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CHAPTER TWELVE

PREACH THE WORD – GRIPPINGLY

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Preachers listen restlessly to the proclamation of the Gospel in tones other than their own. A preacher listens most critically to any homiletical practitioner other than himself. So a charge against contemporary evangelical preaching by someone who both preaches and teaches preaching begins with two strikes against it. Let me get the charge off my chest anyway: there is an enormous and inexcusable amount of dull and mind-numbing preaching going on in evangelical pulpits today. Evangelical laymen point this up in the often-heard lament, “Our pastor just does not feed us”; and equally evangelical preachers defensively re-join, “At least I am biblical” or, somewhat more negatively, “This television generation just is not interested in the Word of God!” But there you have it my growing gripe and conviction: a lot of honestly biblical sermons are honestly boring.

1. RAMIFICATIONS OF THE PROBLEM

When the pulpiteer falls into a dull routine behind his local version of the sacred desk, the faithful pew occupant is in for a rough time, because in evangelical circles “faithful” means “present every time the sanctuary door opens.” That means that the hapless pew occupant trapped under a dull pulpiteer has the opportunity to be bored in the name of Jesus 104 times per year. Should the same layman prove especially faithful and meet the same preacher at midweek service also, one can increase that count of dull interludes per annum to 156. In our more free evangelical call systems of placement one can hardly blame such laymen if they begin to think in terms of calling a different pastor, hope springing eternal in their faithful breasts that this time God will send them a modern Elijah and Isaiah rolled in the same M.Div. diploma.

Given the fact that the Bible is seen by everybody—whatever their doctrine of inspiration—as the most interesting book ever authored, it stands as a strange contradiction that any dedicated to its proclamation should be charged with enervating dullness. Add the evangelical’s clear assertion that every word of Holy Writ was inerrantly prompted by the eternal God and the practice of enervating dullness in its proclamation becomes a sin as monstrous in one bracket as pastoral adultery is in another category. Let any other orator of history prove boring, but never the preacher of the Word:

He lights his torch at all their tires, and then has a torch lit not by their flaring lamps, but at the sun, which sun is Christ. The preacher has all they had, and

more—and more, aye, gloriously more! No interest vital to the world which he does not touch. He stands at the center of a circle whose entire rim is fire. Glory envelops him. He is a prisoner of majesty. A dumb man would stumble into luminous speech on such themes as the gospel grapples with. We dare not be ineloquent when we have themes which do as Aaron's rod did, burst forth into perfumed bloom. We must not be insipid. There is not a dull page in all this age-long story of the redeeming of the race. The minor prophets leap into eloquence which silences Demosthenes; and the major prophets take the thunders for a trumpet on which to blow their universal summons; and the apostles stand in the highway where the peoples throng and exact a tribute of a hearing from the unconcerned; and the evangelists forget bookkeeping and fishing, in eloquence which time has not had the effrontery to dim.¹

Even more damaging to the church than the bored layman, however, is the bored proclaimer—the pulpit craftsman who finds his preparation routine, his sermons all ringing the same in his own ears, and his parish assignment about as long lasting as a pair of good shoes. With his preaching pattern in familiar wrinkles and creases and the sole of his content worn thin through much treading of the same terrain, his ears are soon cocked for a “new call,” hope springing eternal in his breast for a more appreciative people or new preaching vitality through “a new challenge.”

Constant shuffling of preachers among churches fueled by auditor hope for an interesting proclaimer and proclaimer hope for a challenging auditor leaves auditor and proclaimer alike dispirited. The answer to the charge of dullness in evangelical pulpits lies in the recovery of urgency, depth, power, and appeal in sermon preparation and delivery. Once again we must come to the point where

[t]he making of the sermon is actually a moment of revelation, a trip into the holy mountains, for ... (preachers), and the delivery of the sermon is such a moment for their congregations. Their preaching galvanizes men—upends them, probes them, haunts them, follows them into their most remote hiding places and smokes them out, drives them out coughing and sputtering and crying into the open light of new grace and new freedom and new love. The withered are made whole, the lame leap for joy, the dumb find articulation, the confused discover direction, the harried find resources for slowing down—in short, there is an apocalypticism about such preaching, an immediate grasp of what is yet distant and still to come, a taste of what is promised.²

Recovery of this kind of proclamation is inevitably the responsibility of the evangelical proclaimer. Recovery of this kind of sermonizing will inevitably interrupt our contemporary shuffle of pastors with the bonding of a proclaimer to a local people in the delight of the shared preaching experience. Establishment or recovery of this kind of preaching is a worthy goal for any pastor who finds himself in a postseminary, midcareer crisis that features boring preaching. whether in preparation or delivery, as a major ingredient.

To add to the brashness of a charge of dullness in evangelical preaching the audacity of a claim to cure can only be folly, hubris, or both. But it' drown we

¹ William A. Quayle, *The Pastor–Preacher*, ed. Warren W. Wiersbe (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 143.

² John Killinger, *The Centrality of Preaching in the Total Task of the Ministry* (Waco, Tex: Word, 1969), 28

must in such a sea of homiletical folly, let us, before expiring, at least attempt a life raft constructed of planks of observation and suggestion.

II. HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

The history of preaching can rapidly be epitomized through its so-called great centuries. In the almost twenty spans of one hundred that separate the modern Christian from the cross, the first, fourth, twelfth, sixteenth, and nineteenth centuries are generally considered the highlights of proclamation. During that first century the seed of the Gospel was broadcast to the ancients by the apostles. Peter and Paul represent the force of that pristine preaching. The next century of outstanding preaching, the fourth, postdates the triumph of the Christ over the Caesar, and midst the collapse of all things classical, Augustine of Hippo and Chrysostom of Antioch and Constantinople represent, respectively, the passing Latin and Greek patristic orders. As the scholastics froze the church in useless and endless debate and the mass totally supplanted the sermon in the worship of the congregants, preaching burst again upon the world in the brilliant twelfth-century work of St. Francis and St. Dominic. Growing fires of reformation made the sixteenth century great in preaching power, and Luther and Calvin were followed by a phalanx of only slightly less luminous pulpiteers of reformation. Where the fruit of this reformation grew most profusely, the English-speaking segments of Christendom made the 1900s the fifth century of great preaching, and Charles Haddon Spurgeon and Alexander Maclaren, though both British and both Baptists, can perhaps best represent that epoch.

Such a quick survey of the history of preaching yields an instructive observation when confronted with the question, “Where did preaching occur’?” The difference two thousand years brought is immediately apparent. As the infant church took its first steps into pagan culture, preaching largely occurred outdoors and in often furious interchange with auditors caught up in street, forum, or on the riverbank. Now as the aged church totters toward the end of the age, preaching among English-speaking folks at least is almost inevitably indoors and in the context of the worship service. When you cage the sermon behind mortar and stained glass, sustaining and surrounding it with the whine of organ-electronic or pipe, when you tame the sermon to twenty minutes tailored to the latest fashion in liturgy, when you display the sermon only to those who voluntarily come into the cage to behold it, the domestication of preaching has been completed.

None can deny the benefits of domestication: sermons are well mannered (no Petrine prying), shortened (no Pauline length), to the point (no Chrysostom circumlocution), apolitical (no Luther needling the state), and scholarly (no bosom-heaving Spurgeonic flights of oratory). Indeed the sermon has been domesticated; but dare we deny that we have lost some things in the transition? What has happened to the trigger tension, even excitement, of the proclaimer when he never knows the challenge of a shouted rebuttal, to say nothing of a well-aimed stone or wielded club? Where has the electricity of the mixed audience gone that had the sermon carried to it in two sandals via loud voice when that audience is replaced by all those sufficiently in agreement to come to the sermon in a thousand shoes?

Let it be suggested in passing that one thing that might assist in reinvigorating

preaching would be the resolution on the part of every twentieth-century pulpiteer to preach at least twelve times a year to a secular audience, a congregation latently or openly hostile to the Gospel. Reverse the drive-in church rage of hyperaffluent suburbia and drive yourself to the nearest park or campers site and set up a preaching situation. When the weather is too had for that, be enough of a man in your world (not I, you will note) to be invited to give a P.T.A. devotional, the high school baccalaureate, the county medical association ethical discussion, the town council Christmas emphasis, or the jail sermon. Every preaching year, carry some of your proclamations back out of the sanctuary cage and into moments untamed by worship.

III. TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

Several concomitant developments make the domestication of preaching especially debilitating to modern seminary graduates. One is the loss of status accorded the pastor by his community. When the pastor was an authority figure respected by village friend and foe alike the sermon could afford a certain amount of domestication. A second is the rivalry offered the learning of the rector by every field of endeavor. As long as the rector was the most educated man in his hamlet his preaching could face domestication without total loss of clout. Naturally the vigorous competition afforded the preacher by the entertainment media readily available in every home and town square is a third factor that has imperiled the totally domesticated sermon.

A little more sober consideration needs to be given, however, to the fourth and fifth factors concomitant upon this domestication, factors that are threatening the vitality of preaching. When Phillips Brooks, that warm-hearted Episcopal bishop from Massachusetts, stood before those Yale classes of 1877 to lecture on preaching, none perhaps realized that his distilled thought would come to be seen as some of the best in that distinguished series. His classic definition of preaching, great for its very simplicity, took the American homiletical world by storm.

What, then, is preaching, of which we are to speak? It is not hard to find a definition. Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of those can it spare and still be preaching. The truest truth, the most authoritative statement of God's will, communicated in any other way than through the personality of another man to men is not preached truth.³

Everywhere English-speaking homileticians of all stripes were happy to chorus, "Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men"

Since those heady days of ecclesiastical and political optimism in American public life the higher criticism battles reaching our shores expressed themselves in the practical realms of churchmanship in the liberal-fundamentalist clash. In the light of these twentieth-century tensions the word truth in connection with preaching became suddenly suspect. Fundamentalists were not interested in preaching truth for that word could be and often was abused by many varieties of relativism. Fundamentalists were interested in preaching Bible and saw Bible

³ Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 5.

interpreted in orthodox fashion, as the only valid expression of truth worthy of the pulpit. Today evangelicals and fundamentalists both would rather speak of biblical preaching than preaching; and they favor, in practice, the expository sermon as the only (or best) expression of biblical preaching. If the sermon is biblical and expository it is assumed that truth is presented by virtue of the message's "biblicalness"

One need not quarrel with the conclusion drawn by evangelicals and fundamentalists alike as to the value of biblical preaching to observe that this attitude, this approach, adds a certain narrowing to the already domesticated sermon. If a man preaches only in an expository pattern considering the major and subsidiary ideas of a biblical paragraph largely in the order of the text, that man is set to traverse the domain of Scripture year in and year out in ways largely familiar to the faithful and thoughtful layman. If that "preacher man" finds himself so busy that his devotional life is arid and his sermon preparation a hurried and cursory exercise, this narrowing of the understanding of preaching is tilted doubly toward the enhancement of boredom.

Fortunately thoughtful voices in evangelical homiletical materials are reminding us again of our rich heritage as preachers, for the history of preaching and the study of sermons suggest forcefully that there are two modes of preaching and both can be powerfully biblical. One mode is to present the content of the Bible Itself (the "ranger-on-the-text" oral exegetical pattern, however stylistically adapted); the second mode is to present truth that is in harmony with the Bible (the more topical and broad-ranging approach that has always been productive of the greatest doctrinal preaching, for example).

This total reduction of the modern preacher to a Christian scribe, expounding ancient documents in traditional ways, comes near to "quenching the Spirit" and denying the promise that He should guide ongoing disciples into all truth.. . We are led to a wider meaning of expository method than that of microscopic analysis of the words of a given text. The essence of that wider interpretation of "exposition" is that all we preach shall be expository of Bible truth, whatever its method or approach, and shall bring that Bible truth out of the past into the present in the power of the Spirit Who first gave it.⁴

All of this suggests that if evangelical preaching is going once again to seize lethargic congregations by their ears and thereby fire their imaginations and hearts toward active service for God the evangelical preacher must not only take apart every text exegetically but also must learn to put the pieces together again in bombshells of truth. One does not dish up a grenade in components to an enemy or in support of compatriots. Devour the text, preacher; but do not be content just to regurgitate it. Rather incarnate it in example and message of luminous truth using the full range of preaching types, expository, textual and topical.

The sixth factor concomitant with the domestication of preaching that must be considered at some length is the relationship of the sermon to modern studies in communication. Probably no one has done this more succinctly than Clyde Reid in his provocative little volume, *The Empty Pulpit*. Studies in

⁴ R. E. O. White, *A Guide to Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 24—25.

communication abound chin deep in any library these days. To put it summarily there are seven stages to full-fledged communication. They are

1. transmission, the preacher articulating his message;
2. contact, the auditor actually hearing the message;
3. feedback, the return process by which the auditor reflects what he heard to the preacher for verification;
4. comprehension, the auditor genuinely understands what the preacher articulated and the preacher knows he does;
5. acceptance, the auditor's personal decision to receive or concur with the message (if the auditor chooses to reject the message the communication process stops here);
6. internalization, the time and quiet needed by the auditor to turn initial, superficial acceptance into profound personal determination; and
7. action, the common, shared understanding and action or response of the auditor to the message in concert with the preacher.⁵

Communication specialists now know that no significant change of thought or action occurs without feedback and internalization. Dialogue changes lives; monologue reinforces the status quo. When the sermon was domesticated out of the street and into the worship service it became a monologue. And while a good shepherd can view his calling, counseling, and small-group ministries as opportunities for significant feedback, the fact remains that some of the frustrating futility in preaching may very well be the result of the loss of meaningful dialogue.⁶ Hence most sermons tend to be an exercise in stroking those who already agree with the message, as far as communication theory goes. This cannot help but be exacerbated by the modern spirit which announces, "I am going to be a preaching pastor." "This strange contradiction in terms means that the nitty of visitation and the gritty of counseling are going to be left to underling or accident. Such a man, enthroned in the solitary splendor of his exegetical study, cuts off all significant feedback or dialogue with his people and cannot expect seriously to affect thought or action by thrice weekly delivered expositions, how-ever polished.

Short of inviting street gangs to come with rocks to stone us or encouraging differing brethren to pepper our sermons with shouted abuse, how can we modern preachers recapture some feedback, some dialogue, without abandoning worship? Here are five suggestions:

1. Use some pre- or postsermon discussions. Appoint selected speakers for live minutes of rebuttal before you conclude.
2. Try interruptive preaching, accepting reactions and questions as they come. Of course it follows that the content would need to be worthy of a reaction.
3. Follow up a sermon with an I-tried-it-report-back a week later.
4. Instead of a closing hymn, break into small discussion groups or let people move around the sanctuary sharing a response while the pianist plays. The old-fashioned altar call or seeker's room is pointed dialogue.

⁵ Adapted from Clyde Reid, *The Empty Pulpit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 67-74.

⁶ The case for this view is ably stated by Reid, *Empty Pulpit*, 83-85.

5. Set up one month a year to address controversial issues biblically and invite a different, carefully selected group into the parsonage for coffee and a free-wheeling discussion each Sunday evening of that month. You will discover that feedback need not dislocate worship and worship context does not need to stifle feedback. Every sermon need not be a monologue.

IV. THE REVIVIFIED SERMON

When the evangelical sets out to speak of the recovery of gripping, trans-forming preaching he assumes rightly that the preacher is a born-again man, growing in the likeness of Christ, under the call of God to the proclamation of the Gospel, filled with the Spirit, evidencing the Spirit's gifts, fruit, wisdom, and immersed daily and reverently in the study of the Scriptures. These are at once the spiritual foundations, armor, and disciplines of the preaching process without which any discussion of preaching is a presumptuous futility. It cannot be asserted too strongly that these are the other-worldly givens of our trade. No man can grasp for them; no homiletician dare think he can deliver them through training.

Any great sermonic moment is made up of six components. There is the power of the Spirit of God present to convict, bless, intercede, and lead preacher and hearer alike. This is the primary factor in sermonic greatness and it rests upon the givens just discussed. As D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones so rightly reminds us, it is displayed in the anointing of the Holy Spirit upon people, preacher, and sermon in its delivery. You can plan only 50 percent of the sermon situation; the other 50 percent is up to God.⁷ An old-fashioned term for this mandatory ingredient is *unction*. Secondly, there is the excitement of discovery, which rests in the pastor's study and in the pastor's discipline of careful, prayerful, faithful daily devotional scriptural study. When he has been gripped, changed, compelled by his own work in the Word, even though the preacher may be dealing with a truth as old as Adam, he communicates freshness and enthusiasm in powerful and intangible ways to his hearers. In homiletics this quality is technically termed *originality*.⁸ The third component in a great sermonic moment is the compelling application of the truth proclaimed and the appeal made to the audience to respond. One can apply the term *relevance* to this component. *Structure* is the word for our next component, and that involves clarity and matters of logical organization. Fifth in our list would be the matter of style gripping language full of imagination, narrative, and color. No mastery of this has ever surpassed the Master's parables. The sixth and final component in the great sermonic moment is the full and free use of attention-holding factors. The very abused term charisma can be assigned this factor. A great sermon thus has *unction, originality, relevance, structure, style* and is delivered with *charisma*. Not only must the homiletician realize that he dare not think he can deliver the other-worldly givens of his calling; he must candidly and humbly admit that of the six components of the great sermonic moment he can only moderately affect the last and least significant four—*relevance, structure, style, and charisma*. Let this chapter conclude by way of a quiver full of arrows of suggestion to be drawn across the bow of homiletical practice in the studies of those pastors concerned with avoiding dullness in proclamation.

⁷ It would do every pastor good periodically to ponder the chapter "Demonstration of the Spirit and of the Power," D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 304–25.

⁸ The best discussion of originality in all homiletical literature, in this writer's opinion, is by W. G. T. Shedd, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, repr. 1965 [of 1867 edition]), 3–32.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR RELEVANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE, AND CHARISMA

Genuine relevance is born in application with bite. Application involves focusing the truth being dealt with on the hearer, expressing explicitly what the hearer is to do in response, or how he or she is to do it, and motivating the hearer to do precisely that.⁹ As every preacher knows, the third of these applicational factors is the most difficult. Motivating a hearer involves a clear plea so that he or she knows exactly how to “obey” the truth; it involves the speaker’s own heightened feelings so the hearer senses the speaker’s urgent concern; it involves the use of pungent, moving material so the auditor’s emotions are stirred to fire his or her will to act; and motivation finally involves the technical element of appeal, which refers to the speaker’s tug on the legitimate desires of the hearer so that he or she will will to act. A suggestion for revivifying preaching: “bibilicize” the psychological desires of a hearer and check to see that every main point of your sermon incorporates one to three of these elements of appeal. ‘Take any psychologist’s list of basic human drives you wish and translate them into legitimate biblical desires or drives and you will obtain a list something like this:

Psychologists say every man has a drive for .. .	The Bible says every man legitimately desires . .
entertainment, distraction	freedom from guilt fellowship understanding of God’s program knowledge of’ godly character insight into prophecy
preservation of life	eternal life hope in the midst of a despairing world perseverance to avoid death and hell
status	Lord’s “well done” healthy operation of the church self–control self–acceptance and respect confidence and approval of brothers
food and water	Lord’s provision fulfilled promises of God knowledge of the Word’s content
shelter	caring family of the church security joy and peace in crises

⁹ Homiletics’ best discussion of application is still to be found in the century–old text, John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (re–print; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), 211–21.

Love	fulfilling marriage sound home love of God holy sex winning of others to Christ worship and adoration of God
power	leadership in the church rulership in the kingdom to come triumph over social evils

By the prayerful use of a battery of appeals in every message the preacher can, with the help of the Holy Spirit, move the man off the cultural street toward the heavenly path, and even though he may have entered the church giving no credence to biblical authority, that man off the cultural street is brought to the place of obedience to God and the great discovery of every secularist: “This is what the Bible has taught all along.”¹⁰

A further suggestion for revivifying preaching: identify your present, most-used outline organization (*structure*) and deliberately set yourself over the next few months to learn and use two or three new contrasting ways of structuring a sermon. Outline organization can be chosen then in terms of what will best project the particular Bible content or Bible truth to the particular audience, and with an eye to variety in structure, the preacher does not bore himself with his methodology. If your organization is ragged and you feel the need for a clear, clean beginning in structure building, the best step-by-step instructions in all of homiletics are those by Lloyd Perry in *Biblical Preaching for Today’s World* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), 42–62. Begin here. On the other hand, if you have a solid basic structure, turn to the ninth and tenth chapters of H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) and learn his five forms of a subject–subject discussed, thesis supported, message illumined, question propounded, and a story told. Demonstrate for yourself Davis’s theme that form of subject determines structure by writing main points according to his rule for each of the types of messages he envisions springing from biblical materials. If you want to challenge yourself with a keenly persuasive structure, the most cogent organization in public address is that clearly developed by Alan Monroe (which he calls the motivated sequence) in *Principles and Types of Speech* (New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1962), chapters 16 and 17. Preach to persuade under five points (Monroe’s adaptation of man’s thought process): attention, need, satisfaction, visualization, and action. Begin now to cultivate challenging structural variety.¹¹

If one is to improve *style*—the matter of language that is full of color, narrative, and imagination—one must begin in a kind of devotional meditation that walks in the sandals of the biblical characters and sits in the catacomb seat of an epistle recipient and then comes from that meditation able to make the hearer have that “you were there” experience.¹² This demands an integrity in the treatment of the biblical materials that goes beyond mere fairness to the content. It makes mandatory the preacher’s handling of that content while

¹⁰ Donald Coggan, *Stewards of Grace* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), esp. 61–64.

¹¹ Another whole approach to this matter of variety in outline structure is suggested by Ilion T. Jones, *Principles and Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 103–23. One can further stimulate his thinking by relating Andrew W. Blackwood’s fine chapters on doctrinal and biographical preaching to differing ones of these structural styles. See respectively *Doctrinal Preaching for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 184–96, and *Biographical Preaching for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954), 150–68.

¹² This quality of imagination is one of the “most godlike capacities of man,” Whitesell insists. Imagination in preaching is the picture-making faculty of the mind always under the control of reality; and without its disciplined use, all preaching is dull: see Faris D. Whitesell, *Power in Expository Preaching* (Neptune, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1963), 103–17.

doing full justice to the biblical mood. Thus if the biblical content is exuberant in spirit, the preacher does not give it a judgmental mien; if the passage breathes a somber and reflective air, the preacher should not give it a lighthearted and humorous thrust.¹³ These two demands of style meet; for if the preacher in meditation has lived the scriptural passage, he is well enough acquainted with its mood to be fair to it. Beyond the qualities of imagination and fairness to the mood, style also involves clarity, clear thinking.

Miracles apart, a muddled sermon cannot well be sound in theology, interesting to listen to, effective in persuasion, memorable as an experience, or make any useful contribution to worship. Unclear speaking dissipates attention, destroys persuasiveness, defeats the intention of the speaker from the outset. To any man in earnest about communicating truth, the necessity of clarity is clear enough.¹⁴

Suggestion for revivifying preaching: at least once a month write out a sermon verbatim (or have a secretary transcribe it from a tape after it has been delivered). Compare its mood to the mood of its lead Scriptures and adjust accordingly. See that at least one imaginative description or application occurs in each main point. Next turn your attention to each word in the sermon. Replace every ambiguous word with an unequivocal one; turn every abstract term into a concrete one; check for emotive, prejudicial expressions and remove them; and finally replace every negative turn of sentence with a positive unless the negative is absolutely essential for your meaning. This discipline corrects obscurity inherent in message language.¹⁵ On the third time through your verbatim message confine your attention to the sentences and their logical pattern. Replace selective observations with statements that are fair to all sides; remove exaggerations ruthlessly and discipline yourself to follow the purged text; correct false or unfair analogies; think about your assumptions and modify those which are unwarranted; and remove all sloganeering or lazy clichés. Such a sentence check will remove fuzzy thinking.¹⁶

From the human level *charisma* is the ability to rivet attention on the message, messenger, and the whole communication process. 'three things are involved in this: controlled, expressive gestures with variety in level; abundant use and variety of supporting or illustrational materials; and the conscious attention paid to writing attention-holding change factors into the sermon itself. Suggestion for revivifying preaching: Round up three or four trusted and sympathetic friends who listen to you preach regularly and dare to submit a sermon to their critical analysis once every month or two. Set one of them to monitoring your gestures. Have them note down mannerisms and constantly repeated or awkward gestures. In practice preaching sessions, work to remove or bring these under control. Remember that meaningless sameness. repetitious gesturing is more distracting to attention than no gesturing at all. Ask this person to keep track of the number of times you gesture into the upper and lower levels. Belt line to shoulder is the middle level where most gestures must occur: variety depends on movement runs that go above the shoulder or below the belt line. If this individual is a perceptive observer set him to checking the number of emphatic gestures (those that express your feelings) as over against the number of

¹³ See Donald G. Miller, *The Way to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1957), 142–53.

¹⁴ White, *Guide*, 219.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 220–24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 224–28.

descriptive gestures (those describing scenes or objects). There should be a balance in these.

Set a second person to recording instances of supporting material. On a sheet of paper range the types of supporting material down the left hand side: figures of speech, comparisons and contrasts, parables, historical allusions, biographical incidents (from others' lives), personal testimony, anecdotes or stories, poetry or hymn lines, quotations, and building hypothetical situations.¹⁷ Across the top of the paper march the Roman numerals for the points of your sermon. This individual just needs to place a check mark on the paper opposite the type of supporting material used under the column for the point of your sermon in which it occurred to establish a visual representation of your supporting material effectiveness. The check marks should be evenly distributed over the entire sheet, for adequate variety demands many types of supporting material in all points of the sermon.

Set your most perceptive volunteer friend to check the attention—holding factors in your sermon, for these are the most technical and difficult to recognize. The essence of holding attention is delivering sufficient stimuli to the listener to keep him from becoming aware of the passage of time. When stimuli drop low enough for the auditor to become aware of time's movement he is apt to become bored.¹⁸ The essence of keeping stimuli impinging on the consciousness of the auditor is change. An unbroken shout will lose attention as quickly as the unbroken, soft monotone. Attention is seized by change when one sentence is vigorous and the next a whisper. So this person is monitoring changes: changes in content—let him list the persons, activities, conflicts, basic wants, curiosity items, suspense moments, unusual things, and very familiar items you mention; changes in direct appeal to the senses—the ears through silence, rate changes, volume changes, tone changes, and the eyes through visual aids (someone else is already checking the gestures); *changes* through indirect appeal to the senses remembered things seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt; *changes* in types of material—solemn, grim, earnest, shocking, surprising, amusing, ludicrous, satirical; *changes* in emotional tenor—anger, anxiety, contempt, disappointment, fear, gratitude, grief, hate, hope, jealousy, joy, love, pity, pride, regret, relief, remorse, shame; and *changes* in type of sentence structure—long, short, declarative, exclamatory, interrogative.¹⁹ One can simply place these areas of change down the left side of a sheet of paper and the main points of the message across the top of the sheet and have the monitoring individual put a mark down in the proper area every time he detects a change. Three monitors ought to be able unobtrusively to check the *charisma* of your delivery—its gestures, supporting material, and attention—holding factors—without disrupting an ordinary—sized service of worship.

Such are the areas of human skill the preacher can train in, practice, increase, *relevance*, *structure*, *style*, and *charisma*. Admittedly these are secondary and minor compared to matters of other—worldly givens and a theologically informed biblical content. Should the busy pastor spend the energy and time to improve his performance in these secondary areas? Let this question be answered by a second: given the One who called us, God, and the sublime level of the task, preaching, should we not strive to be unashamed workmen in technique as well as in content?

¹⁷ W. E. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Illustration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1973 [of 1950 edition]), 26–45. If you have never read this little book's first chapter, "The Place and Use of Illustration," now would be the time to do it.

¹⁸ Webb B. Garrison, *The Preacher and His Audience* (Neptune, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1954), 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81–85.

VI. A CHALLENGE TO US AS PASTORS

Well does this author know the busy comings and goings, the demands and privileges of the parish! If this book is something other than a respectable library decoration, if it is read, if this chapter should be read to this point, and if you feel as the author does in regard to his own preaching, that sometimes it falls into the gray-flannel area of dullness, the final question becomes: Will we do anything about improving the preaching we deliver? Might it be suggested that we trap ourselves into action? Obtain two or three copies of this book. Muster the pastoral fortitude to urge your people to candor. Invite all who sometimes find your preaching dull to meet with you after service. Pass out those book copies and let them study this chapter at their leisure, making a list of its suggestions. Let them then join us in praying and monitoring us toward more vital proclamation. Then the chips will be down and we will be under some obligation to improve, to grow in our preaching ability. “Great idea, but we might lose our jobs,” the heart responds. Well ... perhaps if we do not care enough to continually improve our preaching we should lose those jobs of ours... .

Let me be as candid as possible, and address the reverend clergy directly. As a preacher in an age when preaching is widely regarded as the bogus currency of a bankrupt ministry, the best thing you can do, for yourself and your ministry, is to set the business of preaching at the very center of your life and work, and give it first claim on your time and energy.²⁰

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²⁰ Killinger, *Centrality*, 28.