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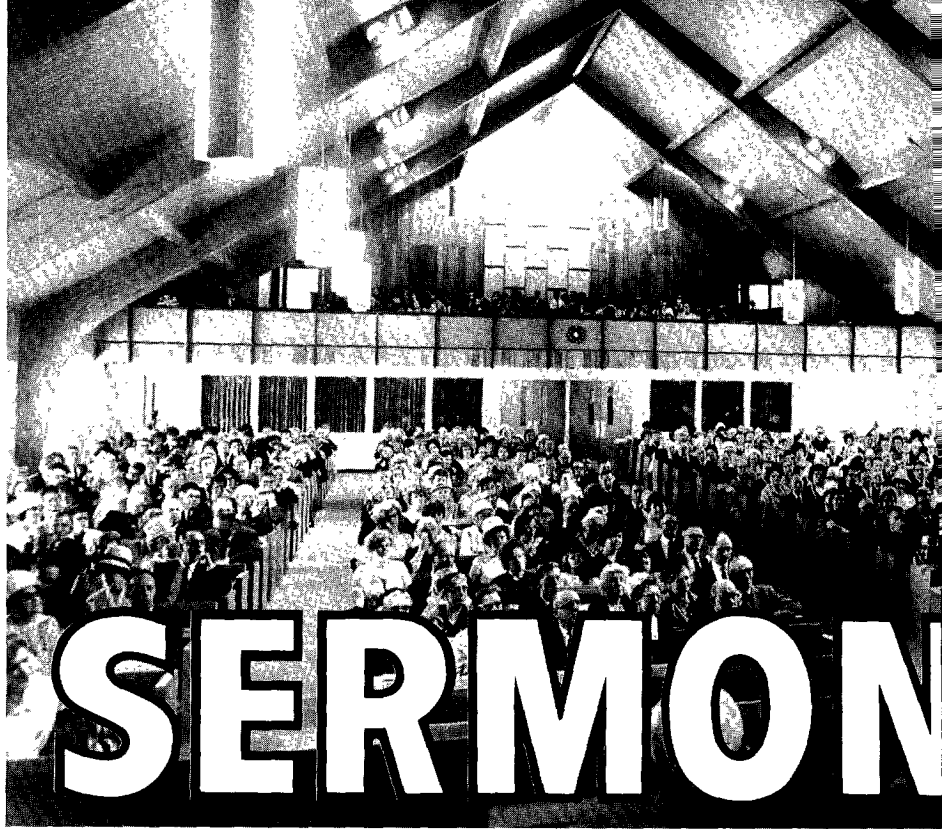
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By ARNOLD KURTZ

HOW TO LISTEN TO A



THE ringing "Amen" in response to a telling point made by the preacher is rare in most churches today. We are victims perhaps of a perverse kind of sophistication that accepts a display of feeling at a sports event but deems it inappropriate where God is worshiped.

Anciently God's people were instructed to respond to the public presentation of God's Word with a confirmatory "Amen" (Deut. 27:15; Ps. 106:48). The practice became well-established among the Jews. Christians also took up the practice, but the custom has suffered erosion in more recent times.

Ellen G. White has commented on the significance of the spoken Amen: "Although all are not called to minister in word and doctrine, they need not be cold and responseless listeners. When the word of God was spoken to the Hebrews anciently, the Lord said to Moses, 'And let all the people say, Amen.' This response, in the fervor of their souls, was required as evidence that they understood the word spoken and were interested in it."—*The Signs of the Times*, June 24, 1886.

This divine requirement that listeners should respond to the proclaimed Word at the moment of delivery is rich with suggestion. That

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the listener shares joint responsibility with the speaker in the communication process is obvious enough; however, few appreciate how critical is the listener's participation when one man speaks to another. This is particularly true in Christian preaching. Listening to preaching takes on dimensions all its own!

What is a sermon? What is preaching? Preaching is God revealing Himself, reaching out to us, calling us to a response. It is not a man merely talking *about* God, or a nice man offering some good advice or lessons in Christian living; it is more than a theological or Biblical lecture or a commentary on current events. It is easy to misunderstand this: "Many do not look upon preaching as Christ's appointed means of instructing His people and therefore always to be highly prized. They do not feel that the sermon is the word of the Lord to them and estimate it by the value of the truths spoken; but they judge it as they would the speech of a lawyer at the bar—by the argumentative skill displayed and the power and beauty of the language. The minister is not infallible, but God has honored him by making him His messenger."—*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 298.

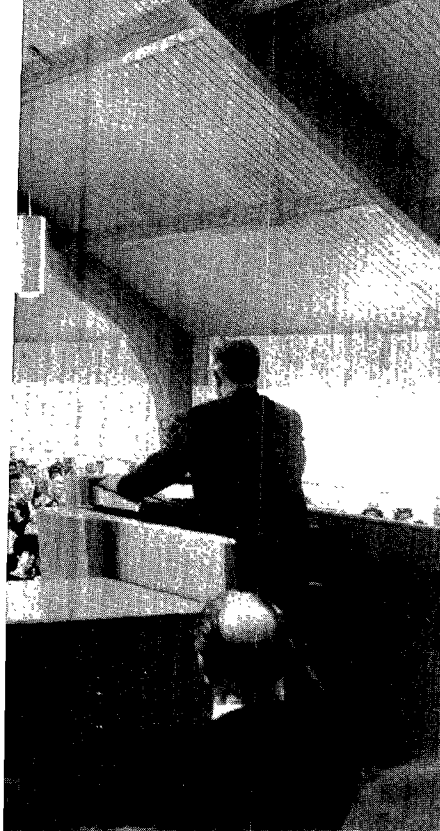
In the words of William D. Thompson, preaching "is a divine event by which God makes himself known in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, according to the witness of the Bible. Preaching is God himself at

work confronting mankind anew."¹ God gave preaching to the church, not as a burden, but as a gift—a gift to be sought by prayer both by the minister and the congregation and to be received with thanksgiving "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13).

When the sermon is placed in this light, careless and listless sermon listening becomes a serious matter. God, who from the days of Eden has sought desperately to make Himself known to man, wants us now to take ourselves in hand, greet His Word with warm, assenting, affirming response—an Amen if you please! And if we can't bring ourselves to an audible Amen, then in our *own* authentic way let it be communicated that we are listening to understand—that we are not "cold and responseless" listeners.

We have a right to expect that where God's Word is preached something significant is about to happen. These listener expectations in turn inject a powerful ingredient into preaching, for the man in the pulpit is inevitably influenced by the expectations of the men and women in the pews. These expectations are communicated to him in a kind of unspoken language. When there are high expectations in a congregation the minister feels the tug of these expectations and rises to meet them.

A sermon comes to life when the congregation responds. Unless we



have experienced it, we cannot imagine the difference there can be in the same sermon when preached to two different congregations. Response can vary from complete apathy to spirited enthusiasm. On this point Webb Garrison insists that the success or failure of a sermon simply cannot be attributed to the speaker alone: "One listener seeking an answer to a problem can raise the level of the preaching situation; a few completely dominated by ignoble purposes can pull so many feathers from the wings of the preacher that he finds it all but impossible to soar."²

Importance of Listeners

The listeners in the pews have far more to do with whether a sermon is good than most of them have ever dreamed. If a sacred writer could note that even Jesus "could . . . do no mighty work . . . because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:5, 6), it may be said with equal cogency of many a preacher that "He could do no mighty preaching there because of their lack of expectation and response."

It is an interesting paradox of our times that while preaching is commonly downgraded as irrelevant and an ecclesiastical antique, it continues to be the first requirement on the list of virtually every pulpit committee in the land. The first question asked is, Can he preach? But do you hear of congregations being confronted

with their responsibility: Can they listen? Jesus frequently punctuated His public addresses with appeals for careful listening: "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 13:9).

How does one listen to a sermon? We must seriously seek to develop the skills of effective sermon listening. It has been noted³ that serious listening takes on aspects related to the activities of a reporter, philosopher, counselee, and executive all in one.

Listen as a reporter. Ask, as a reporter would, What is the speaker saying? What is his main idea? After testing lay persons from a number of churches in the Detroit metropolitan area, Ronald J. Parsons concluded from his doctoral research that in meetings immediately following the worship service, less than one third of the persons tested could give a reasonably clear statement of the main idea of the message.⁴ A sermon is composed of ideas and supporting material. One of the hazards of listening is precisely at this point. Listeners frequently get carried away with a striking illustration and overlook the main point of the sermon. As we gain practice in listening we will learn to separate the ideas—the assertions—from the illustrative and supporting material.

Admittedly, we trust that the preacher has a lucid outline and says clearly and simply the plain truth.

Feel free to take notes. Many people find this is a good way to focus their attention on the sermon and to fasten it in their memory even though they may not refer to the notes again. A good sermon has a clear-cut outline. Can we put it down on paper? Or, we might try to digest the sermon into three written sentences: 1. The problem or need to which the sermon addresses itself. We can word it as a question. 2. The truth developed in the sermon in answer to the question. We can word it as an assertion. 3. The response to the truth urged in the sermon. We can word it as an invitation. If we listen to a sermon as a reporter would, we are off to a good start!

Listen as a philosopher. Like the philosopher, ask, What is the meaning of what is being said? We are interested not only in filling the mind with ideas but also in stirring the mind to action; for after all, the most important ideas in the sermon may not be verbalized by the minister at all, but may be those thought by the listener in response to the sermon

as he lets his mind respond to the Spirit within. Over the centuries we have heard that preaching—the spoken sermon—is central in Christian worship. A more accurate concept might be that the really big event in Christian worship is what goes on in the mind of the listener in response to the preached Word.

As we listen as a philosopher we allow our mind to pursue the spoken ideas to meaningful conclusions for ourselves, individually.

Listen as a counselee. We should come to the sermon with the expectation of being helped personally. Each one should listen to every sermon with the recurring question always at the forefront of his thinking, What does this sermon mean to me? Does it contain a prescription for my needs?

Divine Address

Daniel Walker reports the comments of a parishioner: "It always amazes me when I hear a good sermon, how many people I can think of who ought to be hearing it. It isn't until my enthusiasm for saving someone else cools off that it dawns on me the sermon is speaking pretty directly to me. I've also discovered that if I feel sensitive or defensive about something the minister has said, it is always to my benefit to discover why I feel that way."⁵ This listener was learning to make the act of listening to a sermon a personal counseling experience.

We must remember that the sermon is a unique form of public speaking. God Himself speaks through His Word as it is being preached. But it does not count if what we hear is only for our neighbor in the pew. It is us to whom God is trying to get through!

Listen as an executive. We should listen with the intent of carrying out or putting to work the inspiration, insights, and ideas gathered from the sermon. (The word *executive* when taken apart means simply to carry out or "follow up to the end.") After hearing a sermon we should face the world with a plan of action and the resolution to carry out that plan.

Now, no preacher is so optimistic as to expect a radical transformation of everyone's life as the result of every sermon. He does, however, expect some response; and the most important response we will make is change in our behavior.

Of course, the degree of response expected will vary with the sermon

purpose or intent. Broadly speaking, there are three prime purposes for preaching—to evangelize, to teach, and to heal. The intent of an evangelistic sermon is to invite men to accept Christ's call to discipleship. If we are committed Christians, we might respond with gratitude that we are Christians, or we might respond with the determination to share our faith in the days ahead.

If the sermon has focused on teaching or inspiring with the purpose of imparting new information or revitalizing beliefs already held, our response might range from one of a deepening commitment to those beliefs to a far-reaching decision that

will result eventually in new habits.

A sermon to heal might be right on target helping us to accept the death of a loved one; a teen-ager listening who perhaps has had no such experience might put some of those insights that are useful to others on the back burner until needed.

Effective sermon listening may prove quite costly. It was intended that way by One who put us on guard when He warned: "If you have ears, listen!"

Preaching is a function not only of the preacher but of the entire congregation. God's self-giving and man's receiving are essential parts of a total process. The preacher, under God,

pours into the sermon the best he has—his best living, loving, thinking, and speaking. He delivers not a speech, but his soul. The hearer brings his best to that joint experience. He listens with concentration, in his "wholeness, wholly attending." Just as there is an art of preaching, so there is an art of listening—yes, and an art of practicing, the truly validating Amen! ♦♦

REFERENCES

- ¹ William D. Thompson, *A Listener's Guide to Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), p. 25.
- ² Webb B. Garrison, *The Preacher and His Audience* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1954), p. 43.
- ³ Daniel D. Walker, *Enemy in the Pew?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 93ff.
- ⁴ Cited in Clyde Reid, *The Empty Pulpit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 29.
- ⁵ Walker, *Ibid.*, p. 94.

When You're YOUNG

By Miriam Wood

A BIG BROOM Currently, it is almost obligatory that writers discuss major issues at the drop of a typewriter key—things such as unique (and often erroneous) interpretations of theology, problems of the inner city, the outer city, and the in-between city, and certainly not least, *finding oneself*. I must admit that the monotonous repetition of the latter expression has begun to inspire me to acts of mild violence, such as snapping a pencil in half. My feeling is that people who are busy and who are thinking of others don't have much time to spend in searching for themselves.

When one comes right down to it, life is lived on a very daily basis. No matter how lofty one's thoughts, he must arise each morning, do something about his disheveled person (some people don't do *enough*), and then face the day. It seems to me that not nearly enough is being said about a very common old-fashioned (it takes courage to use that word) virtue that's becoming rare indeed. I'm referring to the quality of cheerfulness. On the everyday level, I can't think of any quality more guaranteed to produce happiness for everyone who encounters it or more guaranteed to produce misery by its absence. I suppose it's somewhat lacking in popularity as a subject because it's so much more difficult to practice than to preach.

The tricky thing about cheerfulness is this: one can always tell himself that he will be cheerful when he has something to be cheerful about. And thereby he loses the whole war, not only the battle, because few human beings seem to feel that their lives contain much to inspire cheerfulness. Strangely enough, though, from an observer's viewpoint, people who have the least—on the surface—to inspire them to display this attitude are usually the ones who have mastered the art. People who have everything going for them, at least from an observer's viewpoint, too often are the ones who drag themselves about, always having to be encouraged and bucked up and bolstered by their longsuffering friends.

It would be unrealistic to assume that most people are without problems. In fact, the realistic assumption is that people in the late twentieth century are riddled with problems of one sort or another. Therefore, if anyone is planning to be cheerful when all his problems are solved, he'll doubtless one fine day discover that the years have raced along, he's an octogenarian, and he's *still* waiting to be cheerful, for who in the world can expect cheerfulness from someone who's afflicted with arthritis, indigestion, or high blood pressure? (Actually, many octogenarians *are* cheerful, in spite of these and other problems, but they belong to the breed who

started being cheerful at the beginning of their long lives.

Children, usually thought to be rather spontaneous in their reaction to life, differ surprisingly in their ability to be cheerful. Doubtless they reflect the atmosphere of the home they live in; this can bode great good for future husbands and wives or great misery. An unforgettable small boy whom I encountered is certainly going to be great husband material in a few years. He was being interviewed by a Sabbath school superintendent regarding his Investment project. It turned out that he and his parents lived in an apartment house. Having no opportunity to plant a garden or do some of the other things his Sabbath school teacher suggested, he thought up the idea of asking the apartment owner whether every Friday he might sweep the parking lot when most of the cars were off it. Obviously sensing a bargain, the owner agreed. He'd pay a quarter to have the five-year-old sweep a very large parking lot.

As the story unfolded, the Sabbath school superintendent was clearly stricken by the amount of work involved for the small arms.

"Billy," he said, "that must have been a lot of work."

Bursting with smiles, the enthusiastic child exclaimed, "Oh, but I had a big broom!"

Not always successful myself in maintaining the cheerful attitude that my blessings warrant, I've at times reminded myself that my "broom" isn't so small, either, regardless of the size of the task.

I was interested to find that Ellen White has commented at such great lengths on cheerfulness that there are literally dozens of references in the index to her writings on this subject. Reading through many of them, I realized that a Christian who isn't cheerful isn't—well, I won't complete the sentence by saying that he really isn't a Christian, for that would be judging. Better to say that he doesn't fully understand the power within his grasp to overcome even inherited tendencies to gloom and the blues.

A few statements from *My Life Today*, page 177, are pretty definitive. "Cheerfulness and a clear conscience are better than drugs. . . . You will be benefited with the effort you make to be cheerful. . . . Gather sunshine about you instead of clouds. . . . You will surely shorten your days by unhappy complaining."

And, finally, on the same page, "The cheerfulness of the Christian is created by the consideration of the great blessings we enjoy because we are the children of God."

In other words, we have a BIG BROOM.