



The listener and the sermon

If one wants to advocate listener-directed preaching, one ought to know to what kind of listener the sermon should be addressed. This is why it is important to take the trouble of constructing an image of the listener. Who is this listener coming to church on Sundays to pay attention (among other things) to a sermon? In this article I shall investigate how to find an answer to this question.

Who is the listener to the sermon? It is not a question that has a readily available answer. This is because we must recognize the fact that in church we are dealing with a large variety of people. Concerning these people who come to church on Sundays, we find among them much diversity or pluralism. People going to church are most likely widely different from one another. They come with varied expectations and from miscellaneous backgrounds and a variety of situations and stations in life. In what follows I shall try to develop a picture of this diversification.

Diversity

Among church visitors we find people who consider themselves deeply involved with the church, as well as the kind of people who remain at the margin of church life. We meet people who have been successful in life and those who seem to be constantly pursued by troubles. We find both highly educated and basically educated persons. Then there are the typical urbanites and people from the country. One group is deeply attached to a regular setting and familiar words, whereas another group looks for an updated vernacular and new forms of church reality.

Here you will find those who expect a clear, brief, and straightforward sermon which the children, too, can appreciate. And then there are others who expect healthful and solid nourishment since they are no longer children. There is the person who seeks moving experiences in church, likes to revel in them, whereas others want to learn something above all else. Then there are the elderly in the church who want to sit in their accustomed places and are of the opinion that something has to change in the church, because they are worried about the young people who appear not to have the experience of being addressed as well.

There are youngsters who, back in the last row of the seating arrangement, are busy doing all kinds of things except paying attention. But there are also young people who try to find out about themselves and their relationship with God. They are wondering: who they are and who God is and what is expected of them in life. In church we meet intellectuals who consider themselves to be post-modernists. They are looking for a basic but authentic narrative that will touch them. But there are also those who do not have a clue about the questions that modern culture generates in every day living.

We also meet people who personally know what it is to live in the "twilight of God," as well as people who find that this term should be banished from a Reformed vocabulary. Next are the people who do not wish anything else but to believe in a simple child-like way, and those who understand the intellectual challenges in particular when it comes to giving account of their Christian faith. The visitors comprise both males and females. We may even find "outsiders" in the church who do not speak the idiom of her language. They do not understand the traditions of the Church nor do they know the God of the Church.

We know of listeners in church who like to kick at office bearers and especially their own minister. But then there are also listeners who are always highly supportive of their office bearers, the minister included. You will find followers and leaders, businessmen and women, fathers and

mothers. There will be those whose marriage is floundering and whose children, as a result, are distressed. There are people who live in sin and it does not bother them. But there are also those who live in sin and recognize their inability to make a clean break from it.

We meet unmarried people who are lonesome as well as married people who are lonesome.

We have heard about four-year olds whose parents insist that a special children's service is overdue. And then there are sixteen-year olds whose parents practically browbeat them into going to church. At this point we have not even mentioned the conservatives and the progressives, or talked about differences in spirituality or the impact of an image-culture. Neither have we referred to fathers who never seem to be home, or fathers who actually should not be home. We have not mentioned psychological problems nor alluded to the effect that competing church magazines may have as well as the allied problems resulting from this situation. And finally: you are a church visitor and so am I, and that should about complete the picture.

To the unaided eye

So when we talk about the listeners that visit church, we must be aware of a huge degree of diversity. It should therefore be evident from the above sketch that the question about a [typical] listener cannot be answered. When he delivers his sermon, the preacher will have to take into account the manifold differences among his listeners. Still, to think that the matter of listeners has now been settled is presumptuous. Admittedly, with an unaided eye it is impossible to come up with an unequivocal answer to the question: Who is the person who listens to the sermon on Sundays? At this point one may ask whether this implies that the minister should simply administer the Word of God or tailor his sermon to some average level (that of a junior high school student, for example) or that he, first of all, should do his best to make his sermons understandable. The bottom line of these considerations is that the question about the listener has no final answer. Or the opinion is that the listener's need should be taken into account only to the extent that the sermon must always be understandable. I think that this last view (with reference to listener-directed preaching) is too one-sided. For this approach affects only the intellectual ability or inability of the listener. It is too superficial, since it does not take into account the listener's much deeper and actual expectations; that is, he not only wants to understand but also wants to be understood.

Looking deeper

It should be possible to dig a bit deeper and to expand our view. Is there in and behind all this diversity not something that unifies the different listeners? Is there not something that is a common characteristic for each one of them, individually?

Indeed, I believe there is, and I would like to express this as follows. The listeners who visit church have (one way or another) a relationship with God. A distinctive feature of this relationship is that it is continually in motion. It is not stationary. There is a motion towards God and there is a motion away from God. One time the motion towards God prevails and this is shown in a warm and living relationship with God. Another time the motion away from God prevails, and this results in a chilled and silenced relationship with God. In fact, both of these motions are regularly intertwined in the lives of the listeners.

Therefore, this is what all those different listeners have in common: a continually changing position in the relationship with God. This circumstance should play a central role in the preacher's assessment of the listener's image. It may be helpful to elaborate on this from a more theological point of view. This can be done by defining the motion towards God as "searching for God", and the motion away from God as "being led into temptation".

Searching for God

It is a common trait of listeners who visit church on Sundays that for them there is a motion towards God inasmuch as they go there to meet Him. It is not only on Sundays, however, but all week long that this motion towards God occurs. This concept will be put into focus by a feature that is typical for the motion towards God, or "searching for God." This typical feature will be elaborated on in five points.

1. "Searching for God" is first of all an expression based on the Scriptures. In Hebrews 11:6 (RSV) we read: *"For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."* Isaiah 26:9 has: *"My soul yearns for thee in the night, my spirit within me earnestly seeks thee."* In Psalm 119:10 we read: *"With my whole heart I seek thee; let me not wander from thy commandments!"* Then there is Psalm 63:1 with: *"O God, thou art my God, I seek thee"* From these texts (and others could be mentioned) it is clear that the verb "to seek" unmistakably shows a direction. For whoever seeks God is directing his entire life towards God and the salvatory aspect of His directives. Next: the verb "to seek" connotes as well a strong desire: the heart of the believer longs for his God. And this opens up yet another aspect: in the Psalms this "seeking" God or "searching for" Him often coincides with "looking for God's face" in prayer. People who search for God are praying people, people whose lives are accentuated by prayer, people who are directed towards God, with longing.
2. The verb "seek" implies moreover an activity that is never completed. In this life the search for God never arrives at a completed stage; it never ends. There is always more we can learn and experience about Him.
3. The use of the verb "to seek" also expresses the idea that our relationship with God is not self-evident, and cannot be taken for granted. As far as having faith is concerned, we can never bask in the belief that we have arrived, or that our assurance of faith can be taken for granted. The God who reveals Himself remains the hidden One even in His revelation. Isaiah 45:15 confirms this: *"Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, o God of Israel, the Savior."* This concept can be seen most thoroughly in the cross of Christ. (*transl. note). It is in a totally unexpected place that God reveals Himself.

The idea that assurance of faith cannot be taken for granted is expressed in the verb "to seek" or "to search", but these words have a promise attached to them. In Matthew 7:7 we read: *"Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find."* Likewise in verse 8: *"For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds."* He who truly listens to what Jesus tells us, will discover that "searching for God" is not some kind of worrisome, vexatious activity (as Dr. Harry Kuitert's search), but that it is a searching that is answered by finding what one is looking for.

Our search for God is ultimately sustained by the fact that we have been found. I seek God because I have been found by Him. If it depended on me I would have abandoned my search all too readily. But guided by the Holy Spirit I continue my search. In my innermost being I am being drawn towards God.

Trials of faith

This motion towards God is, however, the object of many trials, to such an extent, in fact, that we see a motion away from God as well. In daily life there is often an antagonistic voice that dominates. This antagonistic voice wants to drown out God's voice, so that it appears as though God is silent. In the Bible it is in particular the book of Psalms (the book of walking with God) that verbalizes these trials. Just a few examples: Psalm 22:2: *"O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest."* Psalm 28: 1 has: *"To thee, o Lord, I call; my rock be not deaf to me, lest, if thou be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the Pit."* Psalm 44: 24 *"Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression?"* The Psalms have a large number of antagonistic voices. This shows that the personal relationship with Him is

(no matter how) subjected to temptation. Having faith without any conflicting voices is unthinkable. A faith that is never tried does not exist.

These trials can arrive in several different forms. Let us name just five of them:

1. First of all one's own experience in life can be a source of trials. Active believers may suffer unbearable pain or devastating loneliness. Certain things happen that cannot be comprehended, things that should not have happened. Life abounds with emptiness and loss. Light is swallowed up by darkness. *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"*
2. We are living in a culture that is frequently described with such expressions as secularization and the twilight of God. The world has become a world without God. No longer does He play a decisive role in today's society. Neither are we in need of Him, since we have boldly claimed life and appropriated it. Society has become a technocracy and has been rationalized. In practical terms, God has been banished or declared dead. All this, and much more is a source of trials. The exclamation point after the Name of God has turned into a question mark. The confession "God is in our midst" is no longer applicable, or so it would appear.
3. In addition, the great sufferings of this world are a source of trials to our faith. We hear about famines and wars, earthquakes and floods, aircraft disasters and concentration camps. These things are incomprehensible. Moreover, it is totally incomprehensible what man can do to man. Where is God in all of this?
4. Then there is the reality of church life and Christian life, both of which frequently do not live up to the ideal. What about the church showing itself as a warmhearted congregation? Too often the atmosphere there is chilly. And what about Christians taking care of one another? The loneliness that we discover there, can sap life. We are given to understand that the worship services ought to be a source of joy because of our meeting with God. Quite often they are rather formal and conservative: inspiration is lacking and the mystery of believing may seem squashed. For those who dare to take a look beyond the acceptable norm and size up reality (indeed, it's safer not to!) there will be numerous existential questions that present themselves, questions that can lead to estrangement from the church.
5. Finally, there is the reality that *"our sworn enemies the devil, the world, and our own flesh do not cease to attack us"* (Lord's Day 52, Question and answer 127). Whoever believes will, like it or not, be engaged in a spiritual battle. Each time again the power of sin shows itself to be mighty, even overwhelming. The personal relationship with God has often become barren and cold. The fountain of prayer has dried up ("I can no longer pray") and the daily companionship with the Bible has ceased ("To me the Bible no longer means anything"). Doubts are on the attack and multiply. And because of all this (and much more besides) our consciences accuse us: We have sinned against all the commandments of God and continue to do so. The relationship with God repeatedly falls apart.

The trials of those that seek God

Let us return to the central question: How is the preacher to form an image of his listener? What kind of hearer-image would lead to a suitable point of departure for the preaching of his sermons? My answer would be that the minister should perceive the listener as someone who discerns two motions in his relationship with God. There is a motion towards God (seeking God) and a motion away from God (trials and temptations). To put it succinctly, I propose that the sermon should address the listener as one who is undergoing trials in his search for God.

Preaching in the major key of the relationship

What does it specifically mean that a sermon should be directed to an assembly of listeners who realize that they undergo various trials and temptations in their search for God? It means that the believer's struggles should be addressed in the sermon. It means that the minister, while preaching, should always be aware of the fact that our faith is not self-evident and can thus not be

taken for granted, but that it is always under siege. At the same time the preaching should recognize the listeners' longing for God and searching for God, and it should stimulate this longing and searching. Summarizing this, I would like to express this as follows: preaching should be in the major key of the Relationship.

God communicates with man and works through the Holy Spirit faith in their hearts. And this will result in a relationship; God comes to man, and man comes to God. This relationship is (as said) not to be taken for granted, since it will repeatedly break down. On man's part there is a lot of unwillingness as well, which should not be hushed up. Sin is a powerful adversary. But at the same time there is the question of man's innate inability to believe and having a relationship with God, because both are areas of conflict.

And that is why the listener in church first of all longs to hear the words of God that will show him anew the way he should go in his ever-challenged search for God, God's words that will help him along on his way. He wishes to be recognized and understood in his search and trials. He wishes to hear anew that the God of the Word is the God of his daily reality. He wants to be swept up by the motion that leads away from an inability-to-believe, a motion that leads directly towards the goal of believing with all his heart. He wishes to hear words of forgiveness, and to receive the power and inspiration from the Holy Spirit so that he again may commit himself to the Relationship.

Preaching in the vernacular

The language of preaching that resounds in the major key of the Relationship, should be the vernacular. In this context I do not primarily mean the common native speech in our surroundings, for this is the kind of language which in a sermon can readily slip into the superficial or trivial. What is meant here is a language that is fitting for the intimacy and fragility of the relationship with God. It is a language that uses imagery, an individual language, a language of solidarity and love, a language of recognition and surprise, a language of trust and encouragement, a language that gives insight in what really matters in life, a language that strikes us as warm and comfortable but which can be cutting and piercing as well, because love discerns keenly. This vernacular is the language of God, Who seeks and finds us. People who seek God will attempt to use this language because God found them first. Though often brittle and fragile, this language leaves the Relationship intact.

Preaching for the listener

In summary, then, preaching for listeners is preaching for people who, in their search for God, know that they can be assailed by doubts, but are longing for the true Relationship which they, simultaneously, either have broken or experience as being broken. Sermons that do justice to this phenomenon will sound in the major key of the Relationship. These sermons make room for the fact that faith will undergo trials. The appropriate language in this context is the language of the Relationship, a language that one can identify with, a language that invites us to enter into the realm of God's Relationship.

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Endnotes:

*Translator's remark. At this point there is a sudden jump in the train of thought, since no cogent transition is made between the "hidden God" of Isaiah 45:15 and the revealed God on Golgotha. To be sure, the "God of Israel, the Saviour" can, however, be clearly seen as "the Saviour" in a totally unexpected place: Golgotha.

Several times the author uses: "Faith" and "Relationship" capitalized, presumably to make a distinction between commonly accepted usage (the vernacular) and (in this case) a distinct and specific usage. The author's preference has been followed in the present text.