

# Thoughts about Sermon Listening in an Age of TV Watching

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by Michael LeFebvre

As a student of theology preparing for the pastorate, I find myself in an interesting position. Frequently, I am in the pulpit preaching; and frequently, I am in the pew listening. On the one hand, I find that regular experience *listening* to sermons has a significant influence on how I prepare to preach. But I also am finding that my experience *preaching* is changing the way I listen to sermons. It is this latter discipline — the skill of sermon-listening — which is currently on my mind.

Further influencing my thoughts along these lines is my background in video production. Though I never intended to make a career of it, various circumstances involved me in scripting, shooting, and editing promotional videos for a number of years. I learned a bit about the way moving picture media works in the course of my experience — and the way it trains people to think.

I've heard a number of churchmen bemoaning the dumbing-down of the modern mind by television, and I concur with such sentiments. But I also believe that moving-picture technology is no less subject to the crown of Christ than print-media, so that demonizing television and gloating over the intellectual virtues of the pre-electronic age is not the way forward for the church. The church needs to take a careful look at Christ's purposes for creating, and leading man to discover, moving picture technologies.

Nevertheless, there are problems with the television influence on how modern man listens, and thus an influence on my present subject: sermon-listening. Based on my contemplations on this subject, I'd like to propose two very simple but oft-neglected principles for making the most of sermon attendance.

My first recommendation for sermon attendance is, quite simply, *listen to the preacher*. By *listening to the preacher*, I mean to distinguish giving attention to the man from absorption with his style, his vocabulary, his outline, or the other *means* (ie: media) he uses. In the television-age, we often forget what it means to listen to a preacher *for what he is trying to say*, whether or not he says it as clearly as Tom Hanks or Tom Brokaw might have.

Preachers do not have the luxury of speech-writing teams to craft eloquent sound bites and create smooth transitions for them. We are used to beautiful speeches every time we turn on the television. I was thinking about this while watching a movie recently where two actors exchanged a

particularly well-scripted foray of words. Undoubtedly, writing, reviewing, and rewriting over many months had gone into the creation of lines such as that, but they were made to look so spontaneous on screen — like the two characters were thinking on their feet in poetry.

Not only does television craft every word to present just the right thought, but music and visuals are added. Television draws upon every sense-element at its disposal to guide the audience's thoughts along the desired path, like a well-carved oar slicing through the water without stirring a single eddy.

A preacher does not have the same tools at his disposal — at least, if he is preaching Biblically. Many church-growth movements are attempting to bring television-style sensationalism into the pulpit, but preaching has a different purpose than television and therefore *requires* a different method of communication.

The power of television is not instruction, but persuasion. Yes, sermons ought to be persuasive also; but sermons should persuade by instruction. Television persuades not by instruction, but by emotion. Television is an inherently emotional, rather than intellectual, medium. And the reason is simple: television would be utterly boring without an exaggerated element of emotion. Even documentaries and “talking head” news programs have to adopt dramatic camera angles, scene changes, musical underscores, artistic settings, and over-dramatized “discussion” in order to keep interest. Well done, these elements carry the emotion of the viewer in a way that pictures in a box otherwise never could.

When a suspenseful part of a film is unfolding, the music and lighting artificially stir a feeling of suspense in the audience. When something happy is taking place, that closeup of a winsome smile on a beautiful face brings a burst of excitement to the viewer whether or not words are spoken. Television artificially guides the viewer's emotions in order to keep the storyline interesting. The benefit of this is that it heightens television's power of persuasion. Those messages which are communicated are done in a manner that rings true with the viewer's heart because his heart has been artificially drawn into it. The emotional hyperbole required by television is not necessarily a bad thing, but the potential weaknesses of motion picture media should be immediately obvious. In particular, the downside is that television ends up doing part of the viewer's thinking for him.

When I was a boy, my mother used to give me a spoonful of honey when I was not feeling well. She said that because bees “pre-digest” honey, honey is easy for the human stomach to handle when ill. Not so much work has to be done to break it down. I don't know if that is medically verifiable or not, but it is true of television. Television “pre-digests” its material and carries out the emotional thought of its message for you.

The implications for sermon-hearing? The emotional surrogacy carried out by television means

that in an age of widespread T.V.-viewing, we have pews filled with people who are used to having their emotions carried for them artificially. They expect a presentation not only to give them the facts, but to help them feel the right way about each fact as it is presented. But this is not the way preaching works. Some preachers do manage to express their words in a way that stirs suitable emotions, and that can be helpful. But overdone, oratory or imagery can become a hindrance to a person thinking through the Gospel and making a genuine response.

The Apostle Paul wrote that his preaching was, “a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life” (2 Corinthians 2.15–16). Every person in a congregation must be challenged to think about the truths being declared and come to understand for himself, is this something I should be rejoicing to hear, or panicking about, or dreading to consider? An exaggeration of emotion (television-style) overpowers any personal contemplation of what a person’s thinking and feeling about a particular teaching ought to be and therefore weakens the purpose of preaching. Biblical preaching requires every person to think for himself the truth of the text and personally determine how he should feel about it. The only external persuasion we are to anticipate in preaching is the conviction of the Spirit that graciously overpowers the hardness of unfeeling hearts. But artificial emotion — the strength of television-persuasion — is not permissible in Biblical preaching.

Preaching requires emotional thinking to be done in the pew, not from the front. Unfortunately, in our television-age, many people have forgotten that this is their responsibility. They assume it is the preacher’s responsibility to carry their emotion for them. It is helpful to the congregation when the preacher takes time to form his words for clarity and relevance. And preachers certainly ought not strip their sermons of all relevant emotion: a sermon ought to be full of love and passion and urgency as fitting. But whether the preacher is good at forming his words or not, and whether his presentation is emotionally alive or, in comparison with our normal T.V. diet, seems dry, it is the listener’s responsibility to think about the truths the preacher is doing his best to communicate.

Actually, although television is a modern technology, this tendency to seek artificial props for emotional persuasion is not strictly a contemporary problem. The medieval church, perhaps with good intentions early on, sought emotional aids to “help” the uneducated and illiterate layman be persuaded of the church’s teachings. By devising icons, ceremonies, music, and symbols, the persuasive power of the church was increased — but the worship service was changed from a thoughtful exercise (certainly arousing emotion) into an *essentially* emotional experience. Helping the congregant “experience” the impact of Christ’s death through images and the mass proved extremely persuasive, but it also promoted faith in what was seen rather than faith in the understanding of the Word. It was one of the great aims of the European Reformation to remove all

these production elements from worship and to restore the hearing of the Word (and the instruction of the congregant) to the center of worship.

A brief study of the Westminster Directory for Worship or reading of any of the Reformation-era sermons will demonstrate that these services were far from dry and unemotional. People loved to attend the preaching services because they were learning to think about the truths they were hearing and found great joy in what they came to understand. The truths of Christ are a delight, indeed, and worship centered in the contemplation of truth will be an emotional delight for the redeemed (and, perhaps, a terror to the unregenerate). However, emotion in worship is always the fruit of hearing, not the target for persuasive shortcuts.

Television is a relatively new technology, and as with painting, printing, and music, the church needs to think about Christ's purposes for giving man moving-picture technology and how it fits within the scope of his Kingdom purposes. But we also need to guard against transferring our television experience into our pulpit expectations. When listening to a sermon, a congregant should expect to work: to think and digest — not to be caught up with the preacher's style, nor put off if he fails to convey his point as clearly or eloquently as one is used to. What is the preacher actually saying? Does the message he is striving to convey through well or ill-chosen words call you to joy or sorrow?

It is entirely possible that a preacher may give a lousy presentation, but his message may be one of tremendous hope. The congregant who is listening to the preacher's presentation will go away disappointed; but the congregant who is listening to the preacher's message will go away rejoicing. Listen to the what the preacher has to say and think about its emotional significance.

The second principle is very similar to the first but needs to be handled separately for one very important reason. The second principle is *to listen to the text*.

Hopefully, listening to the preacher and listening to the text will be one and the same thing. It is the preacher's duty to give voice to the text: he is not to use the text as a platform for his own ideas. The preacher's job is to be the prophet's voice. Unfortunately, this is difficult to do and many times a preacher will end up preaching the message that is on his heart rather than the message that is at the heart of the text before him.

It may be that the preacher, being filled with the study of Scripture, has on his heart a valid Biblical message, even though it is not the message of the particular text he has set before the congregation. It is poor preaching on the minister's part to introduce this situation, and it creates confusion for the listening congregant who finds the text saying something different than the minister. But because the minister is Christ's appointed shepherd responsible for the care of the congregation, it is important for the congregant not to write off the minister's heart message too quickly, but rather

to take it to the Scriptures and, if faithful to Scripture, accept it. (It is possible, I suppose, for a congregant to thus get two lessons for the price of one: a lesson from the text the preacher has chosen and another lesson from what the preacher is trying to say which, though not the message of the chosen text, nonetheless true to the meaning of the Bible in other places.)

The thrust of my second principle of sermon listening, — listen to the text — is, however, to emphasize the need to listen to a sermon with the Bible open (literally or metaphorically). The purpose of a sermon is to give voice to the Word of God and to apply the text of Scripture to the life of the congregation. It may be that the preacher does well or fails to bring out clearly the message of the text. But the congregant's duty is to lean upon the help of the preacher, but not to lean only on the preacher. The Holy Spirit will apply the Word to the heart of the listener, and the task of the sermon attender is to listen as the Holy Spirit uses the preacher to amplify the text, and from the text to accept the conviction and comfort of the Spirit. Sermon listening requires listening to the message of the text.

A preacher-friend of mine, after preaching one particular Lord's Day, confided in me that he was feeling poorly about his presentation: he believed he had been faithful to open the text, but he had been unable to express it well. My response was that, as I understand preaching, he had done what God required of him. The preacher's task is to open the Word for the people in its truth — some Lord's Days he will know how to do that in an interesting way and some Lord's Days the sermon may not come together quite so attractively. So long as the text is being rightly explained, however, the minister is doing his duty. Now, that being said, one must hasten to add that it is a work of love on the preacher's part to go beyond simply opening the text to also help make it as clear and relevant as possible every time he preaches. It is pastoral love that takes the textual exposition and presents it in a way that strikes the chords of the believer's heart. Every preacher ought to strive for that. However, as he lovingly endeavors to do so to the best of his ability, the congregation must not think that his labors of love to bring the Scriptures to them removes their responsibility to come to the Scriptures. The preacher's purpose is to give voice to the prophet; the congregation is responsible to give heed, to consider, to understand, and to respond to what the Scriptures announce. Regardless of what the preacher says or is trying to say, the believer is to come to the worship service to hear the Scriptures, looking to the minister as a divinely ordained guide in his own examination of the text. If a congregant walks away from the sermons feeling like he has gotten nothing out of the message, it only shows he has completely misunderstood what was supposed to take place in that sermon.

It is your job and my job as believers to come to the sermon with our Bibles open and an intent to study. The preacher's voice will be, in God's grace, an aid to guide us as we study the text to glean its word for our hearts. (Consequently, this is why a congregant must pray faithfully for his pastor:

our ability to hear the word at services is significantly affected by the minister's effectiveness in explaining it. We ought to pray regularly for those preparing to guide us in the Scriptures each coming Lord's Day.) Ultimately, however, it is not the preacher we are there to hear. It is the Word of God we are there to give heed. A congregant must go to the sermon intent to hear the Scriptures.

In our television and cinema-centered culture, our minds grow accustomed to polished presentations that give us pre-digested ideas. As I said early in this article, I am persuaded that motion picture media belongs to Christ as much as print technology does, and it is our duty in the church today to identify the right and sanctified use for new media technologies. Demonizing the technology is not the way forward. However, television has significant limitations, and it is not a proper model for preaching. Unfortunately, because television has so permeated our lives, its methods have subtly imposed themselves as our assumed model not only for preaching, but for politics, evangelism, business, one's love life, education, and other areas of society which have different needs than the television philosophy can adequately meet. In this article, it is simply the matter of preaching which I have sought to address, because it is in the preaching of the Word where I believe the mis-application of the television model has its most flagrant dangers. Guarding against its tendency to spoil good listening skills in God's house is an urgent priority for the 21st-century church.

If we forget how to listen to sermons, the effect on the church will be (as it already has proven thus far to be) drastic. It is the word as it is *heard proclaimed* which is the foundation of the church's faith: "Faith comes through hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10.17).