Transforming, Not Informing

WE'VE AFFIRMED the potential impact of the Word, spoken. I think I hear a faint "Amen" in the not-so-distant future—faint only because of your distance from me in time and space. As a minister called to preach the gospel, you likely agree wholeheartedly with me that we should expect sermon communication to regularly make a positive impact, resulting in visible changes in individual lives, congregations, communities, and culture. You may be beginning to expand your thinking about the communicative nature of preaching, particularly the mutual responsibility for meaning making you share with your listeners. Your faith in the transformative power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is strong, or you would not have answered your call and made the countless sacrifices necessary to continue to serve in this challenging role. And also important, you still see the gaping wounds so in need of the healing made possible through the transforming power of the Scriptures and the Spirit.

Sermon Communication Purpose

If you have those high expectations for preaching, you are not alone. In a nationwide study of one hundred diverse congregations in the United States, I asked pastors and their parishioners an open-ended question about the purpose of preaching.[1] You may not be surprised to learn the strongest theme among the answers from your colleagues: the goal of their preaching is *change*. What may be a bit of a surprise is that their listeners agreed with that purpose. The two-word phrase used most frequently by parishioners to

describe why they listen to preaching and what they expect from preaching is "spiritual growth." In fact, the open-ended surveying of these listeners in mainline, Catholic, and evangelical churches revealed something even more startling than agreement with their pastors about the purpose of preaching. Listeners in all types of churches said the primary reason they attend church is for spiritual growth and that the component of the service most likely to contribute to their spiritual growth is the sermon or homily. When I have shared these results over the last few years, pastors seem slightly shaken.

> I have to say that I didn't really believe you when I first heard this information. I think it's the lack of verbal response Sunday after Sunday that keeps me thinking the expectations of my parishioners are pretty low. Sometimes when I think a sermon has been powerful, I hear absolutely nothing from anyone. Other times, when I feel less confident about my preparation because it's been a busy week, I'll get a few more "good sermons" than usual when I'm shaking hands after the service. Virtually no one tells me they are growing spiritually because of the sermon. I have kind of unconsciously concluded that they come to church for some reason, but their motivation has nothing to do with the sermon.

I urge you to reexamine your perceptions that listeners hop from church to church primarily to make friends or to hear their preferred music style. Surely such cases occur and have been documented, as relationships and music are central to the community and worship components of church experience. And though some parishioners may feel a moral or social obligation to be present, such constraints and pressures are less common than in previous generations. Hear this now: these research results reveal that a core group of people—representing millions across North America, including many who are looking back at you each week—choose to come to church expecting, hoping, and longing for their participation in sermon communication to contribute to their spiritual growth. This news is good news.

But now the results get a bit more challenging. As this sermon communication research has expanded through the Lilly-endowed Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership (CECL), listener surveys, journals, and focus groups have continued to deepen our understanding of the meaning

being made during and after sermons. This ongoing study shows that regardless of listeners' age or gender, the type of church, the sermon topic, or even their preacher's years of experience, a majority of them report (1) they understand the sermon, (2) they already agree with the sermon, and (3) they will not be changing beliefs or actions as a result of the sermon. So, although pastors intend for their preaching to bring about change and parishioners listen desiring spiritual growth, transformative results are rare. The vast majority of sermons accomplish the purpose of reinforcing listeners' already-held beliefs. Of the hundreds of sermons analyzed throughout this CECL study, more than 95 percent inform rather than transform. Important to this discussion, the top percent (categorized as "high impact sermons") have some commonalities that can serve as models to guide preachers' thinking and practice.

The opening words of this chapter may have set off a few fireworks for you. In Wisconsin, it's legal to buy fireworks but illegal to set them off. That has always seemed like a strange state of affairs to me, and at least figuratively, I may have just broken the law. I bought the fireworks by conducting this research carefully over many years with deeply committed pastors who prepare and preach prayerfully, and now it may seem as though I am lighting smoke bombs and recklessly tossing them into the street to watch the action. If you're sitting on the edge of your lawn chair saying, "Hey, wait a minute! Before you set off that bottle rocket, what do listeners mean by *spiritual growth* anyway?" Or, "Hang on to that Roman candle before I call the cops. Put down that match, and tell me what you have in mind when you use the words *informative rather than transformative*." Please be assured. I have been following all safety precautions as I set off these explosions in the first few paragraphs of this chapter. I will continue with great care. This spectacular display of research results is not random, reckless, or irresponsible.

Listeners participating in this preaching research often scribble sparklers of their own on their sermon surveys. One such commenter encouraged me, as the researcher who would be reading the surveys, to "get a real job," and another noted, "This pastor is a hottie," adding in smaller letters, "Yes, this is his wife." But no comment is more memorable than the listener who wrote in large, dark capital letters: PASTOR AIN'T BROKE DON'T FIX HIM. Agreed. Most of you preachers are not broken, but your listeners desperately need to participate in the most transformative sermon communication possible.

Their affirmation of your good intentions and kind heart may be well deserved, but accepting adequacy as the standard for a sermon's impact could contribute to the collective complacency of the American church. An alternative position is a preacher's commitment to continuously and prayerfully keep asking questions like, "Is the revolutionary potential of the gospel proclaimed making its way into the life of this congregation as fully as possible?" and "How does my preaching lead my listeners to reveal the presence and power of the living Christ to local and global neighbors?" The next practical step in pursuing those answers is a close inspection of your preparation habits.

Sermon Communication Preparation

This long-term research project includes many interrelated specific studies. Each year brings a fresh class of CECL pastors, allowing new questions to be investigated. In the third year, I tracked preachers who prayerfully and specifically worked to increase the transformative quality of their sermon communication, determining their progress by surveying listener responses. From those longitudinal data, elements of the sermon preparation process that are critical for transformative preaching have been identified. Now usually when I bring up the subject of sermon preparation, the first response from pastors has something to do with their shortage of time. When I gently opened this conversation with a pastor friend, his reply was quick—maybe even curt. "I can't find more time, so there's no reason to talk about it!" he said, kneading a stress ball in one hand and tapping his toes on his office floor. It was quite likely that my chattiness had already reduced the number of minutes he had designated for sermon preparation that day, and other distracters were waiting to see him when I was done.

For all who preach, the pressure of sermon preparation is a relentless reality. A recent Google search for *saving sermon preparation time* resulted in 636,001 hits. (I spent a moment wondering who would have time to compile or read those sites.) Though this third year of the research agenda had not begun with a primary focus on preparation, it soon became apparent that what happened *prior* to public communication between pastor and listeners was incredibly important. First, the researchers discerned that for preaching to

become more transformative, sermon preparation practices have to change. Second (and this is very good news for time-thirsty clergy), we now know that how preachers use their preparation time matters more than how much time they use. As a first step in the process of reflecting upon their preaching practices and participating in the study, pastors in the third CECL class carefully documented their sermon preparation time and activities. Given what we discovered, that sermon prep documentation has been a part of the process for every CECL class and clergy communication consultation, case study and workshop since. You will be asked to do that soon.

You may be just a little curious about how your sermon prep compares to the common practices of other preachers. The first thing you should know is that pastors who select topics months in advance and those who wait for Saturday night inspiration are unanimous about one thing: there is never enough prep time.

How Long Does It Take Most Preachers to Prepare Their Sermons?

While the typical times range from five to twenty hours, the average (mean) prep time is consistently between twelve and thirteen hours a week. The amount of prep time didn't increase as the study progressed. As you know, pastors don't have more time! Documenting prep time was sometimes difficult for pastors. Many described *living with* a text all week, while showering, steering stubborn committees, or squeezing that stress ball.

What Do Preachers Do During Those Hours of Sermon Prep Time?

Nearly all spent the majority of their preparation time alone, studying Scripture and writing an outline or manuscript. Activities in the "Studying Scripture" category include exegesis, examining various translations of a passage, cross-referencing, reading commentaries, and conducting word studies. What other activities are commonly listed by pastors as part of their preparation? Fifty-seven percent spend time revising, 47 percent list internal

rehearsal, 47 percent mention reading related books, and 36 percent invest preparation time creating visuals (such as PowerPoint slides). While it may be of interest to know what is typical for others, what really matters is how you prepare to preach.

RPC **SERMON PREPARATION LOG**

Increasing the transformative quality of your sermon communication through reflective practice will require that your awareness of precisely what it is that you do as you prepare to preach intensifies. This documentation of preparation processes is a necessary next step. The prep log will be needed throughout the rest of this book, so be sure to construct a detailed record. As you prepare to preach your next sermon, please log the type of preparation activity and the time spent engaged in that activity in the order you do those tasks.

You may download the "Sermon Prep Log," which is part of the abbreviated RPC Journal, at the Alban Institute webpage "Preaching That Matters," www.alban.org/preachingthatmatters. Or you may copy as many pages of the form as needed from this book or create your own chart with similar headings. However you proceed, be meticulous. Each aspect of your preparation is important. Previously, some pastors have recognized preparation activities that are nearly invisible or at least hard to quantify. Try to include on the list everything you do to prepare, even if the activity doesn't fit neatly in the boxes on the form. Many find that by the time they sit down in front of the screen to start crafting sermon notes or a manuscript, a considerable amount of preparation has already been done. If you think or pray or converse in specific ways related to upcoming topics or passages, heighten your awareness of those preparation processes by writing them down (for example, ruminating while training for a half marathon, asking probing questions to discover insight while conversing with the custodian, and so forth). Most pastors have well-established habits of preparation that are undertaken in a regular sequence—whether conventional or unconventional. Preparation routines for most clergy also do not vary significantly from week to week, though time constraints created by circumstances in the church are a common reason cited for departure from the regular routine.

Pace yourself. Depending on what day of the week you started this chapter, this first Reflective Practice Challenge may take you a week or so to complete. If you want to continue to read the book as you construct this log, the next few pages may be of interest, but you'll need to finish the log before you get to the end of the chapter.

DATE	TIME SPENT	PREPARATION ACTIVITY	COMMENTS

Sermon Communication and Spiritual Transformation

I have used several words so far to describe a particular sermon outcome, one that aims for and accomplishes change. After experiencing the pyrotechnics at the outset of this chapter, you may have already started to reflect on those words. The word I have been using most frequently is *transformation*, and of course, *spiritual* transformation is what I have in mind. The words listeners use are *spiritual growth*. Related concepts after confirmation, conversion, or a spiritual awakening include the spiritual journey and spiritual formation. My United Methodist–raised husband uses the argument-inducing phrase "going on to perfection" (acknowledging ever-so-humbly that the "perfection" part does not occur in this life), while other traditions have substantial theological investment in the concept of sanctification. In these and other named and unnamed expectations, there is an imbedded assumption: we Christ-followers are engaged in a process of becoming more like Christ. We are being transformed.

In his book *Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God*, pastor and preaching professor John Addison Dally proclaims God's work in the world is an ongoing reign rather than something that is either over or yet to come.[2] In that same work, Dally reminds those who preach, "The New Testament portrays large crowds following Jesus to hear his words . . . audiences comprising the entire spectrum of ancient society are portrayed as finding *life-changing value* in his words."[3]

Those public words of Christ launched radical personal and communal reshaping, with changes that continue to unfold across time and in diverse contexts. In an article entitled "Preaching as though We Had Enemies," theologian Stanley Hauerwas offers a bold challenge about the purpose of preaching to those who proclaim truth in this specific age and postmodern culture:

> The ministry seems captured in our time by people who are desperately afraid they might actually be caught with a conviction at some point in their ministry. . . . They, therefore, see their task to "manage" their congregations by specializing in the politics of agreement by always being agreeable. The preaching such a ministry produces is designed to reinforce our presumed agreements, since a "good church" is one without conflict. You cannot preach about abortion, suicide, or war because those are such controversial subjects—better to concentrate on "insights" since they do so little work for the actual shaping of our lives and occasion no conflict. . . .
>
> God has entrusted us, His Church, with the best story in the world. With great ingenuity we have managed, with the aid of much theory, to make that story boring as hell. Theories about meaning are what you get when you forget that the Church and Christians are embattled by subtle enemies who win easily by denying that any war exists. God knows what He is doing in this strange time between "worlds," but hopefully He is inviting us again to engage the enemy through the godly weapons of preaching and sacrament. I pray that we will have the courage and humility to fight.[4]

Though preachers in our twenty-first-century church in North America may not travel cross-country by foot with listeners following in throngs, your collective humble and courageous public spoken words are expected to lead to personal and cultural change, enabling a closer connection of Christ-followers to God's work in the world. At the heart of this chapter,

we are examining the goals of communicators during the sermon, goals related to change, growth, learning, movement—forward progress in the spiritual journey. As we work to defeat the complacency and stagnation enemies of preaching, we can ask, Does the meaning made during sermon communication

- inspire and contribute to movement in faith formation?
- fuel growth or learning already in progress?
- motivate listeners to act on their shared beliefs?
- create new faith-based ways of thinking and responding to pain and suffering?
- inspire and incite collective change in our specific and broad cultural contexts?

Such a list is lofty, yet given the current lack of transformative sermon communication, we must continue to push our expectations for change beyond previous confines. Importantly, spiritual transformation includes but is not limited to individuals' initial faith commitments and subsequent incremental alterations in lifestyle. In the introductory material of his frequently quoted book *The American Church in Crisis*, church planter David T. Olson addresses that expansion of the notion of spiritual growth:

> The goal of moving from decay to restoration is not simply for the church to grow numerically, not simply to have more churches with more people sitting in them. Instead, the goal is to move the church into more fruitful ministry so that the church can transform culture with the love and grace of God. Spiritual transformation gives rise to both personal and societal change.[5]

In this age and country, millions of people who profess to already believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ are attending church, listening to the public words of spiritual leaders, spiritual directors, spiritual formers—their preachers—for the purpose of growth. Yet fewer than 1 percent of the hundreds of sermons in this overall study overtly aim to bring about spiritual transformation with broad cultural impact. Those sermons that do aim to transform rather than inform are almost exclusively focused upon personal change. As you think about sermon communication in general and your sermon com-

munication in particular, what manifestations of spiritual transformation do you expect?

Spiritual transformation is not just of interest to those who preach. A nationally commissioned group of sixty scientists was competitively selected from a large and prestigious applicant pool to undertake a multiyear, multidisciplinary research agenda focusing on spiritual transformation.[6] The first time these scientists gathered, they collaboratively constructed a working definition of spiritual transformation. I can only imagine the intensity and length of their discussion. Eventually, they came to an initial consensus, describing spiritual transformation as "Dramatic changes in world and self views, purposes, religious beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. These changes are often linked to discrete experiences that can occur gradually or over relatively short periods of time."[7]

As we continue to explore spiritual transformation, we must also consider how listeners are describing the spiritual growth they seek as they listen to sermons. After the survey findings in this study began to consistently paint a picture of complacency among parishioners—satisfaction even with sermons that did not ask for change—I assembled listener focus groups to explore the situation further. After all, they had previously been quite clear that they wanted to grow spiritually, that they attended church with that goal in mind, and that the sermon was the component of the service most likely to contribute to their spiritual growth. Members of these focus groups affirmed what the survey results have shown: sermons are reinforcing what listeners already believe. The scientists' definition of spiritual transformation, however, broadens our understanding of *spiritual transformation* from "belief change" (which the listeners resist strongly in their sermon responses in every year of the study) to include alterations in world- and self-view, purpose, attitudes, and behaviors. So, though beliefs remain firm among most who make meaning during and after sermons, is it possible that growth still occurs?

A subset of listeners talked with conviction about three ways that informative, belief-reinforcing sermons still yield what they describe as spiritual growth. First, these listeners describe how they clearly want and need consistent reminders of what they believe to help them maintain faith in difficult times or generally hold on to their beliefs. A regular comment from listeners with this perspective was, "The sermon helps me make it through the week." For example:

> It's good to hear about how much God loves me, because things are tough at work and at home. I already know God loves me, but I like that reminder. It feels good to hear the familiar. I take comfort in hearing what I believe spoken by someone I respect and admire.

A second theme from listeners who uphold the spiritual growth potential of sermons that inform and reinforce comes from those who talk about a deepening or strengthening of belief. The growth result, they explain, is "increased certainty," which they find important even if they do not act differently as a result of having their beliefs affirmed. A third way these listeners understand informative sermons to be serving their spiritual growth is by applying known principles to circumstances that arise in their lives. For example, gaining a father-in-law with a gruff personality can add substantially to the challenge of loving others, so the reminder to do just that is appreciated. Said a young woman in such a circumstance,

> I had stopped listening to the sermons about loving other people because I've heard that preached so many times and I think I'm already pretty nice to people—but now that I have a person in my life who is so hard to love, I realize there is still room for me to grow in this area.

Those new personal applications produce something these listeners experience and appreciate as spiritual growth.

In contrast, most parishioner focus-group members are dismayed as they discover the sermon survey results. Many are even alarmed, concerned that the church in general is not having the impact it should be having, given the depth and breath of need apparent with a quick glance at any news source. Some use crisis language as they react to the research results, including words like "horrified" and "ashamed" in combination with "complacent" and "stagnant." This vocal listener contingency insists that they want to be challenged to be, believe, or behave in new ways because of their spiritual commitments. These listeners' descriptions of spiritual growth are similar to the scientists' definition of spiritual transformation. Stagnation is not acceptable, nor do they perceive that they, their congregations, or their cultures have "arrived" and should rest comfortably. Though the goals of reminding listeners of their beliefs, strengthening those beliefs, and applying them to

new personal circumstances were welcome and acceptable among possible preaching outcomes, such aims were not perceived to be enough by most of the focus-group listeners.

These listener focus-group dialogues were spirited and fascinating. As participants speculated about their apparent collective complacency in the sermon communication process, they brainstormed the following potential explanations: (1) wanting to affirm the minister they love; (2) enjoying the ambience created by shared beliefs and values; (3) avoiding authentic dialogue that might produce conflict; and (4) succumbing to the culturally derived individualism that their Christianity should be countering. Hauerwas would respond "Amen" to that list of explanations suggested by the focus group, identifying each of those items as a "subtle enemy."[8] Dally would encourage us to be aware that God is already at work in the world and that these listeners need an invitation to participate in God's transforming adventure.[9] What is your response?

Is the potential for spiritual transformation enhanced by the way you prepare and preach, or are you readying yourself for sermon communication in such a way that you repeatedly tell your listeners what they already know and believe without challenging them to activate those shared beliefs? It's a tough question. Put another way, "Why do preachers who aim to transform continue to inform?" Though scientists and listeners have contributed to this conversation, you may be wondering what the pastors who participated in this study think about their informative sermons. In research study exit interviews and clergy focus groups, pastors with the ongoing habit of informative preaching reveal three consistent philosophical commitments. The commitments have merit, yet in the thinking of those whose sermons are exclusively informative, they somehow work against transformative aims:

1. I'm a teacher, not a preacher.
2. I'm committed to biblical preaching.
3. I will not manipulate people.

I'm a Teacher, Not a Preacher

More than half of evangelical ministers in the study self-identify as teachers, not preachers. They are not alone, as some mainline and Catholic colleagues

join them. This identification of themselves as teachers often arises from an admirable desire to be amicable and approachable, rather than high and mighty. And of course, our model Jesus was repeatedly described as a teacher. Unfortunately, sermon response goals corresponding with this identity are more likely than the aims of those who self-identify as preachers to be mired in informative purposes (for example, "Over the next five Sundays, I will explain this letter to the church in Ephesus to you"). As the director of a teaching-and-learning-excellence center on my campus, I am especially intrigued by this connection of teaching with information transmission. Teaching is not telling; at is best, teaching aims to transform ("Students will be able to use their voices to enact change related to a current campus issue of their choosing") rather than inform ("Students will be able to define public speaking and contrast it with interpersonal communication"). Of special note here is the tendency of teacher-preachers to overexplain and underinspire. Former president of Youth for Christ Jay Kesler begins an article entitled "Overfed, Underchallenged" with these words: "Preaching is distinguished from teaching in that it calls for commitment and attempts to bring people to a point of action."[10]

I'm Committed to Biblical Preaching

Exegesis and exposition of the Scriptures are crucial practices for many who preach. While preachers and listeners (and this researcher) remain firm in their expectation that sermons be biblically based, a preacher's dedication to textual analysis can sometimes produce chronological, verse-by-verse explanatory sermons without a unifying theme or a discernible call for change. Often in this type of informative sermon, listeners report that they are either overwhelmed by the amount of information or underwhelmed by the familiarity of content. As a challenge to those who are afraid to deviate from an explanatory sermon because they want to be true to the text, I offer the words of one whose lifetime of ministry was dedicated to advocacy for biblical preaching—pastor, author, and teacher John Stott. In the opening pages of the edited volume *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*, he is charged by the editors with the task of defining biblical preaching. In that definition, he emphasizes the listeners' response to the voice of God: "To expound Scrip-

ture is to open up the inspired text with such faithfulness and sensitivity that God's voice is heard and his people obey him." In his long list of possible listener responses to God speaking through biblical preaching, Stott includes compassionate actions such as feeding the hungry and caring for the poor, confession, worship, obedience to commands, and hope.[11]

I Will Not Manipulate People

Informative preachers who make the declaration "I will not manipulate people" often have childhood memories of coercive altar calls. Their commitment to avoid pressuring people with emotional, guilt-inducing pleas is an appropriate ethical standard. But if preachers avoid even asking for change based on an aversion to all things persuasive, their sermons will be less transformative than possible. When I teach public speaking to students or business professionals and we talk about the general goal or purpose, the word *persuasion* is used without issue. In those settings, the word is not problematic. With many clergy, however, there seems to be immediate association of *manipulation* with *persuasion*. Did that happen for you? If so, might you be able to replace that term with the concept *ethical spiritual influence* or *spiritual leadership*? The roots of your aversion may be deep and worthy of your close consideration. One pastor wrote,

> I endured endless verses of "Just as I Am"—a spiritual arm-twisting that made me and other people in my youth group repent and recommit endlessly. I felt badgered and pushed—and I don't think I've ever quite recovered. It's just so wrong. I never want to "persuade"—just quietly live and talk about my faith.

In your role as a person called by God to lead through the spoken Word, are you able to respectfully and ethically challenge others to change on the authority of the Scriptures, on your conviction that change is needed, and through the power of the Holy Spirit? It is possible to maintain these same commitments—to be a teacher, to be biblical, to be ethical—and to engage in sermon communication for the purpose of spiritual transformation.

RPC

SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION AND PREACHING: PUSHING YOUR BUTTONS

In both adult and childhood education, researchers find that activating prior knowledge is one of the important first components of learning. As we have explored the idea of sermons that aim to transform rather than inform, some of your prior learning buttons may have been pushed. Using the Prior Knowledge Button graphic organizer, free-write in each space as you connect prior learning to the idea that sermon communication should be spiritually transforming. In the Personal section, you might note experiences and models that have influenced your thinking. In the Theological area, your guiding assumptions, authors who have influenced you, or even reactions to the material in this chapter might emerge. And in the Practical space, preparation habits and listener reactions could be considered. As you look at your brief notations about prior learning associations, determine what button has been pushed for you with this concept. Is this a hot-button issue? A panic button? A defense-raising, bright red button? Or maybe a green button, for *Go!* As you activate prior knowledge about spiritual transformation and preaching, name the button or buttons that are being pushed for you.

(4) Practical

(3) Theological

(2) Personal

(1) Spiritual Transformation and Preaching
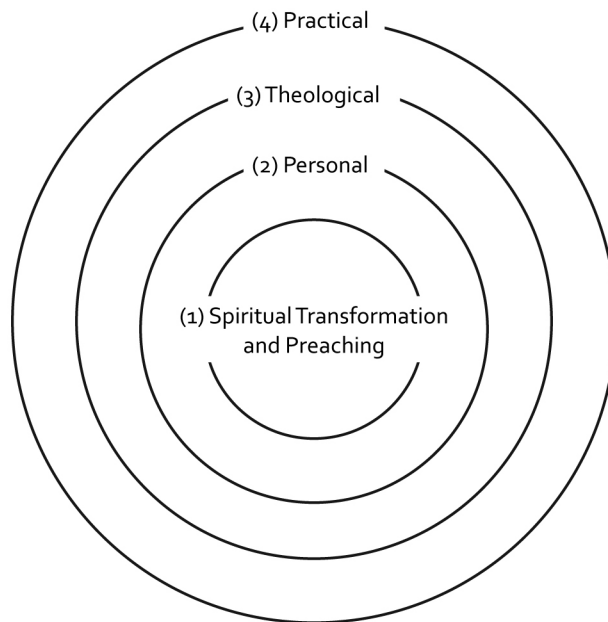
Prior Knowledge Button

Then, check your preparation log. Begin to think about why you do what you do. Inspect the impact of your prior learning on the development of your current sermon preparation habits.

Sermon Communication Preparation: Identifying a Transformative Response

Now that you have documented your preparation and examined your prior knowledge about spiritual transformation and preaching, it is time to reveal the rare preparation practices that increase as preaching becomes more transformative. As this phase of the research progressed, some pastor-participants implemented action plans that led to preaching that listeners experienced as more spiritually transformative than it had been previously. And although the overall amount of time those pastors spent in preparation did not change over a period of eight months, the way they used their time did change. Importantly, time spent studying Scripture and praying did not decrease. The preachers had to pick up time somewhere, so they decreased time spent reading related books, viewing media, and revising. And what did they do instead? I'll share two of those practices in this chapter and save the rest for later.

Uncommon Prep Practice 1: Discernment of a Clear Sermon Goal

"My primary challenge was to be more intentional and focused on what the sermon is asking of the people."

Can you speak the response goal of your last three sermons? Could your listeners? Many pastors are able to name only sermon topics or passages or ideas that listeners should now understand. As these preachers immersed themselves in Scripture and prayer, they worked toward a clear, compelling, text-connected subject. Once that subject was formulated, they allowed a specific, high-expectation response aim to emerge. Prep time spent formulating a spiritual growth goal led to reduced revision time and more focused content. Pastors who made this change report that the goal shapes their thinking throughout the remainder of the preparation process. Prep time used in this way pays off in the spiritual growth listeners experience.

Uncommon Prep Practice 2:
Personal Spiritual Growth Activities

"I needed to leave room for the Holy Spirit to work."

Several pastors recognized that they had been neglecting their own spiritual lives, substituting professional responsibilities for personal spiritual disciplines. Those who made changes in this area of sermon preparation spoke of resulting increases in their sense of integrity, inspiration, and invigoration. The specific discernible changes in preaching that accompanied this uncommon prep practice varied. For example, spiritual growth for some led to further transparency, and they became able to self-disclose during preaching. For others, by their own report, spiritual growth led to increased humility, which decreased a habit of using self as the positive example too frequently, so self-disclosure decreased. Regardless of the specific alterations, as preachers spend more time in meditation, journaling, prayer, fasting, or personal devotions, listeners report a stronger impact of the sermon on *their* spiritual lives.

These two uncommon preparation practices are intertwined. Preachers who begin to include the first practice—identifying a clear, spiritually transformative response goal—encounter a challenge: how to discern what that response goal should be for each sermon. A passage or theme or subject may be apparent and needs in the congregation or community may be known, but decisions about specific response goals can be incredibly difficult to make. Choosing that goal is a matter of spiritual leadership and thus is connected to the personal spiritual life of the preacher. While many pastors reference the Holy Spirit's work during the preaching event, fewer point to the Spirit's work during preparation. A midwestern pastor in a mainline church had this to say, after a full year of work on his sermon communication:

> When I realized my sermons weren't even asking listeners to change, I quit blaming them for being stagnant. Procrastinating the preaching prep is a problem—I can always fill the time with something that seems important. As I made a commitment for my preaching to be more of a priority, I had to look at my time use honestly. The awareness discouraged me at first, but now it's freeing. My own spiritual journey has been enhanced as I've become

open to God speaking through me—in spite of me. I haven't been this aware of my own spiritual life since my ordination. Discerning spiritual growth goals is never simple, but my own spiritual awakening is helping me become comfortable with the role of spiritual leadership through preaching.

A critical component of moving from informative to transformative preaching is to aim to transform. The communicative goal affects structure, supportive material, language usage, and every other element of the sermon. If you have a worship team or leader, or musicians, paid or volunteer, their early awareness of the spiritual-transformation goal of a particular sermon can enhance all aspects of worship, increasing the cohesiveness of the sermon and service. Let us acknowledge together again that sermon communication is a special form of public speaking: the meanings made in the minds of listeners can and will extend beyond any predetermined response goal. But that is not a good enough reason to avoid selecting a change-based goal altogether! The One who is leading your congregation to spiritual transformation is leading through you, your spoken words, and your spiritual discernment during preparation. The question that must be addressed as you prepare for each sermon: Where are you headed?

As promised, this step requires a change in preparation. As you work toward ethical spiritual influence in sermon communication, check your (now-completed?) prep log. Are you regularly spending prep time determining a sermon response goal? Many preachers list "selecting a subject" after studying the passage, or they don't list "selecting a subject" at all—because they are "preaching through" (or "on") a passage. Some must select a title for the bulletin by a certain day of the week, but they don't think of that decision as a component of preparation, even though it often affects listeners' expectations. As you inspect your preparation routine, determine a place in the chronology of activities to insert "discernment of desired spiritual growth response." Some pastors select topics for a sermon series weeks or even months in advance, but are not ready to identify a spiritual transformation response goal until they are immersed in the prep process just prior to preaching. Others, who follow the lectionary, may make decisions about responses by looking for connections between the readings. Still others prayerfully dwell in cultural, community, and congregational events, breathing in needs that drive them to the Scriptures and then to discerning spiritual transformation response goals.

As you become intentional about setting specific transformative goals for sermon communication, please do not imagine that there is a one-size-fits-all formula for this preparation process. The method you use for the practice of discerning a transformative purpose for each sermon needs to work with your established preparation habits. Also note that the response goal sentence or phrase may not ever be spoken explicitly during the sermon or printed in the bulletin; rather, its purpose is to guide your preparation toward transformation. As you work to discover and select a personally viable method for this practice, consider the following four processes for the crafting of transformative sermon communication goals during preparation:

Setting public-speaking goals

Creating learning objectives

Writing a sermon in a sentence

Identifying subject and response catchphrases

Setting Public-Speaking Goals

As you seek a preparation method that will enable you to set these goals for each sermon, the process used by other public speakers might be a helpful place to begin your thinking. In other forms of public communication, the speaker starts with a general speech goal, such as "to persuade," and then develops a specific listener-driven purpose based on the topic and an analysis of the audience:

EXAMPLE 1

Topic-Based Audience Analysis: friendly, supportive audience of family members of ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) patients

Type of Persuasive Goal: motivate them to take specific action

Listener-Driven Purpose: listeners will donate money to ALS research

EXAMPLE 2

Topic-Based Audience Analysis: apathetic, unaware audience

Type of Persuasive Goal: gain their attention and cause them to care, so that the next time an article or news story about ALS comes into their perceptual field, they will pay attention

Listener-Driven Purpose: listeners will care about the underfunding of ALS research

EXAMPLE 3

Topic-Based Audience Analysis: hostile audience, with counterarguments related to the importance of other needs better matched with their organizational vision

Type of Persuasive Goal: to cause them to consider a new alternative that they have previously resisted

Listener-Driven Purpose: listeners who must divide their foundation dollars will consider the merits of contributing to ALS research

When applied to preaching, an important element of this planning method is the audience analysis piece. For each sermon subject and goal, listeners may be agreeable, apathetic, hostile, or all three. If you start a sermon on Job as though your regular churchgoers have never heard of the guy, you reveal your lack of awareness of their perspective. For many sermon subjects, listeners are "friendlies"—familiar with your content and already in agreement with your ideas. To move from informative to transformative, sermons to friendlies can use reinforcement of shared beliefs as a launchpad for a call to action rather than a primary purpose. When your audience is extremely familiar with the material, listeners may actually feel apathetic rather than agreeable. (Remember the listener comment, "I stopped listening to sermons about loving other people . . . because I'm already pretty nice"?) And those who preach must never forget that if they address countercultural topics such as keeping the Sabbath holy, the likelihood of hostility among listeners is great (though tomato throwing is less likely than silent counterargument that negates the potential for implementation). Later in the book when we tackle sermon structure, we'll return to this discussion of purpose and audience analysis.

Creating Learning Objectives

As an educator, my inclination is to construct sermon response goal statements using the structure of a student learning outcome: "As a result of this sermon, listeners will . . ." In educational contexts, we have worked for decades on clarifying, sharing, and assessing our expectations for student

learning by creating precise objectives as we plan classroom communication. In higher education, however, there has been a relatively recent shift in how objectives are constructed. In the past, such statements were often professor or class driven ("The professor will instruct, impart, lecture, make known, create understanding, inform . . ." or "This class will increase learners proficiency . . ."). With Ernest Boyer's 1990 widely read *Scholarship Reconsidered*, a movement in higher education began to refocus faculty on learning rather than teaching.[12] That international movement is now called the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), and it has inspired many in higher education to gauge the success of teaching on one criterion: student learning.

That kind of thinking applied to the sermon preparation process asks you first to avoid preacher- or sermon-driven statements, since we've already busted the myth about transmitting messages. So, the following goals could be improved:

~~The preacher will explain Psalm 71.~~
~~This sermon will clarify the meaning of Psalm 71.~~

To revise these subject and goal statements, we need to begin with the listeners' response, just as educators begin with their students' learning ("The listeners will . . .").

Carefully selecting a precise verb can also be helpful as you work to move your subject toward a transformative response. Informative sermons (and some college lectures) are driven by verbs such as *know* or *comprehend*, which keep sermons at the lowest levels on famed educator Benjamin Bloom's oft-cited taxonomy of learning.[13] You might be able to expand or specify your thinking about these goal statements by considering verbs related to higher levels of thinking as identified by Bloom, verbs such as *apply* (relate, implement, choose, construct, develop); *analyze* (contrast, examine, focus, prioritize); *synthesize* (compose, design, facilitate, generate, model); or *evaluate* (critique, defend, reframe, support, assess).

~~Listeners will understand the example provided in Psalm 71.~~
Using Psalm 71 as a guide, listeners will compose a prayer about aging.

Of course, spiritual transformation is not limited to changes in thinking. Bloom and others also push educators not to confine themselves to the cognitive domain, but to consider kinesthetic and affective learning objectives

as well. Certainly God through Scripture challenges us to change emotion, attitudes, and physical behaviors in addition to our thinking. Consider this sermon subject and response objective, emanating from an Old Testament reading in Judges.

> Listeners will decrease their attitude of entitlement and expectation of prosperity by committing to a daily practice of gratitude.

Perhaps the goal of Dwight A. Moody's sermon to young preachers (quoted at the close of chapter 2) had a listener response objective that went something like this:

> Listeners will be inspired to raise their expectations about the impact of God's work through their own preaching.

Spiritual growth and learning have much in common, and this particular type of sermon goal setting may help you stay listener-response focused. In addition, as you work to include a specific and possibly action-oriented verb in your sermon goal, subsequent thinking and content selection during preparation may focus more specifically on addressing implementation.

Writing a Sermon in a Sentence

David Mains, author of the *Sermon Sucking Black Hole* and host of the Sermon-Coach website, offers another method for writing these response goals.[14] Mains urges pastors to merge subject and response into a single sentence as they prepare for sermon communication. Example sermon sentences from his website include:

EXAMPLE 1

Title: The Prayer of Thanks; Text: Judges 13–16
Sermon in a Sentence: The daily practice of listing for God your specific thanks guards against the sin of presumption.

EXAMPLE 2

Title: Promise of Springtime; Text: Jeremiah 5:6

Sermon in a Sentence: Before experiencing firsthand the delights of Spiritual Springtime you must recognize winter conditions for what they are.

For those pastors who already select a title and text each week, the Sermon in a Sentence method can be an excellent next step. Notice that the "you" in each example sermon sentence is the listener with whom you (the pastor) will be engaged in sermon communication. One of the benefits and challenges of this method is that selecting the precise words necessary to construct a fluent, concise sentence provides focus—making editing of extraneous thoughts much simpler in later stages of preparation.

Identifying Subject-and-Response Catchphrases

Finally, those who like to keep it simple may decide to list a short phrase for *subject* and another short but precise phrase for *response*. A pastor from a coastal state chooses to create a Subject and Response (S&R) header for every preaching document on his computer. Once he decides on these phrases for a particular sermon, he inserts the S&R header on each page of every document related to that sermon—general brainstorming notes, illustrations, the developing draft, and his final outline that accompanies him to the pulpit. He explains, "Having the S&R catch-phrases in front of me at all stages of preparation has helped me stay focused on transformation. It's been especially useful during the editing portion of my prep, because I usually have too much content."

EXAMPLE 1

S: Presumption; R: Practice gratitude

EXAMPLE 2

S: Hope & Global Crisis; R: Bring tangible hope to hopeless

This method may be the simplest shift for those preachers who currently identify a subject but not a response, but I offer one caution: If the preacher uses the response catchphrase as a tag-on during the conclusion or a quick insertion in the closing prayer, the anticipated change from informative to transformative sermon communication will not be realized. The rationale for determining the sermon's goal during preparation is to allow it to shape subsequent sermon structure and content.

If you are tempted to skip this creative and sometimes laborious preparation step in your next sermon, remember that the vast majority of sermons (more than 95 percent) do not invite listeners to change. Such sermons follow a predictable pattern:

Preacher's General Purpose: Let me tell you about something.
Listeners' General Response: I agree with what you said.

My own response goal for this chapter? Preacher-readers will choose to intentionally and prayerfully select a specific spiritual transformation goal as they prepare for sermon communication.

RPC ⊌ TRANSFORMATIVE SERMON RESPONSE GOALS

Look Back

Begin this reflective practice challenge by trying to reconstruct the response goal of your last sermon. If you can recall the transformative aim, write it down in various formats—Listener Objective (public speaking or learning approaches); Sermon in a Sentence; or S&R Catchphrase. If this recall task seems impossible, explore the reasons for the difficulty: Were there multiple topics? Was your aim mostly informative? Was there a subject but not an expected response? Did you preach that sermon some time ago, making recollection difficult?

Practice Each Method

Then, using this passage of Scripture from Mark 8:34–37, create a sermon response goal in each of the formats to begin discerning which option works best for you.

[Jesus] said, "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help

at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?"

1. List subject and response catchphrases.
   Subject: Self-Sacrifice
   Response:

2. Write a sermon in a sentence that includes subject and listener response.

3. Given your general transformative goal for all sermons, construct a specific listener-driven response goal (or learning objective) for this sermon:
   Listener response goal: Listeners will . . .

Move Forward (Partner Needed)

Finally, use your favorite of these formats, or some original method that has emerged as you have practiced these options, to delineate a subject and response as you prepare your next sermon. If possible, before you continue reading, begin another prep log, tracking in the comment section the effect of delineating this aim on other aspects of your planning.

Not only will the pre-sermon process be changed, the sermon communication will also be affected. Ask your accountability partner to listen to this sermon, and then meet to converse about the subject and response as they were communicated, using the following discussion guide. (Other components of the guide will be introduced later in the book.) On this guide, how well the subject and response are communicated during the sermon has been indicated using a continuum for each aspect, with increasing competence from left to right, designated by the terms *emerging, developing, clearly present,* and *strong.* Descriptions of strong subjects and responses in the far right column come from sermons that listeners identified as spiritually transformative (the top 5 percent, sometimes described in this text as "high impact").

After the sermon, talk with your accountability partner about your perceptions of how *subject* and *response* came to life during this particular

sermon communication experience. For example, if your designated listener could discern a text-connected subject but experienced it as something strictly informative ("Job was a model sufferer"), then the two of you might revisit the transformative goal set during preparation and contrast that with the way the subject and response were communicated during the sermon. Of special note in the subject category is the phrase "spiritual growth fueled by God's power." Regular listeners indicate that they can be overwhelmed by repeated requests for change if it seems like they are responsible for making that growth happen themselves (be more forgiving, be a better spouse, and so forth). Said one listener, "Pastor lets us know it's not just that God wants us to change and be change agents, but God is going to help us make those changes. God gives us the gifts, the strength, the resources, the church community . . . What a relief."

Using this discussion guide with your accountability partner will enable you to continue to refine the preparation processes that increase the spiritually transformative meanings made in the minds of listeners.

	EMERGING Transforming characteristics emerging in this sermon	DEVELOPING Transforming characteristics developing in this sermon	CLEARLY PRESENT Transforming characteristics clearly present in this sermon	STRONG Transforming characteristics strongly demonstrated in this sermon
S U B J E C T	Passage, illustration, or main points may be the only discernable theme.	Subject is discernable and connected to text.	Subject is clear, text-connected, and relevant.	Subject is clear, compelling (attention-gaining), text-connected, relevant; spiritual growth fueled by God's power is anticipated.
R E S P O N S E	A desired response may be implied or may be primarily informative.	Response is discernable and connected to text.	Response is clear and text-driven, and moves beyond informing to transforming.	Sermon conveys clear, high expectations for change, extends beyond individual, is text-driven, moves beyond informing to transforming, urges commitment.

Do you preach with change in mind? For one year of this study, a small group of pastors from mainline, evangelical, and Catholic congregations worked together—not to fix what's broken but to support one another as they attempted to further the spiritual impact of their sermon communication. While these ministers have many differences, they are unanimous about one thing: changing preaching preparation habits is hard work. Listen in and learn from one of these pastors who reflects honestly about the challenges of preaching to transform:

> I have never been more convicted about the importance of preaching well. . . . It was easier when I was satisfied. Now that I'm aware of how little people remember and how little they change as a result of sermons, I'm struggling. It takes more time, effort, thought, self-reflection, honesty, and prayer than I ever imagined to truly connect God's word with the lives and minds of listeners. This process makes me more dependent on the grace and power of God, even though I'm working harder on it than ever. I've quit assuming that I'm "good enough," and that's a vulnerable place to be.

As you prayerfully accept the challenge of moving toward increasingly more transformative sermon communication, perhaps you—like your listeners—will be comforted by our shared belief that forward motion requires your effort but does not depend on your strength alone.