

EDITORIAL

The Pastor As Communicator

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Nels F. S. Ferré once said we have become almost neurotic about communication in our day. Quite true, and with good reason. With the population explosion (current daily world birth rate: 324,000; net gain after deaths: 190,000) there are more voices to be heard. With the proliferation of communication devices (radio, tape, movie, television, a hundred printed forms) competition for attention is unbelievably difficult. The sheer barrage of things clamoring to be seen and thought about complicates the fight for attention.

Is it any wonder the pastor finds it difficult to call his people to worship on Sunday morning? Is it surprising that it is hard to get his members to zero in on a single idea? Is it hard to understand the frustration he feels in trying to “get through”? What is the answer?

Any simplistic answer will not do. The answer is complex precisely because there are so many variables (each hearer has different needs and comes with his own individual background of experiences). Yet progress is being made toward an answer to the problem of pastoral communication.

Reuel L. Howe, Director of the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies, has been at work on this whole problem and has come up with some highly useful findings. His little book, *Partners in Preaching, Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967) is first rate. It is frank and somewhat devastating to a purely traditional form of communication, but will be helpful to the man who wants to communicate more than to preserve outmoded forms.

A volume characterized by the same kind of disturbing reality is Clyde Reid's *The Empty Pulpit, A Study in Preaching as Communication* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967). Both Howe and Reid review contemporary communication theory and come to grips forthrightly with the

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“monological illusion” (the process of deluding ourselves that one-way communication communicates).

What are these men and others trying to say to us? What is our own experience as pulpit communicators saying to us? *First, we try to say too much.* Howe’s findings show that ministers tend to carry a load of guilt because they think they haven’t enough content in their sermons; laymen are frustrated because they can’t eat and digest the enormous quantities dished out. Interesting! Seminary loads us with a tremendously rich content. We revel in the biblical exegesis courses, with all their fresh and scintillating material. We are excited in the classroom and want to carry that same excitement into the pulpit. But we find we simply don’t have time to dig up that much fresh information (we forget the professor *lives* in the world of fresh ideas; the practicing minister lives in *many* worlds). But even more significantly, we forget that our people simply are not *oriented* to the biblical world. They cannot grasp because they are not prepared. The result is that frequently people leave church with the impression of words, words, words. They know they have heard a lot of words, but have little idea what they symbolize.

Howe went into dozens of churches and taped lay reactions to sermons. He made the most fantastic discovery: Many had no concrete idea of what had been said; astonishingly few had a specific and accurate idea; the variation of ideas about what had been said was so great that pastors could hardly depend on a one-to-one relationship between what was actually said and what “got through.”

A recent survey of sermons was published under the title, “What Makes a Sermon a Dud?” Three answers were given: (1) “They don’t offer the listener any new insights or information”; (2) “They try to cover too much ground”; and (3) They make “sweeping generalities.” Note the sharp analysis of point (2): “Instead of settling on one theme and developing it forcefully, the minister tries to cram four or five different ideas into a single discourse. Since there isn’t time in a 20-minute sermon (nor even, heaven forbid, a 30-minute sermon) to do justice to so many scattered ideas, he leaves the listener more bewildered than uplifted.”

Second, preaching today must be a cooperative affair. Somehow we must make our people feel they are “on the team.” The homiletical team, that is. Gone is the day when we can “lecture” our people *ex cathedra*. They will not take it. Clyde Reid points out that people probably sit in the back of the church as a gentle rebellion against being “told.”

Someone has said the genius of communication is concern. Exactly. If our people believe we are on their side, actually trying to help them rather than “performing” in the pulpit, they will listen. If, as we have

gone in and out with our people during the week, they feel we have suffered with them, then they will listen on Sunday morning. This is the essence of what some have called incarnational preaching. Identification with our people is the very ground of rapport in or out of the pulpit, and if not out, not in.

Further, in that very process of identification our people are “telling” us what to preach on Sunday. Their needs speak eloquently; they are the clues to sermon topics. And if this life-situation approach to preaching is criticized as unbiblical, let it be remembered that the Bible grew out of authentic human need. Redemption is the key scriptural motif, and that is obviously keyed to man’s dilemma.

Some ministers in our day have even experimented with cooperative sermon planning in which laymen come together with the preacher, and while together chart the course for the coming Sunday’s sermon. Not a bad idea. But it is doubted that in the typical situation this would work for long, if even for a single one-stand experiment. What cannot be denied is that in the everyday circumstances of our people, they are helping us write our sermons and do not know it. The question is, Does the preacher know it?

Once more, the preacher with a burning heart communicates. With all their criticism of contemporary preaching, Howe and Reid admit that personal dynamic experience communicates. Yesterday, I was trying to communicate to my class in first-year preaching that the Spirit of God anoints his called men to preach to make a better world. My biblical documentation was Luke 4:18-19, Jesus’ quotation from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the
poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

I called in a Middler who has established a remarkable rapport with a nearby Negro community. I asked him to help the Lukan passage come alive for us. He began with some good but not very penetrating words. Then a student who knew him stopped him: “You’re not really coming to grips with the cutting edge of your ministry. Isn’t it true that you lost your job because of your association with the Negroes? And isn’t it also true that your life has been threatened?”

As it turned out, these questions opened up the burning heart of the young Middler. Here was a man authentically called of God to preach good

news to the poor and the captives, to bring sight to the blind and liberty to the oppressed, yet he had been called before the town fathers, assailed for his contact with the destitute Negro youth, and dismissed from his job because he was now no longer “respectable.”

Now, you could hear a pin drop in that classroom (even though the dismissal bell had sounded). People listened. They were in the presence of a man who practiced what he preached, who had the courage to follow through on his call, who himself had become poor to touch the poor. They watched a heart flame with the divine fires of passion for the lost and with indignation at the evils of the establishment.

The burning heart communicates. It is authentic, utterly sincere, real. People will follow that heart, they will listen to it, they will love the man who owns it and stand by him when he meets opposition.

O God, make our preaching come alive to the real needs of real people; make it cut right through meaningless tradition and the lethargy that supports that tradition. Set our hearts on fire for divine purposes, for making a bad world a good one. Restore our confidence in preaching as the divinely appointed means of doing just that. Renew our call to preach, and renew us to preach with courage and power. Fill us with a holy passion; open the hearts of our people to receive the preached word; touch those to whom we minister for God and for good.