in essence, does not exist. This can be illustrated, for instance, by asking: "Should not all preaching be Christ-centered preaching?" Granted, all preaching should be so. But the very fact that it is Christ-centered, means that the preaching is to be directed to the heart. Dr. C. Trimp formulated this concept concisely and precisely in his essay '*God involves man...*' He asks the question whether in Christ-centered preaching man is given a place at all. Actually, he posits that this issue should in fact not be problematic. Trimp summarizes his view as follows: *Christ-centered* preaching

- (a) uncovers the resistance in the *heart* of man;
- (b) addresses the opposing voice of the *heart*;
- (c) inspires that very same *heart*, and
- (d) makes the heart resonate to the preaching.⁴

The above definitions, further enlarged upon in Trimp's essay, make it abundantly clear that Christ-centered preaching is directed to the heart of man, and that a contrast does not exist here. It is essential for all good preaching that it is directed to the heart of the hearer.

Having faith

It is evident from Lord's Day 25 that preaching as administration of the Spirit is directed to the heart of the hearer. I would like to pursue this further by pointing out that there is another central element in Lord's Day 25, namely: faith (Question and Answer 65). Preaching as administration of the Spirit is directed to the heart of the hearer. In other words, faith is (according to Lord's Day 25) the goal of the preaching. But what, actually, does it mean to have faith? I would like to answer this by distinguishing three dimensions of faith, all of which are interrelated. These three dimensions can be defined with the following key words: doctrine about God, relationship with God, and living before God.⁵

The first dimension, then, is about doctrine. Faith always has an aspect of cognition (knowing). Whoever believes must know who God is. And God lets Himself be known inasmuch as He has revealed Himself in the Holy Scripture. For many centuries the Church has read the Scripture and reiterated the message found there in the Church's confessions of faith. Whenever preaching is taking place this dimension of faith must be recognizable: the listeners should be guided onward in their knowledge about the God of the Word as well as their knowledge about the Word of their God.

The second dimension is about one's relationship with God, for it is a distinct characteristic of faith that it implies a personal relationship with God, a relationship of trust. God has a relationship with man, and man stands in a relationship with God. Walking with God leaves room for feeling and experience. The end-all of faith is not only knowledge, since it encompasses such aspects as: experiencing faith, joy and longing, sorrow and being downhearted, anxiety and doubt, adoration and giving praise. Whenever a sermon is delivered, this dimension of faith must always be recognizable: the listeners ought to perceive that there is room for questions and recognize internal struggles generated in lives that suffer temptation. But there is also room for the joy of assurance of faith and tasting the goodness and mercy of God.

The third dimension is concerned with living before God. Faith always manifests itself in a Christian life style. Believers are identifiable because of the manner in which their lives are taking shape. Fruits of faith become visible in everyday living. He who believes will let himself be shown the way by the Ten Commandments of God, for this is the way that leads to the good life. Whenever the Word is preached this dimension of faith should always be distinguishable: the listeners should clearly get to see where the road to life will lead them. Following Christ will put them on this road. And despite their moments of falling down and rising up again, they need assistance to continue on this road.

Relationship

These three dimensions of faith (doctrine, relationship, and living before God) ought to be discernible in the preaching of the Word that (as administration of the Spirit) addresses faith in the heart of the hearer. Even so, I would like to pursue this concept one step further. Fact is that these three dimensions of faith are not neatly lined up in equal ranks. One of these dimensions forms the nucleus of faith: it is the dimension of the *relationship*. It is this dimension that lends colour and depth to faith. But this does not mean that the dimensions of *doctrine* and *living before God* are less important. It does signify, however, that these two should always reflect the dimension of the *relationship*. Seen this way, the doctrine about God will then never become a dry and abstract exposition of orthodox truths, neither when it is preached. At issue is always the knowledge of God in His relationship to man. Living before God will then never be patterned (neither in a sermon) on the keeping of a number of rules and statutes, because it is always concerned with living in the relationship with the God of the Law, and living according to the Law of God. It is a life that is characterized by following the Christ of the Scriptures, a life motivated by the Holy Spirit.

In an attempt to express what the significance of all this is for preaching, I would like to say that the entire sermon should sound in the key of the *relationship*. The meaning of this is foremost the reality that the sermon as administration of the Spirit ought to be directed to Faith found in the heart of the hearer. But at the same time it is wholly concerned with the framework in which the sermon takes place. This, then, is the liturgical framework of the meeting with God. God comes to us and we come to God. God opens His heart to us and we may open our hearts to Him. God seeks a relationship with His children, who in turn seek a relationship with Him. A sermon that is delivered within that framework can do little else but sound in the key of this precious *relationship*.

The preacher and the listener

This applies to all sermons that address faith in the heart of the listener. But now I must return to the question that in point of fact should be addressed. Who is the listener? How is the listener perceived, first of all from the view point of the preacher? How does he assess the listeners whom he meets in church on Sundays?

What kind of mental picture does he form of these listeners? The answer the preacher gives to this question will have important consequences for the way he approaches his preaching. In addition, no preacher looks at his listeners as completely neutral. For whether he is aware of it or not, he carries with him a certain image of the listener, an image that will affect his style of preaching.

With this in mind, I would like to elaborate on this idea from the preacher's viewpoint, and arrive at a few possible answers about the image the listener presents. At the same time I shall try to show how a certain listener-image will affect the preaching. For the sake of clarity, the following sketch may come across as rather black-and-white, in other words without provisory nuances.

The image of a listener

1. The first kind of listener is seen foremost as a *sinner*. It cannot be denied that the church is visited by certain sinful people, people that harbour hostility towards God. They are people who, as a matter of fact, do not really want to listen to His Word and do not wish to be admonished by it. The sermon addresses them as notorious sinners that always pursue what is wrong, as people that do not show an inkling of a restored life because they dismiss the Spirit. The pastor who makes this assessment of these listeners will preach penitence and warns them about their sinful style of living. He will point out the corrupt nature of his listeners, who are evidently blind to this fact. His style of preaching is bound to take on legalistic qualities, although the gospel is barely done justice to as the good tidings that bring joy into the lives of those who have surrendered to its message.
2. The second kind of listener is seen mainly as a representative of *twentieth century's secularized* man. There are church visitors who are taken in by the corrupt and pagan atmosphere that saturates the world. They are the people who do not resist the world and are lured into it.

This church visitor of the nineties is a die-hard individualist who doesn't care the least bit for society. This person is barely able to discern the significance of the norms of God's Word, for example in the relationship between man and woman, or in the area of recreation.

The preacher who has perceived this kind of listener-image will turn into a prophet who, sagaciously, observes what is happening in the world with its utterly corrupt society. He then proceeds to comment on this state of affairs and admonishes his listeners to forsake the world and to refuse being influenced by the culture that surrounds them. Here his style of preaching has a broad, social and ominous perspective which, nonetheless, leaves precious little thought for whatever may motivate a person to act the way he does.

3. The third kind of listener is seen chiefly as a *consumer*, a genuine or potential church shopper. On Sundays he visits the church to take a look and see whether he can find something to his liking. He passively slumps down on a chair (or in an uncomfortable pew) and, with critical ears and eyes, submits himself to whatever he experiences there. If it appeals to him he will return. If it fails to do so, he will try his luck somewhere else, since any concept of church or office is alien to him. The preacher who has this perception of his listeners will avoid establishing a close rapport, at any cost. He consistently shuns the vernacular, shrinks away from letting his audience get a glimpse of himself (just imagine: daring to show a human touch in church...). So he carefully avoids any anecdotal references in his sermons, and emphasizes practically every Sunday that God's Word is officially administered here, a Word whose origin does not lie in man nor is characteristic of man. This kind of preaching has a trait of invulnerability, and any criticism is therefore held to be fundamentally wrong since it would imply a measure of consumerism.
4. In the fourth place, the listener is primarily seen as *having been renewed by the Holy Spirit*, a person who in Christ has become a new creature. His life is filled with the joy of the assurance of faith and is almost free from any temptations. It appears that sin is (pretty well) conquered. The preacher who has this perception of the listener-image tends to be charismatic and impulsive and fires up his listeners to live through the Spirit, but he knows little about the shadowy sides of a Christian's life. His sermons are in the key of optimism and depict a life which (having been opened up for the work of the Spirit) is distinguished mainly by positive experiences and harmonious relationships.

Developing a listener-image

As mentioned before, the above listener images are, indeed, quite black-and-white. It can therefore be reasonably assumed that no preacher would look at his listener in such a one-sided fashion and use in his sermons the kind of one-sided accents as were sketched in earlier. Even so, the sketched four images of the listener may well strike us as being more or less familiar since (despite their black-and white appearance) they are made up of various factual elements. But this is not the issue at the moment. What is relevant here, however, is that having arrived (consciously or sub-consciously) at a certain listener-image the preacher will be noticeably influenced in the style of his preaching.

Given these data, and with a view to contemporary Reformed approaches to preaching, we may now see the necessity to spend some time on developing a listener-image. Who is this listener after all? What kind of listener-image will serve as a useful point of departure for the art of preaching? In the next article I hope to address these questions at further length.

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¹ Cf. C. Trimp, "God brengt de mens ter sprake" in A. G. Knevel (ed.) *"Bevindelijke prediking"* (Kampen, 1989), pp. 104-109. In this context we refer to the following observations: "Preaching is the instrument of reconciliation of our life before God, of illumination of our reason, of assurance of our hearts, and of the motivation of our will. Preaching comforts and admonishes us out of the truth that is with Christ. Hence, a sermon is per definition timely and hearer-directed. It is a true benefit of the "proclamation of life" which the Church must guard closely as her primary characteristic. (C. Trimp, *Klank en weerklank. Door prediking tot geloofservaring*, (Barneveld, 1989), pp. 40-41.

² Cf. Trimp, *Klank en weerklank*, p.23: "Therefore should the entire sermon have the voice of an *address*. The issue is neither a subjective perception of one's heart nor an objective proclamation of doctrine, but the address of the speaking God of the Covenant".

³ Cf. C. Trimp's view on preaching as administration of the Spirit: "*Woord, water en wijn. Gedachten over prediking, doop en avondmaal*," (Kampen, 1985), pp. 23-29.

⁴ Trimp, "God brengt de mens ter sprake" pp. 104-105.

⁵ Cf. the article "*Wat is spiritualiteit?*" which I wrote September, 1996 for *De Reformatie*, pp. 931-934.