



How can they hear when they always see?

Seeing, not hearing

People today used to visual images.

Our culture is geared towards pictures rather than print. If a speaker wants to communicate a message chances are he will opt for a multi-media presentation – a mixture of speaking, video clips, power-point slides and overhead projector transparencies. This emphasis on visual communication owes a great deal to the all pervasive influence of television – TV has shaped how people absorb information. Most people who watch a lot of TV are not used to listening to someone simply speaking without the use of visual aids for any length of time. Rather, they are used to watching constantly changing images that put no demands on their concentration.

What does this mean for preaching? Can people hear the message of a sermon when they are always used to seeing pictures? Is the time for preaching past? Should the church be adopting multimedia forms of communication in worship?

In previous articles I described some of these barriers to preaching. In response I noted that Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the good news and that the Apostles also instructed pastors to preach, and used this method themselves.

Throughout biblical times and church history preaching has been the primary means of communicating the Word of God. The biblical and historical background given in these earlier articles answers some of the primary objections raised against preaching. However, we still need to deal with this practical consideration raised by the visual character of our society. Yet, even here, it is important that we argue the case on principles rather than pragmatics – on what is true rather than on what works.

The value of the spoken Word

This low regard for the spoken word is of recent origin. For most of human history verbal communication was the main means of learning, persuasion and debate. Rhetoricians in ancient Greece and Rome spent much time and energy instructing students in the art of public oratory. The church too trained her ministers in the skill of communicating to people through the spoken word. Some were more able than others and there were times that the church put a higher value on preaching than at other times. But preaching was a mainstream form of communication. It wasn't peculiar, odd or different, but normal, usual and acceptable. It is only in more recent times that the value of preaching itself has been widely questioned.

An old proverb states the importance of the visual: 'I *hear*, I forget; I *see*, I remember; I *do*, I understand.' There is truth in this, but we should not underestimate the power of what we hear. Even today much more information is communicated by plain speech than in any other way. Despite this visual age there is still an enormous number of words being written, read and spoken. Many business organisations and teaching institutions still use the spoken word when addressing large audiences. Spoken words are also important for television – much of what happens is presented by a person or persons speaking to others. Think of all the television talk shows as one example and the news broadcasts as another. The spoken medium is still well used.

Even Willow Creek, with all its emphasis on drama, music, programming, lighting and image, recognises the central importance of preaching. In a special message to senior pastors at Willow Creek's leadership conference Pastor Bill Hybels had this to say:

"Now I don't like to say this around the staff; I don't like to say this, you know, around the church or even in public. But in closed-door sessions with senior pastors I like to say – it would be difficult for you to overestimate the importance of great preaching. It's not much of an exaggeration to say it's about 85 percent of the game."¹

Even with the thousands of hours that are poured into all the other aspects of Willow Creek's ministry Hybels recognises the central role of what is preached.

The value of the personal

Preaching is personal whereas the electronic television medium is impersonal; the people speaking through those flickering images seem close at hand but they are remote, inaccessible and unapproachable. By contrast the preacher is 'live', a flesh and blood person, someone 'real'. Moreover, he is accessible and approachable – you can shake his hand after the service, ask him questions and converse with him. Not only can the listener have contact with the preacher but there is also the opportunity to have fellowship with the rest of the congregation, an opportunity not afforded by a person sitting at home alone in their living room.

This is a compelling argument against the "electronic church". To sit at home in your lounge watching and listening to an American pastor preaching to his artificial television congregation (who listen to him with rapt attention not moving a muscle!) is quite different from sitting in the church building, listening to your own pastor, in amongst the congregation you know (although here too we hope you are listening with rapt attention!) Worshipping in your own congregation is better by far because it is a real-life community of people whom you know and who know you. As well as that, you know your pastor and your pastor knows you. Your pastor may not have the communication gifts of Dr. Charles Stanley, but the Lord calls all of us to be part of a local, living, loving, lively community of people who together can love the Lord and each other. The televised church, while of benefit to those who are house-bound and shut-in, is a poor substitute for the living members of the body of Christ.

The value of concentrating

We are still left with the objection that people today cannot concentrate – that their attention span is limited. The Puritan preachers of the 1600s generally preached for one hour and often much longer; today many preachers hesitate to speak for more than fifteen minutes. What can we do as preachers and listeners to overcome this problem of a lack of concentration?

As preachers we cannot ignore the capacity of our congregation to absorb the message. We need to take account of how much they can absorb. Stories and illustrations can help: They are to a sermon what windows are to a building – they let in light and air, so aiding concentration; they provide a 'breathing space' and enable people to listen more attentively for an extended time. Providing an outline of the sermon can also help people listen – perhaps on an overhead projector, or written up on a white-board, or printed in the church newsletter – this can help people see where the sermon is going. We who are preachers also need to make every effort to communicate as well as we can. We all have different gifts and abilities but we must make the best use of what the Lord has given to us in the way of communication skills. One of the puritan prayers dealing with a minister's preaching asks this of the Lord;

Give me then refreshment among thy people, and help me not to treat excellent matter in a defective way, or bear a broken testimony to so worthy a redeemer, or be harsh in treating of Christ's death, its design and end, from lack of warmth and fervency. And keep me in tune with thee as I do this work.²

As preachers we should do all we can to assist the congregation to apply their minds and pay close attention to the Word of the Lord.

Yet those in the congregation should not think that the preacher has to do all the work – listening is also hard work, as I have noticed when I have sat in the pew. The listener also has to concentrate. We ought to be training ourselves to concentrate harder and to listen longer. Here are a few practical suggestions to help you:

- Take notes. This often helps you pay attention to what is being said and it aids your memory of the sermon.
- Consider what you do on Saturday night. Ask yourself: Will this activity help or hinder my worship of the Lord tomorrow? Get to bed on time on Saturday night otherwise you will be half asleep on Sunday morning and afternoon/evening.
- Think about how much time you spend watching television. You should, of course, think about *what* you are watching – is it edifying, upbuilding, God-honouring? But I am also asking you to think about the *amount of time* you spend in front of TV. Watching television can not only be a terrible waste of time but it also dulls our ability to listen and concentrate. Too much TV leads us to expect constant change and variety in every presentation of information and makes us less able to benefit from reading the written word and listening to the spoken word.
- Pray. Pray that God will help the preacher to preach and the listener to listen.

Conclusion

It is true that we live in a visually orientated society. It is also true that more people are finding it harder to listen to sermons. This does not mean that we should cave in to the culture around us. Even in a visual culture there are many practical advantages to listening to the preached word proclaimed by your pastor. Yet, the bottom line is not a pragmatic, or even an historical argument – it is that God has commanded that the gospel be preached:

"How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ... Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

(Romans 10:14)

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¹ G.A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, p. 116.

² The Valley of Vision: A collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions, Edited by Arthur Bennett, *Banner of Truth*, 1975.