

The Other Side of the Pulpit: Listener's Experiences of Helpful Preaching

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Abstract: *The Australian National Church Life Survey identifies churches where the preaching is reported as “very helpful to my life.” Six case studies of these churches were undertaken. Observation, interviews, focus groups, and a survey were used in each case to identify salient descriptors. A number of features common to all cases are discernible including, practicality, humor, passion, boldness, intellectual stimulation and a simple structure. However, the research also confirms that preaching is a highly contextual activity and that preachers need to adapt their style to their particular context. A continuum of helpful preaching styles related to context is developed.*

Introduction

Allen reports that since the 1960s, scholarship in preaching has spoken about “taking a turn to the listener.” This involves a shift from focusing on the preacher to how congregations listen to sermons.¹ While there has been some social scientific research regarding the listener's experiences of preaching,² the dominant influence in the development of preaching has remained theoretical and theological. This theoretical approach is not without merit, but it does downplay a crucial element of the preaching event—the experience of the listener.

A number of research projects have focused on sermon *effectiveness* from the listener's perspective. In 2000, a group of researchers through Christian Theological Seminary carried out empirical studies of people who listen to sermons to find out what they find most engaging or disengaging.³ The project used in-depth individual and group interviews with 263 lay persons and 32 preachers in 28 Midwestern U.S. congregations. The questions used in the interviews were along the lines of three major categories from Aristotle's Rhetoric: logos, ethos, and pathos.

- How do listeners find ideas engaging (logos)?
- How does the congregation's perception of the character of the preacher affect their hearing of the message (ethos)?
- How do feelings generated by the sermon play into the ways listeners receive messages (pathos)?

Based on this research Mulligan and Allen identify⁴ the twelve most frequently mentioned qualities that listeners say engage them in sermons. Many of the themes that emerged from the study were already in the literature of preaching:

- The sermon should deal in a foundational way with what God offers and asks.

¹ Ronald J Allen and Mary Alice Mulligan, “Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later,” *Homiletic* 34, no. 2 (2009): 4.

² See David Rietveld, “A Survey of the Phenomenological Research of Listening to Preaching,” *Homiletic* 38, no. 2 (2013); Marianne Gaarden and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, “Listeners as Authors in Preaching—Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives,” *Homiletic* 38, no. 1 (2013); Clifton F Guthrie, “Quantitative Empirical Studies of Preaching: A Review of Methods and Findings,” *Journal of Communication & Religion* 30, no. 1 (2007).

³ For a summary see Allen and Mulligan, “Listening to Listeners: Five Years Later.”

⁴ Mary Alice Mulligan and Ronald J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity* (Chalice: St. Louis, 2006).

- Preachers should live in a manner consistent with the church's deepest theological convictions.
- Preachers should speak from their own experience.
- The sermon should center in the Bible and make the biblical material come alive for the listener.
- The message needs to relate in a practical way to the lives of the listening communities.
- The sermon should be short (although the meaning of short varies from congregation to congregation).
- Preachers need to be clear and easy to understand.
- Congregations are eager for sermons to help them make theological and ethical sense of the range of life's issues.
- Listeners do not want the preacher to dumb down the sermon; rather, they want to wrestle meaningfully with important issues.
- Preachers ought to be specific in helping congregations draw out the implications of the Bible and their deepest theological convictions.
- Preachers need to be lively when they embody the sermon, talking expressively as well as loudly enough to be heard, connecting with the congregation through eye contact, and speaking with appropriate movements of the hands, arms, and body.

Another research project on listener's experiences of preaching was conducted by Lori Carrell.⁵ Based on her research with 5,000-plus listeners Carrell identified the factors related to sermons most likely to succeed:

- Ask for Change: Sermons are built around a clearly stated change based goal that emanates from Scripture.
- Organized for Listening: Organization of ideas is key to the memory process.
- Well Delivered: Sermons are delivered in a way that authentically communicates relationship and emotion.
- Integrate Listeners' Perspectives: Content is connected to the listeners. (The listeners describe this as "relevancy.")

Although this research has been very helpful in understanding why listeners engage with preaching, the research described in this paper brings a more nuanced approach by asking listeners of *superior* preaching what things they appreciated about the preaching. This means the participants in the research have a more informed understanding of what superior preaching is because they are regularly experiencing it. This research is also a more "grounded" methodology in allowing listeners to describe their experiences of helpful preaching in their own language rather than through a pre-formed survey. Finally, it is an opportunity to validate the findings of Carrell, Allen, and Mulligan in a different context.

Methodology

The methodology for this research is a series of case studies.⁶ A case study is "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used."⁷ The case study is the preferred strategy when "how," or "why" questions are being asked. Hence case study is appropriate for this research because

⁵ Lori Carrell, "Sermons Most Likely to Succeed," *Rev* May/June (2007): 71-73.

⁶ Approval for this research was given by Malyon College Human Research Ethics Committee.

⁷ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994). 94.

it seeks to answer the “how,” or “why” questions related to effective preaching in real-life contexts. The advantage of survey research with large samples is breadth, whereas its disadvantage is lack of depth. For the case study, the opposite is true. Both breadth and depth are necessary for a sound development of knowledge about preaching.

In order to identify churches with superior preaching, the research drew upon the database of the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS). The NCLS sampled 3,000 local churches from 22 Christian denominations including over 260,000 adult attenders (aged 15+) and 6,000 leaders (lay and clergy) in 2011. The survey included the following question:

How often do you experience the following during church services at this congregation?:

23. Preaching very helpful to my life? (Always / Usually / Sometimes / Rarely or never)

The NCLS wrote to the 50 churches in Australia that scored the highest on this question in the 2011 NCLS asking if they were willing to participate in research on their preaching.⁸ Selection of these 50 churches was based on:

- Congregations being above the 90th percentile on the “preaching helpful” question (more than 47% of people had indicated “Always” on this question).
- The rating on the preaching being higher than the rating on the other similar “How often do you experience the following during church services” questions.
- At least 50 forms returned.

The composition of these “top 50” churches was:

- Anglican (Episcopalian) 18
- C3 (Christian City Church) 9
- Baptist 5
- Australian Christian Churches (Assembly of God) 3
- Uniting 3
- CRC Churches International 2
- Independent 2
- Lutheran 2
- Presbyterian 2
- Apostolic 1
- Christian Outreach Centers 1
- Churches of Christ 1
- Vineyard Fellowship Australia 1

Fifteen churches responded to the invitation to participate.⁹ Of these the researcher visited six on the basis of their denominational and geographical diversity and the ongoing tenure of the same preacher since 2011.

The methodology assumed some equivalence between the concepts of “effectiveness in preaching” and “helpfulness in preaching.” Some may question whether “helpfulness” is the ideal criteria for measuring the quality of a sermon. However, if we are to take seriously the notion of “taking a turn to the listener,” then the notion of “helpfulness” becomes a

⁸ Thanks to Sam Sterland from the NCLS for his work in this regard. For more about the Core Qualities identified by the NCLS see John Bellamy et al., *Enriching Church Life* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2006).

⁹ Unfortunately no women preachers responded to the invitation to participate in the research.

compelling measure of the effectiveness of preaching. If a sermon is not helpful to a listener, its effectiveness must be questioned, no matter how theologically or homiletically informed.

At each church the researcher:

- Observed the worship services.
- Conducted one or two focus groups discussing with the participants their experience of the preaching in their church.
- Invited the church attenders to complete a survey on the preaching.
- Interviewed the major preacher in order to better understand their philosophy of preaching.

Worship Services

The researcher attended one or more worship services to not only experience a typical sermon, but to understand the context in which the sermon was delivered. He noted various cultural artifacts that shed light on the culture of the churches in which this effective preaching was situated.

Focus Groups

The researcher conducted one or two focus groups in each church. The groups ranged in size from eight to 16 people with a range of age, gender, and ethnicity. In each case the focus groups reflected the general make-up of the churches they represented.

The compelling concern in collecting this data was giving the participants the opportunity to express in their *own language* their *own experience* of the preaching. For this reason the primary question for each group was: “What adjectives would you use to describe the preaching at this church?” The researcher recorded each of the adjectives nominated by members of the groups. When no more adjectives were forthcoming the group went back over the list answering the question “What did you mean when you used the word ... to describe the preaching?”

Notes were taken during the focus groups with more than 200 pages of transcript collected. The sessions were also recorded to subsequently confirm the accuracy of the notes.

Survey

The qualities of engaging and successful sermons identified by Carrell, Allen, and Mulligan formed the basis of the survey. In addition, questions were designed to measure whether preaching techniques like induction, narrative, interaction or use of multimedia were a significant factor in the helpfulness of the preaching. Finally, the researcher contacted preachers and academics from different Christian traditions in order to generate a better understanding of the dynamics of preaching in those different contexts. The insights of these “experts” were incorporated into the survey as well.

In an adaptation of Allen and Mulligan’s use of the categories of Aristotle’s Rhetoric the survey asked:

What, for you personally, is the most helpful part of the preaching at this church?
(Please circle one):

- The content of the sermons
- The character of the preacher
- The power of the sermons

The survey required participants to prioritize the factors helpful in the preaching through the use of forced choice questions. The survey was only made available after the focus groups to ensure it did not “contaminate” the participant’s language. More than 45 surveys were completed by a representative sample from each congregation.

Interview

In each case the major preachers were asked a series of questions including:

- How would you describe your philosophy of preaching?
- How do you go about preparing for a sermon?
- Who have been the major influences on your preaching?
- What advice would you give to other preachers?

Six Cases of Helpful Preaching

The following six cases of helpful preaching are arranged as a continuum based upon the context in which the preaching is embedded. The contexts at one end of the continuum are characterized by an emphasis on the content of the sermon. The contexts at the other end of the continuum are characterized by an emphasis on the preacher. This continuum will be explained more fully in the conclusion.

Preacher A

Anglican, South Australia.

This church was planted in 2010 and had grown to 350 people. It is a “low” church (evangelical) Anglican (Episcopalian) church. Most evangelical Anglican churches in Australia are in the reformed tradition, placing a heavy emphasis on the importance of preaching and teaching the Scriptures. This emphasis is apparent in Preacher A’s church. The church services and the weekly small group Bible studies are structured around the theme of the sermon. The culture of the church places heavy emphasis on the reading, teaching, and preaching of Scripture and the sermons reflect these values. Preacher A is the founding minister and church planter.

The Preacher Speaks

The basis of Preacher A’s philosophy of preaching is that “God speaks today and we hear him through the Scriptures.” He aims to train people in how to read the Scriptures themselves by showing how they are relevant to today. Preacher A intentionally puts something of himself in each sermon to “let people in” to his world. These insights will often be humorous.

The preaching plan for a year is set in the October of the previous year. He normally takes 12-15 hours to prepare a sermon. “The sermon is not ready to be presented until you can say in one sentence what the passage is about.” Once this is in place he writes a full manuscript that he takes into the pulpit. His sermons run for a maximum of 30 minutes or 5,400 words. When writing he seeks to bring application at several points in the sermon keeping two to four kinds of people in mind. He aims to pose a question in the introduction to engage the congregation. The sermon has five to six points that are produced in a bulletin insert and/or projected on the screen.

Preacher A describes his preaching as “Very illustrative – too much so, my colleagues would tell me.” In selecting illustrations he is careful to draw on experiences (rather than knowledge) which overlap with the experiences of the congregation. Major influences include Warwick de Jersey, Chris Edwards, Peter Adam, and David Cook. He listens to lots of sermon podcasts from sources such as All Souls St Helens, UK.

His advice to other preachers includes, don’t go to too many Bible passages, show you live in the same world as the people you are speaking to, and let people know you love them by the way you preach.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
founded in Scripture	“No misunderstanding of where the sermon comes from” “Encourages us to explore the Bible for ourselves”
expository	“Works through a passage and the whole Bible”
clear	“You are never in doubt about what he wants to say”
structured	“Well prepared” “Logical sequence” “No fluff or tangents” “Although structured you don’t know how it will end”
relevant	“The preaching program is deliberate but links to current events” “Finds the relevancy in every passage”
challenging	“Faithfully preaches the hard parts” “Not softened”
engaging	“Always a hook to get you in” “Self-depreciating humor”
practical	“Intellectual but communicated very practically”
gifted	“Articulate” “Well-chosen illustrations”
faithful	“Consistent” “No rude surprises” “Spends lots of time in preparation”
accurate	“Always refers back to the original language of Scripture” “Breadth of investigation”
encouraging	“I never feel ‘preached at’” “Always ‘us’ and ‘we’”
inclusive	“Always a challenge for Christian and non-Christian”

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible (75% of respondents)
- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (50%)
- The sermons help make theological and ethical sense of the range of life’s issues (45%)
- The sermons are well structured (36%)

The listeners also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a Bible passage and then explains and applies the meaning, focuses on only one passage from the Bible in the sermon, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time explaining the Bible than applying it, comes across as an expert in the Bible, and is generally consistent in his presentation. The most helpful part of the preaching is the content of the sermon (92% of respondents) as opposed to the power of the sermons (5%) or character of the preacher (3%).

Preacher B

Anglican, New South Wales

Preacher B has been the Senior Minister of this Anglican Church located in a lower socio-economic area in the outer western Suburbs of Sydney since 2007. Although in different states, Preacher B’s preaching is experienced in much the same way as that of his Anglican colleague, Preacher A.

The Preacher Speaks

The basis of his philosophy of preaching is that “the Word will move people better than you will.” If people see clearly that something is scriptural then they will be more convicted than if it is just a well-put assertion. He also assumes that people are filled with the Holy Spirit. Preacher B seeks to preach as though he was talking to people in a conversation. Because Christianity is grace-based, he believes the application must start with feeding the desire to please God. When preaching narrative he works hard to get people into the world of the story including smells, tastes, and moods. No matter how challenging or negative a passage is, Preacher B always seeks to leave people glad they are Christians. He works hard at transitions between major points because people need to know when one point is finished before moving to the next. “This aids clarity, and clarity is what enables people to listen well and grasp truths.” Preacher B assumes non-Christians will hear his sermon, but focuses on the Christians. He uses visuals/PowerPoint as outlines but doesn’t give away where the sermon is going. He deliberately does not “dumb the sermons down.” He believes in giving people depth and richness by explaining complex concepts well. However, he admits that you have to work hard to do this.

Preacher B also generally preaches systematically through the Bible a book at a time. It takes him about 10 to 12 hours to prepare for a sermon and he takes a full manuscript into the pulpit. Preacher B acknowledges that the major influences on his preaching have been John Chapman, David Cook, John Piper, Phillip Jensen, and Mike Raiter. He aims to preach for about 35 minutes.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
true	“It comes from the Bible” “I can see it in his life as well”
accurate	“He knows his stuff”
biblical	“We are encouraged to pick up the Bible” “He gives cross-references”
applicable	“I feel I am back there at that time ... but it fits into my life today” “He goes out of his way to find application”
understandable	“He doesn’t use jargon” “He doesn’t ‘dumb-it-down’ – he makes it understandable and current”
encouraging	“He knows us very well” “He speaks as a fellow struggler” “You don’t go home feeling you are the worst person in the world”
engaging	“The introduction is always engaging” “The PowerPoint slides are engaging”
honest	“He uses examples from his own life” “The man you see preaching is pretty well the same man you talk to afterwards”
challenging	“He is not afraid to address the hard issues” “It is personal, as though he is talking about each one of us”
accessible	“Relaxed presentation style”
entertaining	“Usually a funny bit somewhere”
thorough	“He doesn’t skip over things”
relevant	“He makes the point early in the sermon, ‘Why this is relevant?’” “He tackles the tough subjects”

clear	“Well explained. Good diction. It flows together. You don’t get lost.” “He has clearly put a lot of time into it – he has thought it through”
deep	“You can see the appreciation he has for a biblical theology”
thought provoking	“Asks questions as we go”
basic	“He doesn’t complicate things to remind you he is “the teacher”” “Any stage in the Christian life you can come here and understand”
faithful to Scriptures	

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (75%)
- The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible (73%)
- The sermons help make theological and ethical sense of the range of life’s issues (40%)
- The sermons wrestle meaningfully with difficult issues (40%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a Bible passage and then explains and applies the meaning, focuses on one passage from the Bible, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time explaining than applying the Bible, comes across as an expert in the Bible and is creative in his presentation. The most helpful part of the preaching for most people is the content of the sermons (63%) and the power of the sermons (33%).

*Preacher C
Baptist, Queensland.*

Preacher C has been the solo pastor in this semi-rural shire on the western edge of the greater Brisbane area since 2004. The congregation has a significant proportion of farmers and retirees.

The Preacher Speaks

Preacher C describes his philosophy of preaching as to center on the Word of God but also ensure relevancy. The aim of the preaching is to bring a response. He particularly works on a good start (to capture people) and a good finish (to leave them with something to take home.) His structure is expository: he allows the passage to shape the structure and uses first person narratives where appropriate.

Preacher C normally takes between eight and 12 hours to prepare a sermon. He aims to preach for 20 to 30 minutes. He takes a full manuscript into the pulpit although recently he has been “ad-libbing” more frequently. If the sermon has a complex structure he will put the outline on PowerPoint.

Preacher C identifies Peter Francis, John MacArthur, Chuck Swindall, Mark Driscoll, and John Sweetman as major influences on his preaching. His advice for preachers includes understanding your audience, allowing the passage to impact yourself and taking people on a journey of understanding.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
consistent	“Not hot one week and cold the next”
passionate	“Doesn’t leave you flat” “He lives his song” “He is not personally unaffected by his preaching”
biblical	“Preaches on the passage first” “Doesn’t just pull out one-liners”
relevant	“Not afraid to deal with an issue”
true	“Finds out the truth of a passage and puts it in the sermon”
interesting	“He has got feeling in his sermons” “He varies his voice” “Uses a story to get people interested” “He doesn’t mind a bit of interaction” “Sometimes he acts it out”
practical	“There is quite a diverse group in the congregation but he is able to get alongside everyone and draws applications”
fundamental	“Theologically conservative”
foundational	“Rarely a sermon where he doesn’t bring it back to the Gospel”
simple	“Uses language we can understand”
introspective	“He examines his own heart before he preaches”
challenging	“How do we take this out into the world?”
honest	“He will admit to his own shortcomings”
humorous	

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible (44%)
- The life of the preacher corresponds to what they preach (40%)
- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (40%)
- The preacher is passionate about his/her message (40%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a Bible passage and then explains and applies the meaning, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time applying the Bible than explaining it, comes across as a fellow learner of the Bible and is creative in his presentation. The most helpful part of the preaching is the content of the sermons (38%), although the power of the sermons (36%) and the character of the preacher (27%) were significant factors for many.

Preacher D

Lutheran, Queensland

This Lutheran Church conducts two morning worship services reflecting the two stages of the church’s history. The church has a long tradition but in recent years has relocated and established a large school with which it shares the property. The first congregation, meeting at 7:15 AM, is largely older and more traditional. The second service, meeting at 9:30 AM, is younger and much larger.

The Preacher Speaks

Like Preacher A, Preacher D indicated that his preaching was not typical of that in his denomination. Preacher D says that the basis of his preaching is to communicate the gospel in every sermon. However, in contrast to many Lutheran preachers who seek to preach single point homilies, his preaching “digs more deeply” into Scripture. As a result he seeks not to “dumb down” the sermon but to explain the complex concepts. Some sermon series are

thematic while others explore books of the Bible. Sermons are planned well ahead and he works consistently on sermons throughout the week collecting ideas for a number of weeks ahead.

When structuring the sermon he uses Buttrick’s “moves”¹⁰ but utilizes them flexibly. He likes to begin with questions and leave people with questions and talk about real-life throughout the sermon. He uses interaction extensively to keep people active and utilizes imagery and PowerPoint. In preparing the sermon he asks questions like “Does this matter to them?” “Does this have jargon?” “How is this helpful?”

Preacher D normally takes about 10 hours per week in sermon preparation and writes out a full manuscript but only takes an outline into the pulpit. He identifies the major influences on his preaching as Mark Sayers, Rick Warren, Rob Bell, Luther, and Spurgeon. His advice for preachers includes: focus on your content first, before you focus on the mode of delivery or how to grab attention. If the Word hasn’t done something in you don’t expect it to do something in others. Don’t read an essay from the pulpit-know and believe the message yourself. A sermon is not an essay and does not contain scientific axioms in all places and all time-it is a living/breathing part of a community.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
challenging	“He says, ‘Take another look at the text; take another look at yourself’” “He unsettles us”
understandable	
engaging	“Establishes common points of reference, for example movies” “Vulnerable – he bares himself willingly” “It is not just him telling us and talking at us, he really engages everyone with how passionate about it he is which makes you want to listen and know more and explore it with him”
relevant	“Starts where people are at”
simplistic	“He is able to break a complex subject into simple terms” “Structure is transparent” “He uses dot points” “Anchors it around the graphics he uses”
theologically based	“He takes us back in time and makes it relevant to today and then he brings it back to our lives” “He really relates the Old Testament to the New Testament”
grounded	“He draws from his own experiences” “He has a certain woundedness which he is willing to share” “We feel we are on the same level”
passionate	
biblical	“Theologically solid at the centre but soft at the edges”
humorous	“If there is no laughter on a Sunday he feels he has failed”
compassionate	“Above all else it is about God’s grace”
visual	“You can see his train of thought through the slides”
interactive	“He is always throwing it back to us, asking questions” “He allows us to turn to each other and engage on a point”
purposeful	“He plans the sermons a long way ahead” “The whole service is

¹⁰ David G Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

	integrated with the sermon”.
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In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (56%)
- The preacher is passionate about his/her message (44%)
- The preacher speaks from his/her own experience (38%)
- The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible (33%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a topic and then brings a Biblical perspective to it, refers to a variety of passages from the Bible, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time applying the Bible than explaining it, comes across as a fellow learner of the Bible and is creative in his presentation. Although the content of the sermons (46%) is the most helpful part of the preaching for most, the power of the sermons (37%) was also identified as helpful by many.

As we move towards the “preacher” focused end of the context continuum the preachers are marked by two descriptors: passionate and Spirit-empowered. There is a greater emphasis on the character, authority, and presentation of the preacher.

Preacher E

Assemblies of God, New South Wales

Preacher E has been the Senior Pastor of this large and ethnically diverse (more than 800 people from 50 different nationalities) Pentecostal church in the northern suburbs of Sydney since January 1996. Preacher E describes himself as a typical “old-style Pentecostal” preacher characterized by passion and an openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit during the preaching. It is also marked by having a “gospel appeal” at the end of every sermon. However, he also notes that in Pentecostal circles he is seen as “a Bible teacher.”

The Preacher Speaks

In describing his philosophy, Preacher E advocates “Factor E” (Energy, Enthusiasm and Excitement) as values of the whole church including the preaching. However he also identifies the centrality of the Word as the basis of authority. Further, the preacher is subject to the Word.

Preacher E usually spends 15 to 20 hours per week in preparation for a sermon. He only takes a sermon outline into the pulpit and the sermons in the two services varied significantly although following the same structure. He cites his experience as a Sunday school teacher as a major factor in his development as a preacher. It was in seeking to keep the attention of children aged five to 15 that he learnt to tell Bible stories with application and make the story come alive. He also points to an awareness of the Engel Scale¹¹ as a useful tool to make a sermon practical for everyone. He identifies the major influences on his preaching as Joseph Vitello, Billy Graham, and T.L. Osborne.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
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¹¹ James F. Engel and Wilbert Norton, *What’s Gone Wrong With The Harvest?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975).

passionate	“He loves God’s Word” “It comes from the heart” “He gets you to feel what he is saying”
engaging	“He asks questions of the audience... you can’t be too passive- he draws you in” “You don’t just hear it, you feel it”
encouraging	“He brings a message of hope” “It’s never too late”
grounded	“Not the theoretical” “He gives new dimensions on the Word that we have not thought of before” “He takes his preaching seriously but he doesn’t take himself too seriously”
substance	“He is a great Bible teacher”
simple	“Not too deep even for non-believers” “Applies to everyone” “Simple not simplistic” “You don’t have to have a university degree to understand him” “Points are clear” “PowerPoint gives headline points” “There are so many nationalities in this Church but they all keep coming because they get the message”
trustworthy	“Lots of experience and he lives and does what he preaches” “Willingly shares his heart and worries” “We know he loves us” “We are sheep with a good shepherd”
funny	“He likes to laugh at himself”
authentic	“Life and message are in line” “He practices what he preaches” “He is open about his own struggles”
biblical	“He says ‘If I can see the depth of this Scripture, so can you’” “Helps you feel the emotion of the character in the Bible story” “Brings in the Greek” “He says ‘Don’t take my word for it – check out what the Word says’”
vulnerable	“He is very human” “Also shares about his failures” “He’s not a fake”
humility	“Willingness to understand and respect other cultures” “He is very inclusive”
relevant	“He is able to transfer the biblical principle to our daily living” “Does not shy away from real human issues”
courageous	“Not afraid of offending” “He doesn’t water down the Word”
anointed	“Often you feel God is talking to you” “He hears from God”
convicting	“Raw with truth”
interesting	“Personal stories” “The historical context makes it interesting”

One participant who grew up in an Anglican church noted that Pentecostal churches are often criticized for not being biblical. Yet his experience was that Preacher E’s preaching was just as “biblical” as in the Anglican Church. The researcher noted that in the services he observed the Communion leader referred to three different Scripture passages at length. The first words of the sermon were “If you have your Bibles turn to Matthew 15.” The sermon then asked a question “What do we do when our prayer is delayed?” He read from the Scripture several times during the sermon and the Bible text was projected on the screen along with the sermon outline. Pentecostal churches are sometimes characterized as lacking an emphasis on the Bible. However, the preaching of the Scripture is a clear emphasis of this church.

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (79%)

- The preacher is passionate about his/her message (51%)
- The preacher moves in the Holy Spirit's power (42%)
- The life of the preacher corresponds to what they preach (32%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a topic and then brings a biblical perspective to it, refers to a variety of passages from the Bible, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time applying the Bible than explaining it and comes across as an expert in the Bible. The most helpful part of the preaching at this church is the power of the sermons (45%) although the content of the sermons is also helpful (43%) for many.

Preacher F

Christian Outreach Centre, Victoria

Preacher F planted this Pentecostal church in the outer suburbs of Melbourne in 1994. It is composed of about 230 people.

The Preacher Speaks

Preacher F describes his philosophy of preaching as bringing truth to the people. The Holy Spirit is crucial throughout the process. He aims to make sure the message is applicable and that people leave able to answer the question "So what?" He begins by identifying a need in the listeners. He then seeks to project the Bible narrative into the "cinema of the mind" by describing the emotions of the people in the stories. He seeks not to preach concepts, thoughts or ideas but stories in order to restate the main point. He tries to avoid using too many points but focuses on "the big idea."

He produces a weekly blog which is basically the sermon notes and the Bible text and some questions for application at the end. The blog is "live" during the sermon so that people can refer to it through their mobile devices.

Preaching is planned well ahead. Although there is a preaching theme for the year, reflecting the vision of the church, there are a team of four preachers who meet once a month to plan and reflect. At these meetings they discuss the sermon topics, identify the main thought, what Bible texts are relevant, and begin the process of structuring the sermons. This monthly meeting usually takes several hours.

Preacher F's sermon preparation time is about two hours, excluding the time spent in the planning meetings, although he does think about the sermon throughout the week. The sermons are usually kept to less than 30 minutes. He takes only minimal notes into the pulpit as he is looking to put energy into the preaching. He walks around the stage and the congregation, although he is not directly interactive. (However, the researcher noted that the congregation is highly responsive often shouting out encouragement to the preacher in the Pentecostal style.) Preacher F uses extensive multimedia including video clips, theme pictures, and words.

Preacher F cites Clarke Taylor, the founder of the Christian Outreach Centre movement, as a major influence on his preaching especially the way he relates to non-Christians and his energetic style. He listens to five or more sermon podcasts a week including John MacPherson, Jensen Franklin, Steve Furtick, Brian Houston, Mark Driscoll, Phil Pringle, and Shane Willard.

The Listeners Speak

When asked what adjectives they would use to describe the preaching at their church participants identified the following:

Adjective	Sample of Elaborative Statements
real	“Real life messages – pertinent and to the point and they talk to me” “He is active in our community so he has examples to make it relevant” “He is open about his failings”
application	“Not just information”
creative	“He gets into a role or character” “Stage design, graphics all integrated”
Bible-based	“He loves the Bible” “It is not just his take on things. Whatever he says he brings it back to the Scriptures”
uplifting	“Always leaves you with hope”
challenging	“The challenges are actionable-for example, ‘talk to your friends’” “At the foot of his blog each week there are a series of questions which are actionable”
practical	“He gives little things we can go and do” “And he gives the ‘how-to’”
encouraging	“There is always hope” “You can do this” “Even in challenging moments... it is still based on love”
relevant	“He doesn’t preach the Bible as a history book- it is a letter to you today” “He tailors the message to the audience”
direct	“He presses the urgency-we have to do something” “He doesn’t beat around the bush”
explainable/simple	“He can speak to the scholar and the layman and everyone in between” “He has the ability to unwrap the word in a way everyone can understand”
quality	“Not-half baked. He spends time.”
compassionate	“His heart is for the people and this town”
funny	“He does Mr. Bean impersonations” “A good preacher is a good actor – in a good sense”
passionate	“It is his whole life”
inspiring	“The sermons are Spirit-breathed”
determined	“A whole year on love – is that determination or what?”
purposeful	“All sermons are based on the purpose of the church.”

In describing what was most helpful in the preaching at their church the survey respondents indicated:

- The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives (66%)
- The preacher is passionate about his/her message (53%)
- The preacher speaks from his/her own experience (38%)
- The preacher moves in the Holy Spirit’s power (31%)

They also indicated that the preacher generally starts with a topic and then brings a biblical perspective to it, refers to a variety of passages from the Bible, brings illustrations from a wide variety of sources, spends more time applying the Bible than explaining it, comes across as an expert in the Bible 53% (although many disagreed, “The preacher generally comes across as a fellow learner of the Bible” (47%)), and is creative in his presentation. The most helpful part of the preaching for most people is the power of the sermons (56%), with the content of the sermons (34%) and the character of the preacher (9%) helpful for others.

Discussion

The research of Mulligan, Allen, and Carrell is largely confirmed in these case studies. The confirmation of their findings in another context strengthens the validity of their work. The factors in engaging and successful preaching they identify are observable in all six case studies of helpful preaching. Key factors in the helpfulness of the preaching in these contexts include:

“The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives.”

This statement resonated throughout the research. The key factor in the helpfulness of preaching in each case is the practical nature of the sermon. However, this practical helpfulness is not achieved at the expense of exegesis. Listeners in all six cases also identified explanation of the Bible as a helpful part of the sermon experience. The assumption that practical application and theological explanation are mutually exclusive is rebuffed by this research. These preachers demonstrate that it is possible to exposit difficult passages of Scripture and bring practical application helpful for life. Preachers can err too far in one direction or the other. They can either spend too much time in application or too much time explaining the passage. The key is finding the balance between the two.¹²

Humor

All cases indicated that the preacher used humor. Of particular importance is that the humor is largely self-depreciating. Not only is self-depreciation a value in Australian culture it expresses the “realness” or “authenticity” of the preacher to the listeners and so builds the relationship through which the sermon is experienced.

Passionate

Four of the six cases identified the preacher’s passion about their message as one of the top four factors which contributed to the helpfulness of the sermon. The two cases which did not score this as highly were the Anglican churches which expressed a heavy emphasis on explaining the meaning of the text. It would be wrong to consider the two Anglican preachers as lacking passion, because this descriptor still emerged in the focus groups. However, the Anglicans did not value this passion as highly as the other cases studied. In practice the greater freedom emerging from not reading from a full manuscript allowed the preacher to be perceived as more passionate. The “cost” of this approach is the loss of preciseness of language and content possible when reading from a full manuscript.

Boldness

In each of the cases listeners indicated that the preachers were not afraid to “tackle the tough issues.” Listeners valued preachers who are courageous in their convictions and willing to address the tough ethical issues of the day.

Structure

Although the structure used by these preachers varied considerably, listeners identified that it was always clear and simple. Although a more complex structure may be helpful for preachers in developing their content, a small number of clear points which are readily obvious to the listeners are far more helpful in delivery.

¹² It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the practice of application. Readers are pointed to recent books on the topic to develop this skill. See for example Murray Capill, *The Heart Is the Target* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2014).

Not “dumbed-down”

Almost all of the preachers and many of the focus groups identified that the preacher does not “dumb down” the content of the sermons. Rather they work hard at making more complex concepts understandable. This means they are able to deal with issues, including ethical ones, in theological depth without overwhelming their audience.

Preparation

The similarity in both the length of the sermons (30 minutes) and the length of time it takes to prepare (10 to 20 hours, although the exception of Preacher F should be noted) is informative. Listeners are looking for “substantial” content in the sermons. Substantial does not mean long (i.e. more than 35 minutes) but refers to an intellectual depth. Preachers need to be investing time in finding fresh insights for the sermons, and making the content understandable without “dumbing it down.” This takes time and effort.

Multimedia, Induction and Interaction

Interestingly, some of the newer developments in preaching (for example, the inductive structure) were not consistently identified by the listeners as key factors in making the preaching helpful, although the interviews with the preachers revealed they were using them. Perhaps this is indicative of their proficient use. PowerPoints with a summary of the sermon points were identified by many as helpful, and although some of the preachers used interaction, it was not as important to the listeners as features like practicality, humor, and structure.

Conclusions

The temptation with case study is to take the findings and generalize them to every context. This research confirms how dangerous this simplistic approach is. Although there are some commonalities between the preaching styles of these very helpful preachers, each has distinctives appropriate to the context in which they preach.

It is possible to identify a context continuum along which the preachers identified by this research can be placed. Anglicans, Preacher A and Preacher B, reflect one end of the continuum of preaching. It can be called the “Content-focused” emphasis. This end of the continuum is characterized by:

- A higher response to the descriptor: “The sermons give me a deeper understanding of the Bible.”
- The listeners perceive that the preacher spends more time explaining the passage than applying it.
- They are also more likely to indicate that the most helpful part of the preaching is the content of the sermons.
- The preachers use a full manuscript that they take into the pulpit.
- The sermons tend to be more expositional than topical.
- The descriptors generally relate to the content of the sermon rather than the preacher.

Application is still highly valued (“The sermons relate in a practical way to our lives” still scored highly), but the message comes first and foremost from the exposition of the text. The content is crucial as reflected by the use of the full manuscript.

Preachers C and D reflect a middle ground approach between the two extremes of the continuum. The content and the preacher were of similar importance in these contexts.

Preachers E and F preach effectively in what can be called the “Preacher-focused” end of the context continuum:

- The listeners perceive that the preacher spends more time applying the passage than explaining it. (This could be described as a “prophetic” role.)
- The listeners are more likely to describe the preacher as passionate.
- The listeners are more likely to identify that the preacher “moves in the Spirit’s power.”
- They are also more likely to indicate that the most helpful part of the preaching is the power of the sermons.
- The preachers preach from sermon outlines rather than the full manuscript.
- The sermons tend to be more topical than expositional.
- The descriptors generally relate to the preacher rather than the sermon.

Different congregations can be located at various positions on the continuum. The two ends of the continuum are marked by the answers to the question: “Does authority come from the careful exposition of the Bible text or from the Holy Spirit working through the preacher as she/he preaches the text?” In other words, “Are the listeners content-focused or preacher-focused?”

Preachers hoping to learn from this research need to carefully consider the context in which their preaching occurs. Congregations in Pentecostal, Baptist, Lutheran, and Anglican traditions have different expectations of their preachers. However, tradition does not pre-determine the expectation of the listeners as demonstrated by these cases. In order to be “helpful” practitioners need to adapt their style to each particular congregational context. The description of the context continuum and the examples of the cases provide guidelines on how to make sermons more helpful for listeners in each context.

However, it should also be noted that the preacher has the ability, and even the responsibility, to shape the expectations of the congregations which they minister to. The listeners must start with a compelling expectation to hear the voice of God whether that be through the exposition of the biblical content or through the voice of the Spirit-anointed preacher. It is as the preaching expectations are established by the leadership that the congregation will find the preaching more helpful as those expectations are met.

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