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12-30-1982

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Coping with dull preaching

By ARNOLD KURTZ

Preachers who are willing to face the truth can improve. And listeners can help too.

How to cope with dull and uninspiring sermons is a dilemma confronting many regular worshipers. Some time ago the "Advice" page of a Christian magazine carried this note addressed to the columnist: "Our pastor is a boring speaker. His voice and long, complicated sentences lull me to sleep every week. Several families have left in the past couple years because they weren't getting anything out of the messages. My spiritual life is a shambles. The pastor is a warm person and an excellent counselor outside the pulpit. But I'm not being fed and feel I have to do something. Should I change churches?"

Sabbathkeepers who live where there are concentrations of our people, sometimes try to solve such problems by changing churches. Others, however, because they value stability and loyalty, are reluctant to take such drastic action. For the majority of our people changing churches, for whatever reason, is not an option. The dilemma, nevertheless, is real. "I'm not being fed. I have to do something!"

It is regrettable that many sermons miss the mark. "The Lord God of heaven cannot approve much that is brought into the pulpit by those who are professedly speaking the word of the Lord. They do not inculcate ideas that will be a blessing to those who hear. There is cheap, very cheap fodder placed before the people."—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 337.

Sermons disappoint when the preacher fails to pay the

price in disciplined study. Some preachers seem to hold the notion that to prepare would be to manifest a lack of faith. They expect God to speak through them as a ventriloquist speaks through his dummy. Others, simply because they are lazy, shun the hard, tedious work of searching out the true meaning of a text, organizing a message, wording it, writing it out, and preparing it for smooth, fluent delivery.

Some sermons fail because of the preacher's coldness of heart. Ice begets ice even as fire begets fire. Richard Baxter cried out in the seventeenth century to a lethargic clergy, "What! Speak coldly for God and for men's salvation? Can we believe that our people must be converted or condemned and yet we speak in a drowsy tone? In the name of God, brethren, labor to awaken your heart before you get to the pulpit."—Paul Benjamin, *The Equipping Ministry*, p. 47.

How shall we cope?

How shall we cope with dull preaching? Raymond Holmes, in his book, *It's a Two-Way Street*, sets forth the thesis that responsibility for a sermon's effectiveness is two-dimensional—speaker and hearer each carries a burden of accountability. John Hutton, of Glasgow, dramatized his understanding of this fact on one occasion. He had just announced his text when he noticed a parishioner settling down to sleep. Pointing his finger, with booming voice he thundered, "Man, let us begin even—both awake. If you fall asleep while I am preaching, you win. If you stay awake, I win. But let us begin even."—James Cleland, *Preaching to Be Understood*, pp. 106, 107. Whatever else, the incident reminds us that it takes at least two to make a sermon. Good sermons have been lost on dull ears. Unfortunately, it also is true that in many cases the patience of the hearers approaches that of saints!

Looking first, then, at the sending side of this equation and assuming that as preacher you do not wish to be part of the problem, here are two suggestions:

1. *Try to learn the truth about your preaching.* You must get at the truth about how people feel about your sermons beyond the routine comment at the door. Handling sermon feedback is difficult. This is true because in nothing is the minister more vulnerable than in his preaching. The sermon is an extension of the speaker's ego. What he or she is in intellect, training, understanding, and personality is centered and announced in the moment of the delivery of the sermon. The challenge, therefore, is to obtain honest evaluation from people without feeling devastated.

Feedback from the pew can be obtained in two ways—by listening for it and by asking for it.

Tuning in to people's responses following the delivery of a sermon is a sensitive and sophisticated business. Ministers should watch for meaningful resistance in their "corridor counseling." The repetition of a phrase such as "what we need are some good old-fashioned Adventist sermons" may

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Grapevine

By HELEN KLOPFENSTEIN

*Don't talk about me
without me there;
they might misunderstand.
Let the words you speak
be those that I would choose.*

*I'm not content to remain
just a rumor going round.
Feel my hands, my side:
Be persuaded who I am—
your Lord, your God.*

be a surface clue to deeper feelings. A follow-through visit may be indicated. Ministers must learn to read between the lines of the responses. Too much of "I enjoyed the sermon" may mean that the speaker is really not saying anything arresting enough to elicit more than a bland or general response.

Some ministers are fortunate to have one or more trusted laymen with whom they have a contract for honest feedback. These helpers are able tactfully to affirm strengths and suggest areas for improvement.

One pastor of my acquaintance preaches a shortened sermon on occasion followed by a response period for the congregation. This can be effective, particularly in smaller churches, in increasing interest and understanding, as well as assisting the speaker to determine how his message is being received and understood.

The modified colloquy is another suggestion for feedback. Several laymen can be asked to take notes on the sermon, or be given copies of it prior to its delivery. Each in turn comes to the pulpit at the close to quiz the speaker about the particular stand he took. In this way the minister can be selective of those who do respond, choosing those secure enough to speak honestly to their friend, the minister.

Some ministers, knowing the great value of honest feedback from the congregation, gather data in a direct manner by means of an occasional questionnaire. These instruments may cover several areas of church life including the worship service and the sermon.

Finally, some brave ministers, in seeking to discover the truth about their preaching, tape record several sermons and then listen to them as if they were sitting in the pew.

2. *Distribute the responsibility.* Few preachers are capable of spellbinding oratory week after week. Most lay claim only to modest endowments. However, when high priority is placed upon the sermon, as by congregations in America, the average speaker feels the burden. There is, happily, a development in church life today that is helping to lighten some of this burden of unwritten expectations. I refer to the current emphasis on the equipping ministry in which the pastor's role is perceived chiefly as that of teacher-trainer—the equipper of the lay members for their ministry. Equipping ministers see their sermonizing over the years as the patient, prayerful preparation of others to minister.

Ministering congregation

Picture the difference on Sabbath morning. We now have a ministering congregation assembled for worship. During the week some of the members have visited the sick, other families are sponsoring home Bible study groups, one man is leading in a food and clothing drive for a family whose house has burned down. A woman is present who has led a teen-age girl to Christ during the week. The sermon may be shortened to make room for reports and for sharing, or it may take the form of a class or a Bible study. Lay members sometimes share in the preaching.

Because the quality of the participation is high, the congregation pulsates with new life, and because members are involved in more than a pew-sitting/sermon-tasting/give-your-offering arrangement they have assumed psychological ownership for the work of the church. It is now "my church" rather than the minister and his church. Now

the burden of success or failure of a given worship service does not fall alone upon the hapless pastor and his sermon. It is diffused and distributed.

Turning now from the sender to the receiver, how shall we cope with poor preaching? As already suggested, we can begin by modifying our expectations. More specifically, we must shift to ourselves some of the responsibility for what happens in worship. If we have cultivated spiritual-mindedness in private devotions through the week and if we then come to worship in faith, claiming a blessing, even a poor sermon will not stand in the way.

To worship is to give unto God "the glory due unto his name." To come to church for what we can *get* out of it is to come for the wrong reason. Some worshipers come not to give but only to receive. They sit and watch with their minds in neutral, or in an analytical or critical state. For worship to be personally meaningful, involvement is essential.

Here are a few suggestions to help you be a giver, not merely a receiver, in worship. Come early for worship, but not with the intention of viewing a performance or to be entertained. Determine to participate with your personal expression of appreciation and love for God. Respond to the call to worship by lifting up your voice in the opening hymn. Think about the meaning of the words. When prayer is offered, respond silently to each phrase. Some worshipers quietly, if not audibly, vocalize responses of "amen" or "yes, Lord." Give your offering as an act of worship—a symbol of thanksgiving, dedication, and sacrifice to God.

In one church worshipers are summoned to a "conspiracy of prayer." A card is handed to the members, bidding them to pray for people as they enter and leave and for the minister as he preaches. "Don't close your eyes unless you wish to, but keep asking God to speak through the pastor's lips and in our hearts. . . . Each of you is as important as the minister in making this a good service."

A similar personal involvement in active sermon listening is essential. Some find it helpful to take notes. They find it a good way to focus their attention on the sermon and to fasten it in the memory even though they may not refer to the notes again. As you listen, ask yourself, What is the speaker saying? What is his main idea? Some preachers intentionally announce their thesis or proposition in a brief statement early in the sermon. See if you can identify it. What is the *meaning* for you of what is being said? After all, the most important ideas in the sermon may not be verbalized by the speaker, but may be those thought by the listener in response to the sermon as he or she lets the mind explore beyond the reaches of the spoken word.

What shall we do about dull preaching? Preachers willing to face the truth can improve. And listeners can help. Responsive listeners inspire speakers. If there is something you did not understand, ask the minister. Your obvious desire to learn and your genuine interest will give you a natural opening for suggestions of your own: "Would you mind using simple language so that I can understand? I really want to learn." Most important, *worship*. You have come to church to worship God, not simply to hear or evaluate a sermon. God will not disappoint you, for the *time* "now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him" (John 4:23). □