

Sermons Don't Work

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This is a review of sermon retention research – of how much of a sermon people remember – about 5% a short time afterward, the same rate as for university lectures – and how schools, universities, and businesses are replacing their lectures with more successful verbal interaction.

This review is not scholarly or comprehensive. It is just excerpts from a few articles that came up when I googled “retention of sermon content” and “audience participation”. But two or three of these articles seem pretty scholarly and comprehensive, with summaries of research findings with plenty of links.

These articles include some information about how, two or three centuries after Jesus, uninterrupted oratory came to replace the dialog placed by God’s Word in the center of worship. For example, no less a popular resource for pastors than George Barna, the pollster widely quoted in Christian media who measures what people believe and how consistent their faith is with how they live, co-authored a book characterized below as listing this early Christian practice which we unfortunately no longer follow today:

“Active participation and interruptions by the audience were common.... There is no indication that Old Testament prophets or priests gave regular speeches to God’s people. Instead, the nature of Old Testament preaching was...open for audience participation. Preaching in the ancient synagogue followed a similar pattern.”

The research linked below finds that people remember longest and learn most when there is verbal interaction, and least where there is none.

For example, from an article below:

...adults retain 90% of what they learn if they teach it to someone else, and have immediate application of what they learn; 75% of what they learn when they practice it; 50% of what they discuss in a group; 30% of what they see demonstrated; 20% of what they see and hear in audio-visual teaching; 10% of what they learn through reading; and 5% of what they learn through lecture.

Another finding is that people remember information longer which is “important, memorable or personally meaningful”. What better way is there to ensure that messages meet that criteria than God’s system where participants are allowed to bring up what is most important to them?

1 Corinthians 14:30 If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. 31 For ye may all prophesy [defined in verse 3 as to challenge, correct, and comfort] one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.

This is the only study in this series with little Scripture. The series is at www.Saltshaker.US.

Political Activism

This research does not apply only to sermons and college lectures. Its conclusions apply just as poignantly to Christian political activism.

Almost the only way activist organizations involve their supporters is to read fund-raising letters and give money. Fundraising letters are sophomoric in their sparcity of details – way less information that people would need to go reason with a lawmaker who disagrees – just enough information to rile up enough emotion to pull out the wallet.

The uniformity of the fundraising letters style – 4 pages, one or two short sentence paragraphs, with about 4 sentences of actual detail about the issue – points to a lot of research indicating 5 sentences would just be lost. The average time spent looking at a campaign flier is 10 seconds before it goes in the trash, which is why political fliers usually contain no more than 12 seconds of useful information.

But what if political groups offered more involvement than giving money or clicking on a pre-written action fax? What if there were opportunities for discussion of the details of issues and of strategies for action, and of further action than was possible when giving money was the only involvement offered?

What if supporters were offered laboratories of reasoning and relationship skills, and coordinated their discussions with lawmakers, turning an organization with one lobbyist and 10,000 supporters into an organization with 1,000 lobbyists? According to that last paragraph about retention averages, that would boost retention to 90%. And higher than 100%, because it would turn listeners into researchers bringing new information, galaxies more than one lobbyist and a board of directors could muster by themselves.

Our first article excerpt shows the general awareness that uninterrupted sermons don't "work", even among those who will not give them up. This article begins with a catchy title making the point, but then the article is about how to try to salvage sermons with media tricks – 20' video screens, puppets, personal testimonies, and drama – which, the research below finds, don't "work" much better.

“Remember the Pastor’s Sermon Three Weeks Ago?”

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1803>

Wednesday, December 12, 2012

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Research has found that we remember less than 10% of the unsupported spoken word.

Yet, Sunday after Sunday pastors stand behind pulpits and employ this weakest of communication vehicles. No wonder few church attenders could answer “yes” to the title of this

article!

Somehow it seems appropriate for our next excerpt to be the broadest, most unsupported claim – not one footnote or source – since that is so typical of sermons. Fortunately articles below are much better sourced, and back up this first introductory claim overwhelmingly.

“How much of your presentation will they remember?” by Jack Malcolm
[<http://jackmalcolm.com/2012/08/how-much-of-your-presentation-will-they-remember/>]

“Researchers once ran a test to measure how much of a presenter’s message sticks in the minds of their audience. They found that immediately after a 10-minute presentation, listeners only remembered 50% of what was said. By the next day that had dropped to 25%, and a week later it was 10%.”

[Typical of sermons! Claims, no references or footnotes!]

This next excerpt is the scholarly review of research which the preceding paragraph isn't. But as you can immediately see, it is never going to be popular, because like my own writing, it is long, and worse: detailed.

Americans like their information short. 300 to 500 words is optimum for a news story about events critical to America’s future which are way too complex to fit in so few words. This is 2600 words, and it is just an excerpt! Unforgivable!

Americans will only sit that long for information if it is entertaining. Like fiction, pornography, or some ruthless accusation against some previously respectable person.

Information that calls for overturning old useless outdated yet overwhelmingly comfortable and familiar traditions, and especially if they contain the large volume of reading necessary to justify such upheaval, is not popular!

Sermons are not how we learn best

<https://theway21stcentury.wordpress.com/church/sermons-not-how-we-learn-best/>

THIS PAGE AT A GLANCE

The human brain has to deal with an enormous amount of input, from our 5 senses and from our nervous system. Only a small amount of this information is retained in long term memory, the rest is forgotten. Some is forgotten immediately, but the brain processes other information to decide whether to retain it, what other memories to link it to, and how it will respond.

If we receive too much important information for more than about 10 minutes, our brain starts to get fatigued, doesn't properly process, and some information is lost. Information is more likely to be retained and acted on if (1) we are interested and **actively engaged**, (2) we receive it via more than one of our senses, (3) we **discuss it with others to assist in processing it**, (4) we **speak it out to reinforce it**, and (5) we **put it into practice** immediately.

Sermons and lectures have almost none of these attributes, and studies show that only a small amount of any sermon is retained and acted on, generally from the first 10 minutes. Sermons tend to make people passive. It makes no sense to use a method that is not suited to how our brains operate.

If we want Christians, and the church, to grow and be active in their faith, we need to use active or participatory learning methods. There are many ways we could do this.

...Katie Driver [www.cmaresources.org/article/why-are-we-so-ineffective-in-making-disciples_katie-driver] gives similar, though 'worse', statistics – **adults retain 90% of what they learn if they teach it to someone else, and have immediate application of what they learn; 75% of what they learn when they practice it; 50% of what they discuss in a group; 30% of what they see demonstrated; 20% of what they see and hear in audio-visual teaching; 10% of what they learn through reading; and 5% of what they learn through lecture.**

...First the raw information must be encoded – that is, the brain links all the relevant information together to form a memory, actually creating new synapses. The brain gives priority to memories that:

- have a strong emotional content; [ie. spiritually important, morally clear]

- have been rehearsed over and over again in short term memory;

- are **important, memorable or personally meaningful**; or

- the memory can be associated with something already in memory (i.e. something we already understand), whereas things that are difficult to understand will be given lower priority.

2. The memories thus preserved are then consolidated by being stored in long term memory, and linked to other memories already there.

These processes can occur quickly if the information is straightforward, **but can take days if the information is unusual or creates problems by being new, unusual or contrary to other knowledge in long term memory.** Processing can be fatiguing – teens and adults can generally only process new information for about 10-20 minutes before they become fatigued, and further information can be lost.

...A recent Scientific American [<http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/budding-scientist/2014/05/21/stop-lecturing-me-in-college-science/>] reported on a paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences which examined hundreds of studies on the effectiveness of lecturing in universities.

When compared to more participatory learning, lectures rated very poorly. "Learners who are subjected to the one-way mode of lecture-based teaching have a 1.5 times higher failure rate than those who are allowed more participative methods." Students found it difficult to concentrate for the entire lecture, and often became passive.

One study found [<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/tomorrows-college/lectures/problem-with-lecturing.html>] student scores at the end of a semester of lectures were only 14% higher than they had been at the start!

This isn't surprising. "Cognitive scientists determined that people's short-term memory is very limited – it can only process so much at once.

A lot of the information presented in a typical lecture comes at students too fast and is quickly forgotten.”

“lecturing isn’t the best method to get students thinking and learning.”

[Sermons would have less retention than university lectures, because (1) students know they will be tested, and (2) professors do not prohibit verbal interaction; questions, and even challenges and disputes, are addressed.]

...ATTENTION SPANS

Many studies have found that most adults can focus for about 15-20 minutes maximum before they start to lose attention (see The National Teaching and Learning Forum, [<http://www.ntlf.com/issues/v5n2/v5n2.pdf>] K Mortensen, quoted by Thomas Hudgins [www.thomashudgins.com/2011/06/does-our-preaching-have-to-change.html] and Seth Norberg [http://www.usma.edu/cfe/Literature/Norberg_07.pdf]).

However it isn’t quite as simple as this. Some studies [<http://ideas.time.com/2012/10/02/why-lectures-are-ineffective/>] show that attention waxes and wanes through a university lecture, typically:

- An initial 3-5 minutes to settle down,
- 10-18 minutes optimum focus,
- a lapse in concentration followed by a return to concentration again, and
- further cycles of shorter and shorter periods of focus then lapse (perhaps every 3-4 minutes [<http://www.ntlf.com/issues/v5n2/v5n2.pdf>] in the end).

Other more recent studies [teachingcenter.wustl.edu/Journal/Reviews/Pages/student-attention.aspx#.U2ILoShqY-Y] suggest a similar pattern of concentration then lapse, but the lapses are less regular or predictable, more frequent and briefer.

INFORMATION RETENTION

Students remember best what they hear first. Immediately after a lecture, students remembered 70% of what was presented in the first 10 minutes, but only 20% of what was presented in the last ten minutes.

Within an hour [<http://www.fau.edu/success/Passport/How%20Do%20I%20Learn.pdf>] [*dead link*] of hearing something, less than half of what is remembered

will be retained. Retention reduces [<http://How Do I Learn.pdf>] even more in the days following.

ACTIVE OR PARTICIPATORY LEARNING

Cognitive research has found that people learn better when they’re actively engaged. People learn by **practicing, with feedback** to tell them what they’re doing right and wrong and how to get better. **They also learn when they have to explain something to someone else.**

Information retention can be significantly improved by adopting active learning [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_learning] teaching methods that provide **opportunities for students to pause and reflect/discuss briefly at times during a lecture**, or at the beginning and end, to work collaboratively or to participate interactively.

ACTIVE LEARNING WORKS

Studies show that active learning can significantly increase students’ abilities to learn and remember – more than doubling retention from as low as 12-23% up to almost 50%.

PRINCIPLES OF ACTIVE LEARNING

This understanding of the brain and learning has led to several principles of active learning being developed:

1. Utilise more than one of the senses and hence more than one of the learning styles.
2. Encourage active participation by the learners, so that information is more readily processed and more easily assembled into mental models, which make sense of the information.
3. Provide opportunities to put information into practice. Learning facts and learning to do something are very different processes, and learners need to practice applying facts to life.
4. People learn better when they learn with others **and can discuss.**
5. People learn much more **when they have to articulate what they have learnt.**
6. Don’t overload working memory (i.e. don’t give too much information at once) or information may be lost.
7. Learners need to get enough sleep – to process yesterday’s information and to be awake for tomorrow’s.

ACTIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUES THAT WORK

Techniques that fulfil some of these criteria

include:

- Guided problem solving where students are given an example to work through in class and guided by the lecturer.

- Discussion in pairs or small groups. This may include thinking through specific questions asked by the teacher.

- Learners do their own research, generally online, and report back, and the matter is discussed. Learning by teaching can be very effective.

- Use videos, games or role plays followed by questions.

PEER INSTRUCTION

One method that is effective is Peer Instruction. It can work in several ways:

After lecturing on a topic for 15-20 minutes, the lecturer stops and asks a multiple-choice format 'quiz question' that tests students' understanding of the topic under discussion. **Students vote on the right answer, and the lecture is adjusted accordingly. If there is poor understanding, the students are asked to discuss the question with their neighbours, and a second vote is taken. The results are almost always far better.**

Alternatively, the discussion can be held at the beginning, to awaken interest in the subject, or at any point during the lecture. It turns out that **those who understand the topic can generally explain it better to their friends than the expert lecturer can.**

"The **"convince-your-neighbour' sessions** allow for valuable peer interaction between students. This promotes active engagement: **students have to do more than passively assimilate material, they must think about it and try to explain it** to someone else."

Use of Peer Instruction improves student learning and understanding.

IF LECTURES MUST BE USED:

- Introduce the most important facts at the start (when they are most likely to be remembered) and then go over them in more detail.

- Use a variety of approaches – visuals, arresting stories, humour, illustrations, examples,

etc.

- Half way through, review what has been covered so far, perhaps via group discussion.**

- Break talks up into **segments of no more than 20 minutes**, with breaks of perhaps 5 minutes when learners can review what has been learnt or work through an example. Sometimes **breaks should be a complete break with the subject.**

- Let non-experts lecture.** It may sound crazy, but studies show that **people who have just learn something communicate better** to new learners than do experts, because they can remember how hard it was for them.

ACTIVE LEARNING IN PRACTICE

Most of these principles are quite clear and understandable. But secular educators have recognised that they need to be developed into programs and curricula. And so the concepts of active learning and participatory learning have been developed and implemented in many ways:

- School learning has been modified from the older passive listening and 'rote learning' to more active, experiential and involving forms of learning.

- Many universities and other tertiary institutions now encourage and assist staff in such diverse fields as Chemistry and Philosophy to use active learning techniques – and also undertake research.

- Teachers and educators are commonly trained in these approaches.

- Business and community training also uses these approaches.

- Many textbooks have been written on the subject – including How People Learn, Experience and Education, Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning and Learning in Adulthood.

WHAT CAN CHURCHES LEARN FROM THIS?

The goal of the church is the mission of God – an action to bring about change. That undoubtedly requires all of us, especially new believers, to learn and grow. But **we may well question how important public teaching is** for this.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that presently

the church makes teaching via sermons one of its main activities and (presumably) one of its main strategies for making disciples. Yet it is a teaching method that has been shown to be relatively ineffective!

Sermons are basically lectures, and studies have found that congregation members react similarly to university students. They lose concentration easily, and they learn and understand better if they are actively learning.

Replacing sermons with more interactive learning will be best, but if we must have sermons (and **it seems unlikely that preachers will give them up easily**, even though they are less effective), they should employ active learning and Peer Instruction approaches.

LEARNING IN CHURCHES

Some learning studies have been done in churches:

ATTENTION SPAN & RECOLLECTION

A study of Catholics in Germany found that “most of the audience tended to pay attention to the sermon in its entirety, although relatively few people actually remembered what they heard”. 60% attended to the sermon in its entirety, 34% gave partial attention, while 6% gave almost no attention. But only **22% had substantial recollection** later, 35% had moderate recollection and 43% had little recollection.

LEARNING AND CHANGE

In a 2009 New Zealand study, Jenkins & Kavan reviewed the research and commented: “studies have shown that sermons have a minimal influence on listeners”. However they found that while **listeners did not learn a great deal, or change their behaviour greatly** (objective measures used in some other studies) because of a sermon, they **responded positively** to sermons which **appealed to them emotionally**.

This US study obtained similar results. Listeners valued sermons and considered them the part of the service most likely to help them in their spiritual growth; the study found that **sermons aimed at specific changes in the listeners are the most effective**, but nevertheless, “it’s the rare sermon that creates lasting change” while **informative sermons are even less effective**.

So it seems that teaching sermons are a very

poor means of teaching, sermons seeking behavioural change are not very successful, and only sermons which encourage and comfort seem to achieve their goal. This Anabaptist blog suggests that changes in our western culture (“from passive instruction to participatory learning, from paternalism to partnership, from monologue to dialogue, from instruction to interaction ... from linear to non-linear methods of conveying information”) require changes in our teaching methods.

EXAMPLE OF TRYING SOMETHING DIFFERENT

One pastor reported:

“During my message, I asked our folks to find a partner and share their response to a non-threatening question. Initially, my inquiry was met with blank stares, but slowly everyone began to partner up. Faces that had been somber moments before broke out in smiles as they engaged in conversation. I let them share for a couple of minutes and then resumed my sermon.”

“After the service people kept talking, many of them finishing the conversations they’d started during my sermon. Also, several people thanked me for preaching the best sermon they said they’d ever heard. Many talked about the steps they were going to take to live out what I had talked about. Woo hoo!”

SERMONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Are sermons recommended in the New Testament, and were they commonly used? The evidence is against this.

MONOLOGUE SERMONS?

I know of no reference in the New Testament to exegetical preaching as we know it today, and few to anything like a sermon.

•The ‘sermon on the mount’ (Matthew 5-7) was almost certainly not a sermon in the modern sense. **Luke’s gospel gives a lot of the same teachings, but not all in one place**, and scholars are generally agreed that Matthew has grouped many of Jesus’ teachings into this so-called sermon).

•Paul’s talk in Acts 20:7-12 was certainly long (he spoke for most of the night), but it was a rare occurrence and the last time they would see

him. Even so, one listener fell asleep with disastrous results!

•David Norrington (To Preach or Not to Preach) [\[http://frankviola.org/2013/02/08/topreachornottopreach/\]](http://frankviola.org/2013/02/08/topreachornottopreach/) questions one of the scared cows in the modern church, namely “the sermon,” and the preeminence it’s given. Norrington’s premise is not built on novelty or questioning just to question. He goes back to the New Testament and shows that there is no evidence for a “a regular weekly” sermon that believers are to lean upon, and the whole “church” experience is to be wrapped around. This book also shows how “the sermon” as it has come to be practiced **supplants the one-another ministries of everyday believers, and stifles the expression of Christ in the ekklesia.** To Preach was originally published in Britain by Paternoster Press in 1996. It had virtually no circulation in the States. Norrington died in 2007, and his book nearly passed into oblivion. However, several supporters banded together to reoffer this work. And with it, a large additional section was added where Norrington responds to reviews of his book. To Preach is a well-documented study that will challenge traditional ideas, restore hope and function in the body of Christ, and help us understand that “preaching” in the NT was primarily a vital evangelistic activity directed toward unbelievers.

•“To Preach or Not To Preach” investigated the New Testament and early church history and concluded that **“monologue preaching was present in this period but was used only occasionally rather than regularly. Much more common were discussion, dialogue, interaction and multi-voiced participation.”**

•The several different Greek words translated “preach” in many Bibles (kerysso, euaggelizo are the most common, but there are several others) are better translated as “proclaim”, “declare”, or “announce”. Greek scholars agree that they are used to describe the proclamation of the good news to the world, and never refer to anything like a modern sermon to a group of believers.

•Whenever christian meetings are described (which isn’t very often, e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:26-33, Hebrews 10:25) the believers all minister to

and encourage each other, and there doesn’t appear to be any reference to a sermon.

DIALOGUE

Jesus’ characteristic teaching methods were parable and dialogue (argument or question and answer).

Paul’s missionary work was characterised by a similar two-way method of communication – the Greek word used in Acts 17:2, 17, 18:4, 19, 19:8-9, 20:7, 9, 24:25 indicates dialogue – and he urges all members to be involved in the gatherings of the christian community (e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:26-33).

LEARNING “ON THE JOB”

Jesus did not send his disciples to Bible College, but taught them in the situations of life, as he conducted his ministry (e.g. Mark 9:26-29, Luke 11:27-28, 13:1-5) and by letting them learn on the job (Luke 10:1-12).

KNOWLEDGE IS TWO-EDGED

While Paul clearly valued the knowledge of God and given by the Spirit, he regarded ‘knowledge’ on its own (what we would call ‘head knowledge’) with some suspicion (see e.g. 1 Corinthians 8:1-11) and of less value than other gifts and attainments (e.g. 1 Corinthians 13:2-8). Both Jesus (Matthew 21:28-31) and James (James 1:22-25) condemned knowledge or talk without an appropriate response.

1 Corinthians 8:1 Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. 2 And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. 3 But if any man love God, the same is known of him. 4 As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. 5 For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) 6 But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. 7 Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. 8 But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. 9 But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. 10 For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the

conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; 11 And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?

1 Corinthians 13:2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. 4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, 5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; 6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; 7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. 8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

Matthew 21:28 But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. 29 He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. 30 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. 31 Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.

James 1:22 But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. 23 For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: 24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. 25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

DEPENDENCE ON SERMONS PROBLEMATIC

According to some scholars (e.g. David Norrington), **the sermon as a form of oratory first entered the church after christianity became the state religion under Constantine in the early fourth century and the clergy vs laity divide began**, perhaps reinforced in the Middle Ages, and emphasised by the Reformation emphasis on teaching the word. It is argued by some that the sermon originated as a way of showcasing the preacher's oratorical gifts rather than teaching the congregation.

There are occasions when a monologue talk may be the best option (e.g. when a gifted visiting teacher is available for a short time to talk on an important topic), but there is **little (if any) New Testament justification for weekly monologue,**

exegetical (knowledge-based) sermons, and some good arguments against them.

[Holy understatement, Batman! There is zero New Testament justification for weekly monologue, overwhelming authority for dialog as the central element of worship, and overwhelming research and arguments confirming that God was not stupid after all in establishing dialog and leaving NO place for uninterruptible monologue!]

LEARNING VS DISCIPLINE

Jesus gave us 'the great commission' (Matthew 28:18-20), to "make disciples" and "teach them to obey" his teachings. So our conclusions on sermons should not be based on whether they 'faithfully teach the word of God', but whether they are useful in making disciples and assist them to obey Jesus' teachings. A disciple who is one who follows, under the discipline of his master, not just one who knows the facts.

The evidence from the educators and experience is clear. Monologue sermons keep people passive, do not teach or disciple them very well and thus do not do a lot to fulfil the great commission.

Their main virtue seems to be that they are an efficient way to ensure that the paid minister keeps control of the teaching and speaks to as many people as possible at one time. It has the **appearance of efficiency, but is not effective.**

Exegetical sermons appear to have the virtue of teaching the Bible, but may fail to connect to daily lives. A New Testament Professor wrote:

"But I wonder if we really are helping people by giving them a prepackaged Bible lesson every week. Are we preparing them for what life will bring their way? Are we teaching them to read and study the Bible for themselves?"

SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE OR REPLACE MONOLOGUE SERMONS

- Teaching must not be an end in itself, but a means to achieve the end of making us all mature obedient followers of Jesus who are making a positive difference in the world.

- Sermonising implies that we can't learn by reading the Bible and reflecting on life ourselves. Perhaps the time spent in sermons could be better

spent in teaching lay people how to learn themselves?

- Teach and disciple using mentoring, which is two-way and experiential.

- Active Learning: “some sort of engagement between the speaker and the audience especially in the form of what some call ‘student active breaks’.”

- Replace the monologue sermon with something that is learner-focused, multi-voiced, open-ended (“be prepared to leave loose ends and to **live with uncertainty, to run the risk of allowing people space to think, to reflect, to explore**”) and dialogue-based.

- Break things up. Have several shorter talks on **different, practical subjects by different people.**

- Shorter sermons – much shorter!

- Taking notes, even if they are not kept, may assist people in focusing and processing, though this is a somewhat artificial solution.

- Primary discipleship could be done one-on-one (as practiced by the Navigators), in small groups or simple churches (where everyone can contribute), or by “on the job” apprenticing within ministry teams.

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE DIFFICULTIES!

There will likely be resistance from both clergy and laity to making any change away from sermons.

Clergy will lose their position of power and esteem. They will likely feel they are not doing their job, and not equipped to take on more mission-oriented tasks. **More effective forms of teaching will be more difficult and time consuming, and will require more personal contact with people.** Some will welcome these changes, many will feel threatened by them.

Lay people have come to expect “good teaching” from an expert, and may feel the minister is no longer earning his pay. (One study showed that university students learnt more when active learning methods were used, but they respected their

lecturers less.) Sitting passively and not being much challenged may suit many.

OBJECTIONS

So this is significant and threatening change.

It may be resisted by various responses:

BUT YOU ARE FORGETTING ABOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT

This objection is often made. But are we going to offer God anything less than the best? Should we deliberately use poor methods, trusting him to “fix them up”? If we really believed that the Holy Spirit worked in this way, we would eliminate sermons entirely and just read the scriptures, and rely on the Spirit to teach each person!

[Ed: Also, if we cared that much about the Holy Spirit, wouldn't we have more interest in the worship format which the Holy Spirit has provided?]

WE DON'T NEED ANY FANCY MODERN EDUCATIONAL IDEAS. ALL WE NEED IS THE WORD OF GOD!

But if that is so, why aren't we dispensing with sermons and just reading the Bible?

[Ed: Also, why aren't we following the worship format in the Word of God?]

PEOPLE MAY NOT LOOK LIKE THEY'RE LISTENING, BUT SOMETHING GOES IN.

The studies show that less goes in and even less is remembered and acted on, than if we used a different method.

[Ed: Like, for example, the method given by God.]

PEOPLE IN MY CONGREGATION TELL ME HOW MUCH THEY APPRECIATE MY SERMONS – THEY WOULDN'T ACCEPT CHANGE

Studies show sermons make congregations feel better, but they neither learn much or change much as a result. Pastors who want to equip their congregation for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12) instead of keeping them passive and doing most of the ministry themselves, will find ways to

make gradual change.

[Ed: This is a huge obstacle to reform. I've talked to hundreds of pastors and hundreds of laymen about the Dialog Scriptures, and have found no more interest in them among laymen than among pastors.]

BUT I WAS NEVER TAUGHT HOW TO DO THIS

This is a substantial issue. Instead of teaching preaching, Bible colleges should be teaching education, training and equipping.

In the meantime, **most congregations include school teachers who are trained in these things**. Pastors should utilise the teachers' gifts, to gain new skills themselves, and to do team teaching with the trained school teachers.

THE CHALLENGE

I hope and pray that we will realise the importance of improving how we disciple people, and want to be part of a change. And then learn and do what we can!

FURTHER READING:

Church in a Circle blog is the best source I know of practical ideas on more personal and more effective learning and growing in church situations. A few of my favourite posts are:

- Let your congregation preach the sermon next Sunday
- Hidden messages in pulpits and pews
- “One-anothering” in church – setting up situations for mutual ministry
- The results are in – people prefer short sermons followed by discussion
- 10 principles which could transform your church practices – permanently.
- And there's plenty more!

Interactive Preaching by Stuart Murray Williams is a good summary and provides some good references.

Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church: And How to Fix It by Thom & Joani Schultz goes into active learning at some length. [<http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/18285.htm>]

My email to author Aug 20, 2017:

Fantastic article, <https://theway21stcentury.wordpress.com/church/sermons-not-how-we-learn-best/>

So encouraging to find such exhaustive validation of what has become more and more obvious the more I stare at certain verses, but that no one in my city appears to want to know. Much less to completely replace with the Biblical model! Have you found more interest than I have, in Sydney?

His answer:

I don't think many people anywhere are open to this, but I suppose it will slowly become more accepted.

Eric unkle at gmail.com

A rather poor defense of sermons

The following post offers to refute “common preaching objections”: specifically, “The Problem With Preaching”, which I have excerpted next.

<https://unashamedworkman.wordpress.com/2008/01/08/parrying-common-preaching-objections/>

First, preaching as is practiced in modern churches (if by that the author means a herald who proclaims and explains God's Word) is not extra biblical. Such a suggestion is unfounded and easily refuted by just a cursory reading of Scripture. Moses restates, explains and applies God's law in Deuteronomy. Ezra gives ‘the sense’ of God's precepts when the temple is rebuilt. Jesus expounds God's law and applies it more fully in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul's life and teaching are replete with Old Testament exposition (even Acts 17 can be shown, in its ‘content’, to be founded on several key OT passages). Last but not least, the author of Hebrews performs detailed exposition from the Law, prophets and

psalms. See some very basic support for all this here.

This is a straw man argument, mischaracterizing what critics of sermons are criticizing. No one is criticizing exegesis, or analysis, of Scripture! We criticize analysis that is uninterrupted. That permits no questions, clarifications, or corrections. Even God takes questions and proposals for alterations to His Will, called “prayers”! None of the Bible events given here involve that kind of censorship of verbal interaction. Now here is what the above thought it could refute:

The Problem With Preaching

<https://abetter.world/the-problem-with-preaching-2/>

SEPTEMBER 11, 2006 DAVID ALLIS

By David Allis david at edgenet.org.nz

I’m becoming convinced that preaching often does more harm than good. Preaching, as it is practiced in modern churches, is **extra-biblical, a poor form of communication, and creates dependency.**

.... These questions have arisen after spending years within a variety of organised churches as an observer, member, lay-leader, **ordained minister & church health consultant. I have heard and preached sermons, and observed their effects in individual’s lives.** Recently, I studied the biblical passages about preaching, and was surprised at what I found – that the preaching that is referred to in the New Testament (NT) bears little resemblance to the practice of preaching in churches. I also looked through the shelves of a good Bible College library – there were about **1,000 books on how to preach a good sermon, yet I could find nothing that attempted to**

clearly justify why sermons should be preached. There is a plethora of books on preaching, but the vast majority of them assume & perpetuate the sermon concept, and there is rarely any investigation or justification of its legitimacy.

....**The sermon as traditionally practiced, in which a clergy person preaches a message to a congregation, originated from Greek, not Biblical, sources. Around the period of 200-300 AD, the sermon emerged as central in Christian gatherings.** The model for this practice wasn’t taken from the Bible, but from Greek culture.

As one author noted, “The sermon was the result of syncretism—the fusion of the Biblical necessity of teaching with the unbiblical Greek notion of Rhetoric.” (Edwin Hatch notes) Greek Rhetoric influenced the early churches, helping create the Christian sermon.

(Kevin Craig, “Is the Sermon Concept Biblical?”, *Searching Together*, 15:1-2, 1986, p.28; citing Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas On Christianity*, Peter Smith, 1970, p.113. Also see David C Norrington, “To Preach or Not to Preach? The Church’s Urgent Question” 1996.)

“With the rise of the Constantinian mass church (4th century A.D.), all sorts of paganistic and Greek ideas entered into Christian thought and practice. One of those practices brought into the church was that of Greek rhetoric. With the conversion of such men as **Chrysostom, Ambrose, Tertullian, Cyprian, Arnobius, Lactantius, and Augustine – all of whom were trained in rhetoric and were quite popular as orators within the Greco-Roman culture of their day prior to their conversion** – a new style or form of communication began to occur within Christian assemblies.”[*Problems and Limitations of the Traditional “Sermon” Concept – article by Darryl M. Erkel*]

2....Scientific studies of education show that passive listening leads only to a small percentage of retention. Few people can remember a sermon the next day, week or month (often the preacher can’t remember it either).

...3. Preaching Limits Learning, Discussion & Debate

Preaching usually allows no opportunity for questions or discussion. **It is rare for a church to**

allow interaction during a sermon, or questions & discussion time afterwards. Sermons are designed to be listened to, not interacted with. Sermons & church meeting structure doesn't allow members of the audience to add their contributions regarding the subject matter, raise issues for discussion, clarification or debate. While there might be opportunity to discuss the sermon with the preacher later (except in larger churches where the minister is inaccessible), because the preacher has invested much of themselves into the sermon, they can easily become defensive if they perceive that their sermon (or the preacher) is being challenged.

...Also, self-discovered-truth is much more memorable and life changing than spoon-fed information. From my limited experience, the most effective long-term way to bring change to lives is not through listening to sermons, but through participative bible study in a mutually encouraging and challenging group. From my study of ekklesia (the gathering of believers) **in the NT, it is clear that the primary purpose of believers gathering together regularly is mutual edification**

[x] Interestingly, NCD (Natural Church Development) doesn't include this primary purpose of mutual edification in its 8 quality characteristics which "when all present to a sufficient degree will practically guarantee numerical growth". The **typical church form of corporate sung worship, which in larger churches seems like karaoke worship or lip-syncing for those who can't sing loud enough to hear their own voices over the amplified sound system, and sermons is not designed for mutual edification.**

In fact, it could be argued that typical church **Sunday meetings have been designed to hinder mutual edification.** Corporate sung worship led from the 'front', and sermons by professional preachers, which are the central focus of most church services, are conspicuously absent from the New Testament passages relating to the purposes of believers gathering together. I think Paul would be horrified at the way we have reduced worship

from his 'whole of life' concept to merely corporate singing once a week.

...Preaching Can Foster Biblical Illiteracy Much contemporary preaching is based around **themes, usually with little biblical basis.** While these sermons might teach some truth, and are often done in creative ways, they don't teach how to personally learn from the Bible.

Even as far back as **1898 David Thomas** touched on some key points in this regard:

The Christian church in assembly, on the same occasion, might have several speakers to address them. If this be so: (1) Should Christian teaching be regarded as a profession? It is now: men are brought up in it, trained for it, and live by it, as architects, lawyers, doctors. (2) Is the Christian church justified in confining its attention to the ministry of one man?

In most modern congregations there are some Christian men who, by natural ability, by experimental knowledge and inspiration, are far more qualified to instruct and comfort the people than their professional and stated minister.

Surely official preaching has no authority, either in Scripture, reason, or experience, and it must come to an end sooner or later.

Every Christian man should be a preacher. Were the half-hour allotted in church services for the sermon to be occupied by three or four Christly men with the capability and expression withal, it would not only be far more interesting, but more profitably spent than now

(1 Corinthians, The Pulpit Commentary, p.459).

Some of the unfortunate implications of centring preaching around one trained professional religious person are:

- It implies that one person hears from God & mediates to everyone else.
- It creates a dependence on being 'fed' by the necessary combination of professional ordained ministers[xii] plus theological training

plus eloquent preaching.

- Week after week, the Christian message is filtered through one person, the preacher. It is filtered through one set of experiences, one personality, one mind, and one limited life experience.

- Not only is the message filtered through one person, but that person is quite different from the church members. The preacher typically lives a different life, in a different world to his/her audience. Many don't have 'normal' jobs, and are treated differently in society because they are ministers.

- It devalues the experiences, insight and revelation of other members of the church, as they are relegated to only being listeners and often never being preachers. It implies that their knowledge of God & life wisdom are of no value to the wider church. Although we might give lip-service to the 'priesthood of all believers', we definitely don't practice it.

- By centering our gatherings on one person and their sermon, we are, in practice, reversing the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:14 and suggesting that the body is not many members, but one (often the same person, usually a man, who preaches most weeks). **Moreover, by centering our church meetings on one persons ability to speak, we subtly begin to form a personality-cult around their talents. In many churches, this person becomes the final authority on spiritual and theological matters, effectively producing our own brand of 'Protestant Popes'.**

[xiii]

...9. Preaching is Expensive

Sermons are expensive. A professional paid minister typically spends 1-2 days/week studying & preparing for their weekly sermon. Taking New Zealand as an example – there are about 3500 churches – if each had a minister being paid 1.5 days/week to preach at say \$200/day – this costs \$1m per week, or \$50m per year. In other countries like the USA, the amount would be much larger. This might seem a small amount compared with what is spent on other aspects of organised church life, or compared with the billions tied up in church properties, but in a world where people are starving to death & Jesus spoke about personal judgement relating to how we treat

the poor, it seems that we have misplaced values.

Summary: Martin Luther talked about "priesthood of believers" but did not push, at least very hard, against the weekly sermon. In those days church attendance was compelled so unbelievers were there too, in need of "the Gospel". And most people could not read the Bible, even if they had one.

The second is a societal shift away from an integrated world to a world where networks overlap, a shift away from simplicity to complexity. We live in a world which is not only complex and diverse but a world in which rapid changes are taking place. There are very few generalists; most of us are specialists in one area or another. The education system is geared towards this, despite occasional attempts to broaden the curriculum.

For preachers, this raises the issue of how to address such a complex world: the biblical text may not change but if we are concerned with application as well as interpretation, how are we to make the connections? Many preachers seem unable to relate the Bible and theology to the world of work or to issues in public life – these are areas of profound weakness in most churches.

Perhaps we need the help of those in the congregation who have expertise and experience in areas where we do not.

The third is a media shift away from linear to non-linear methods of conveying information, from logical argument to pic 'n' mix learning. Whether we like it or not, the television age has deeply affected the way in which communication takes place and how people learn. A careful argument that takes thirty minutes to develop does not make for good viewing in the age of sound bites. Watching someone lecturing for thirty minutes, however many camera angles are used, is not an effective use of the visual media. Communication now frequently involves the use of images as well as words, short contributions from diverse points of view, and open-ended presentation that allows freedom to choose your own conclusion. For preachers, this implies not only the use of visual communication as well as verbal communication but hard challenges about the style and purpose of preaching.

... I am sure that the vast majority of ministers are hard working people with high integrity who are committed to God, their church & their people. However, in this situation, it is difficult for them to question the church 'system'. There are many ex-ministers in society now – some of these might be better placed to raise questions about the organised church systems & the challenge of being a professional minister).

What is the Alternative?

I believe that a better & more scriptural alternative is personal and corporate Bible study, listening to God, discussion, and working together in mutually-accountable community to help each other apply biblical truths in our lives, community and world.

But there is some potential danger in removing preaching (I think it is worth the risk). The two main dangers I see are:

1. Dependent people might not learn to feed themselves. If we take away the church structures that nurture dependency, what will happen? My guess is that many churches & church attendees would 'collapse', including many that have been in 'church' for many years. This is a good example of how current organised church methods have created dependency. However, unless a change like this is made, we will continue to create dependency.

2. People might only read/study what they like, and avoid some of the harder or more important issues – at least preaching may/can address some of the harder issues we might want to avoid. However, mutual accountability groups can also address this issue, and ensure that the full breadth of important scripture and doctrine is covered.

[Ed: Just the opposite! Pastors fear "controversy" like cats fear a good swim. Yeah I know, they get up there and brag "this is controversial but I will say it anyway", but it is not controversial. Let a member make an announcement about a vote on abortion coming up, and you will see the pastor's interest in "harder issues", and who wants most to avoid them, pastors or members.]

Reviews of "To Preach or Not to Preach"

By buckets on March 24, 2016

With no disrespect to the deceased author, I would not recommend this book. It has eight relatively short chapters and three appendices. Even with the brevity, it includes 722 references to other authors' works. There is not all that much that is the author's own writings. Very disappointed reading.

[My response to this comment: Huh? Normally, references to other works is called "scholarship". This could become a valid criticism if the "other works" were mere pulp fiction with no authority, but this review doesn't say that, and other reviews say it relies on "other works" from Christianity's earliest centuries to document worship services then. Oh, and from the Bible.]

By Barry L. Ickes on April 1, 2013

As a follower of Jesus Christ and his Word, the Bible for the last 41 years, I have found myself wondering how the church of Jesus Christ could have strayed so far from the teachings of the Bible. This has troubled me for four decades and I find it hard to imagine that people can actually defend human tradition over what the Bible actually says. David Norrington's "To Preach or Not to Preach" is a great contribution in clarifying what the Bible has to say about "preaching." It stands in stark contrast to the human traditions that have encrusted the actual meaning of the Biblical words and nullified their content.

By Budnewson June 24, 2013

Format: Paperback|Verified Purchase

I noticed this book was often cited in "Pagan Christianity" which prompted me to read it and I have not been disappointed, although I have only read a third of it so far.

By Chris Altrock on March 21, 2013

Format: Paperback|Verified Purchase

Norrington's work on the role of preaching in the ancient and contemporary church is one-sided and subjective. He sweeps aside alternative ways of reading Acts and Church History and opts for his own perspective without strong enough

basis. Norrington's interpretation of Acts and the preaching in Acts is disappointing. For those hoping for a fair and balanced conversation about the role of preaching, look elsewhere.

[The problem with this review is that it gives not one single example of a Norrington interpretation compared with an "alternative way of reading Acts". Nor are we told where we may find a more "fair and balanced conversation about the role of preaching". The reviewer's dislike for Norrington's book may be an intelligent response to it, but while the reviewer keeps the evidence to himself he is not persuasive.]

By Jonathan H. Zenson January 20, 2013

Format: Paperback

We at Searching Together and Ekklesia Press are excited about the release of this re-print of a book that never had a hearing in America, because it was first published by Paternoster Press in England in 1996.

David C. Norrington unfolds many insights concerning early church life as a continuation of Jesus' ministry on earth. For example, he makes this observation about Christ's oversight of the apostles: "There is no evidence for the suggestion that apostles worked in pairs comprised of a senior and junior member. Each appears to have answered directly to his Lord and not another apostles Jesus' policy of ensuring that all answered directly to him, without being under the authority of any other member of the apostolic band, ensured that the question of internal leadership was never resolved. Jesus was the only leader in the group and he appointed no deputy."

As I re-read "to Preach," I was struck by the fact that the traditional notion of "the centrality of preaching" covers up a very important truth. Tradition connects the presence of Christ in the assembly with a delivered sermon. **Norrington takes issue with D. Bonhoeffer who said, "The preacher should be assured that Christ enters the congregation through those words he proclaims from the Scripture" (p. 201). With no mention of a sermon, Christ has already promised His presence when His people gather (Matt. 18:20). The point being, Christ is already**

"in" all of His flock, and they each can express Christ (1 Cor. 14:26). By focusing on the sermon of one person, the multi-voiced assembly is tragically muted.

I believe that this book is an important contribution to the ongoing conversation about what "ekklesia" is really all about.

Communication is a TWO Way Conversation

<http://www.philcooke.com/node3197/>

An internationally known writer and speaker, Phil Cooke has actually produced media programming in nearly 50 countries around the world. In the process, has been shot at, survived two military coups, fallen out of a helicopter, and in Africa, been threatened with prison. And during that time – through his company Cooke Pictures in Burbank, California – he's helped some of the largest nonprofit organizations and leaders in the world use the media to tell their story in a changing, disrupted culture.

Phil was Executive Producer of "Let Hope Rise – the Hillsong Movie" released to theaters nationwide in 2016, and Producer of "The Insanity of God" a feature documentary that premiered nationwide as a Fathom Event. According to former CNN journalist Paula Zahn, Phil is rare – a working producer in Hollywood with a Ph.D. in Theology. He's appeared on NBC, MSNBC, CNBC, CNN, Fox News, and his work has been profiled in the New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, and The Wall Street Journal.

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Generation after generation pastors and Christian leaders get it wrong. They believe our only responsibility is sharing the message. But we also have a responsibility to do our best to make sure that message is received.

To be honest, this new two-way conversation is remarkably similar to the method of worship during the days of the early church. Frank Viola and **George Barna, writing in their book, Pagan Christianity: Exploring The Roots Of Our Church Practices,** reveal some of the most common practices of worship in the early church, including:

- **Active participation and interruptions by the audience were common.**

- Prophets and priests spoke extemporaneously and out of a present burden, rather than from a set script.

- There is no indication that Old Testament prophets or priests gave regular speeches to God's people. Instead, the nature of Old Testament preaching was sporadic, fluid, and open for audience participation. Preaching in the ancient synagogue followed a similar pattern.

Wayne E. Oates, writing in Pastoral Counseling, ([http://www.amazon.com/Pastoral-Counseling-Wayne-E-Oates/dp/066424405X/ref=sr_1_9?](http://www.amazon.com/Pastoral-Counseling-Wayne-E-Oates/dp/066424405X/ref=sr_1_9?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1283268634&sr=8-9)

[ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1283268634&sr=8-9](http://www.amazon.com/Pastoral-Counseling-Wayne-E-Oates/dp/066424405X/ref=sr_1_9?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1283268634&sr=8-9)) put it this way: **“The original proclamation of the Christian message was a two-way conversation... but when the oratorical schools of the Western world laid hold of the Christian message, they made Christian preaching something vastly different. Oratory tended to take the place of conversation. The greatness of the orator took the place of the astounding event of Jesus Christ. And the dialogue between speaker and listener faded into a monologue.”**

That's not to say that preaching or proclaiming the gospel isn't important, ...

[Ed: Actually it does. If the history of Christian practice is consistent with the Scriptures which place zero acknowledgment of even the *existence* of uninterruptible sermons, not to mention zero *importance*, then uninterruptible sermons

which displace the dialog which God did establish are of *less* than zero importance: they have “*negative*” importance. They are a tradition of men which displace a commandment of God, and must be ordered back to Hell.]

...but it does indicate the way new technology is actually giving us the capability to recover many of the styles and ideals of the early church. **The two-way conversation that begin in Jerusalem became a one-way conversation with the influence of Greco-Roman culture; and now in the digital age, we are once-again re-discovering the power of dialogue over monologue.**

Simply put, in the open world of the future, those who simply preach or teach without regard to the way the audience understands and responds may simply be ignored.

My email to Phil Cooke, August 21, 2017

Hi! I just found and read your post at <http://www.philcooke.com/node3197/>, Communication is a two way street, posted 7 years ago. Have you, in these 7 years, had any takers? Have you found an assembly willing to follow God's model? I haven't found that much interest here in Des Moines IA, though over the years I've talked to hundreds of pastors and more hundreds of “laymen” about it. Showing Christians what the Bible commands, even successfully enough that pastors agree that's what God says to do, hasn't proved sufficient for people to be willing to do it.

(No answer)

CONCLUSION

If any good purpose can be established for an uninterruptible message that must never be questioned, or clarified, or commented upon, no matter how respectfully, (other than in some kind of emergency situation where there is no time, or some military or intelligence operation where people must take orders without knowing why in order to preserve secrecy), it must be done against the wisdom of both God and man.

The Bible is full of examples of where God gave a message, and then listened as men – and

women – questioned Him, and asked Him to reconsider, or contradicted Him with reasons to reconsider, and God NEVER punished, or complained that men would talk to God; but God patiently, intelligently addressed the question. God grew impatient with Moses for his lack of courage, and the angel with Zechariah father of John the Baptist for questioning God's ability.

If God is that willing to be questioned and

even challenged by mere men, it is really hard to imagine God approving a mere man unwilling to be questioned or challenged by another man! But maybe you can think of a rationale for such messages. Just don't invoke God's support. That is, unless you can find a Scripture proving me wrong – I am happy to take questions and address challenges too.