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Preaching With Relevance: Without Dumbing Down

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Look from the Pew's Perspective

The *general objective* in this chapter is to grasp the receiver-orientation essential for understanding communication relevance.

The *specific objectives* in this chapter are

1. to see the value of knowing the people to whom we preach,
2. to become familiar with a tool for analyzing or getting to know the audience to whom we preach.

In relevant biblical preaching, perspective is everything. When it comes to relevance, we must ask ourselves, "Who determines whether the sermon is relevant?"[1] From a strictly *theological* perspective, the only viable answer is *God*. The Lord did not leave us His Word in hopes that we would discover some human utilitarian value in it. He revealed Himself and His will to bring glory to Himself through the obedience and praise of His people.

From a communication perspective, however, *listeners* determine

whether the sermon is relevant. We might think that this communication perspective seems contrary to the theological perspective, but the two are quite compatible. If we did not believe that God's Word *is* relevant, why would we attempt to *demonstrate* that it is?

If, then, we are to demonstrate the relevance of God's Word to listeners, we must take the perspective of the pew rather than the pulpit. As a student of Scripture, trained in exegesis and theology, I can "get lost" in the study of the Ancient Near East's worship of Baal, the composition of the tribes of Israel, or the debates about James' theology. As a preacher, give me good biblical-historical-theological evidence, and I'll buy the sermon's big idea or homiletical proposition.

In doing so, I'm thinking as a preacher because I'm living in a preacher's world. The people to whom I speak on Saturday night and Sunday morning live in a world of bioethics, violence, car payments, sitcoms, and dot-coms. Trying to explain to them Elijah's conflict on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) by giving an abbreviated history lesson on Baal worship is like trying to sell flood insurance in the desert. That's because I'm talking in the preacher's world.

When I talk in the listener's world, I may need to state the essential tenets of Baal worship so that people will understand what Elijah was up against. For example, I may say something along the lines of

> The ancient Near East offered an assortment of deities. People could choose one god over another, or to be safe, they might worship several gods. Elijah made it perfectly clear that the people could not waver between gods. The God of Israel is the only true God, Elijah claimed.

Sitting in the pew are Jay and Leah. Their son Jason is a sophomore this year at a major university. One of his classes is a study of world religions. Jay and Leah fear what's being pumped into Jason's mind. He hears that religion is a sociological phenomenon of every culture, a matter of choice, one option in pluralism. Thus, his professor argues, to suggest that there is only one correct belief system is irrational and exclusive.

Such are the culture wars of our day. They sound a lot like the wars of Elijah's day. When we see the similarity between the two situations,

we need to ask, "Why was Elijah so insistent that the people of Israel not waver between gods?" And when we discover the answer in the theology of the Old Testament, we are ready to talk to Jay and Leah about how to help Jason face the challenges of his own culture wars.

When I look from the pulpit, I see Baal worship, Elijah, sinful Israel, and a fascinating showdown on Mount Carmel. When I look from the pew, I see Jason, 230 miles away, shy, questioning, tempted, and facing the challenges to his monotheistic Christian faith. And I see his parents, who fear for his mind and heart. I also see a relevant answer in God's Word to Jason's struggle. In relevant biblical preaching, perspective is everything.

If we are going to demonstrate the relevance of God's Word to our listeners, we must look from the perspective of the pew. That look begins with acquainting ourselves with those to whom we speak. Hence, the remainder of this chapter delineates a tool for audience analysis.[2] Before moving to that tool, however, let me share Pastor Ray Pritchard's insightful words:

> Everyone has a story to tell, even the people who seem to smile all the time. This is one of the first things a young pastor learns when he graduates from seminary and begins his ministry. Some people look so well-adjusted and happy that you think they don't have a care in the world. But they do. If you work with people long enough, you discover that even the "perfect" people know all about sorrow and heartache.[3]

The seasoned pastor preaches from the vantage of the shepherd who knows the sheep. The pastor's analysis will happen somewhat intuitively and in an ongoing fashion. Nevertheless, as I have heard frequently from Doctor of Ministry students, many of them seasoned pastors, "This analysis [tool] opened my eyes to see my people in ways I had not thought about." It's amazing how differently we preach to people when we learn about their hurtful childhood, the tyranny they're under at work, or the loneliness they feel because of neglect from a spouse.

Consider Bill Hybels' insight: "If we're going to speak with integrity

to secular men and women, we need to work through two critical areas before we step into the pulpit. . . . The first is to *understand the way they think*. . . . The second prerequisite to effective preaching to non-Christians is that we *like them*."[4]

To analyze our audience, we need to analyze generally, theologically, psychologically, demographically, and with the preaching purpose in view. The following section provides a tool for audience analysis. When I preach as a guest speaker, I use a much-abbreviated version of this tool. At a minimum, it gives me a glimpse of the people to whom I'll be speaking. Otherwise, I arrive clueless.

To the preacher who regularly speaks in one setting, however, I, like the IRS, recommend that the preacher use the "long form" at least once per year. (This is where any similarity between the IRS and me stops!) Following the Tool for Audience Analysis, the chapter will provide sample Application Grids. Keeping an Application Grid on my desk during the homiletical phase of my preparation is a simple way to keep the people before me. If I'm not intentional about doing so, I may slip back into my perspective of looking from the pastor's study or the pulpit instead of looking from the pew. Remember that the analysis is not of the entire church body but only of the preaching audience.

Tool for Audience Analysis

Instructions: Complete the following outline for audience analysis by reading and applying the recommendations and answering (where appropriate) the questions. Record the sources for your conclusions, even if anecdotal.

Plan to Analyze Your Audience(s)

This first phase of the analysis is general and allows us to gather general information about the community and culture from a variety of resources.

1. Plan to analyze generally.
    a. Various national polls provide general analyses of audiences.
        • George Gallup, *Religion in America, 50 Years: 1935–1985* (Princeton, NJ: Gallup Organization, 1985)

- *Journal of Adult Training* 2, no. 1 (1989)
- *Journal of Adult Training* 3, no. 2 (1991)

b. Sociological and cultural studies provide general analyses of audiences.

- John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000* (New York: Morrow, 1990)
- James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Prentice-Hall Press, 1991)
- George Barna, *America 2000* (Glendale, CA: Barna Research Group, 1989); *The Frog in the Kettle Ventura, CA:* Regal, 1990); *User Friendly Churches (Ventura, CA:* Regal, 1991)
- David Henderson, *Culture-Shift* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998)

Note: Use all sources critically. Be careful not to read *descriptive* research as *prescriptive.*

Too many preachers stop at cultural analysis. Cultural analysis is valuable, but insufficient by itself. It's valuable to know the general "gatekeepers" of information and trends in a given culture, but people are still individuals who have made choices about their values and beliefs. Likewise, churches are communities that often take on a subculture or traits of their own. Hence, we must go beyond cultural analysis.

2. Plan to analyze locally.
   a. Chamber of Commerce analyses provide local information about audiences.
   b. Compuserve's® "Go Neighbor" zip code survey provides local analyses of audiences.
   c. Several databases of local information are available via the Internet.
   d. Most towns or cities have a Web site.
3. Plan to analyze particularly.
   a. Analyze a particular audience through records, questionnaires, surveys, visitation of all kinds, personal observations, informal conversations, past experience, pre-sermon discussions, post-sermon discussions, and so on.
   b. Talk to people; listen to people!

4. Learn about and *love* your audience.
5. Pray for your audience.
   a. Keep an active prayer list of your audience and pray through that list on a regular basis.
   b. Stop the sermon preparation process at the point of audience analysis and, from the pulpit, pray through the empty seats by visualizing the audience and individuals who will listen. Or at least create an Application Grid with people's names so that you can pray by visualizing them. A sample Application Grid appears at the end of this chapter.

Theological Analysis

1. Identify your audience's spiritual condition(s) by percentages.

Unregenerate
___% of the people are far from the kingdom (maybe some interest).
___% of the people are coming to the kingdom (seekers).
___% of the people are near the kingdom (contemplative seekers).

Regenerate
___% of the people seem to be immature or carnal.
___% of the people seem to be immature and growing.
___% of the people seem to be maturing but stagnant.
___% of the people seem to be maturing steadily.

2. Identify your audience's spiritual longings.
___% of the audience longs for transcendence (the urge to *be*).
___% of the audience longs for action (the urge to *do*).
___% of the audience longs for community (the urge to *belong*).

Psychological Analysis

1. How does the audience *think* (process information)?
Does the audience follow the reflective thinking process of (1) recognizing a felt need or difficulty, (2) defining the problem, (3) collecting and analyzing data, (4) listing alternative solutions, (5) identifying criteria for a solution, and (6) adopting a solution? Does the audience

follow this process closely? Does it follow some other process of "thinking" (authority, tradition, spontaneity, rational-emotive, anecdotal, and so on)?

2. How does the audience *feel* (sense experience)?

3. How does the audience *act* (choose from different options)?

4. Identify the audience's paradigms.
   a. What are the audience's attitudes? (Attitudes answer the question "How do you think, feel, and act concerning . . . ?")
   b. What are the audience's beliefs? (Beliefs answer the question "How strongly do you think, feel, and act concerning . . . ?" or "What do you embrace?")
   c. What are the audience's values? (Values answer the question "What do you hold dear?")

Demographic Analysis

1. What percent of the audience is ages
   __ 5–12 __ 13–18 __ 19–22 __ 23–30 __ 31–40 __ 41–55
   __56–65 __ 66–80 __ over 80

2. What percent is
   __ male __ female

3. What is the approximate mean adult annual income? (Take an anonymous survey, if necessary.)
   $_____ annually

4. What percent of the audience lives
   __ within one mile of the church property __ 1–5 miles
   __ 6–10 miles __ over 10 miles

5. What percent is
   __ Caucasian __ Hispanic __ African American
   __ Native American __ other _____

6. What percent works in
   ___ "white collar" occupations ___ "blue collar" occupations
   ___ unemployed

7. What percent is
   ___ married ___ divorced ___ never married
   ___ divorced and remarried ___ widowed

8. What percent identifies with
   ___ a particular political viewpoint or party

9. What percent in regard to education has:
   ___ no high school diploma ___ high school or equivalent
   ___ college ___ graduate degree

10. What percent has been Christian
    ___ less than 1 year ___ over 3 years ___over 5 years
    ___ over 10 years ___ over 20 years ___ never

11. What percent has
    ___ "grown up in church"
    ___ started coming to this church within the last two years
    ___ started coming to this church within the last five years

12. What percent comes from backgrounds that are predominantly
    ___ unchurched ___ Catholic ___ Mainline Protestant
    ___ Evangelical ___ non-Christian religion

Purpose-Oriented Analysis

1. Are any members of the audience "hostile" (argumentative, adverse to Christian beliefs, application, and so on)? Or are any members of this audience "hostile" to this sermon's purpose? If so, why?

_____

_____

_____

2. What feedback has been received from audience members about previous sermons?

_____

_____

_____

3. How long should sermons be for this audience? (Is length a significant issue?)

_____

_____

_____

4. Have previous messages delivered to this audience been generally positive, negative, corrective-admonishing, encouraging, motivational, instructive, and so on? How might previous sermons influence future messages?

_____

_____

_____

5. Are there significant "issues" that undermine or influence the overall ministry (a split, unresolved tensions, financial concerns, tensions between the preacher and audience members, etc.)?

_____

_____

_____

6. What will stimulate interest in the sermon's subject for this audience?

_____

_____

_____

7. In what ways does this audience influence the organization (structure, outline) of a sermon?

_____

_____

8. What is impossible to know in advance of preaching to this audience?

_____

_____

_____

9. What do you like about preaching to this audience/in this setting?

_____

_____

_____

10. What do you dislike about preaching to this audience/in this setting?

_____

_____

_____

Adaptation to Audience

Become aware of the segments within your audience. Within every audience there are small groups who are different from the many individuals or from the audience as a whole. Selectively address segments within the audience. As in exegesis of the text, not every detail of your exegesis of the audience will show up in every sermon. Enough messages are selectivity addressed to the various segments of the audience, however, to enable the message to hit home to a large percentage of "real" people.

Additionally, think in terms of community as well as individuals. Most of the information gleaned from the above Audience Analysis tool will inform you about individuals. But sometimes we have a text that applies to the body as well as the individual. Thus, the sermon needs to develop a corporate application as well as an application for individuals.

Adapt to the audience in some simple ways, as necessary, to aid communication:

- Dress—semi-formal, casual, or sporty?
- Language—elevated, normal, or conversational?
- Arguments—logical, ethical, or emotional?
- Arrangement—deductive, inductive, conceptual, imagery, and so on?
- Support—credible authorities, research, statistics, illustrations?
- Allusions/images—biblical, historical, current, or local?
- Association/dissociation with audience?

Sample Application Grids

On the following pages are sample Aapplication Grids that provide a way of "keeping the people in front of you" as you prepare. The first grid is a four-column grid of names that represent somewhat of a cross-section of the congregation. The following guidelines will help you to use the grid for maximum value.

Guidelines

a. As you think through the flow of the message, look at the names on the Application Grid and ask, "How will this truth touch this person?"

b. Ask, "How should this person respond in terms of belief, attitude, values, or behavior?"

c. Aim to be concrete, but shape application in terms that are general enough not to identify or embarrass anyone.

d. Don't be so specific with application that you become irrelevant. (If application gets too narrow, it may miss a large percentage of the people, who will then think, "That's not me." More importantly, it may "misrepresent" the text.)

e. Change the names on the grid monthly, especially if you preach to one audience regularly.

Sam	Kate	Mark	Bill
Suzanne	Lucy	Tim	Rex
Margaret	Harold	Paul	David
Beth	Marcia	Phil	Stephen
Cindy	Dale	Janet	Gary
Jim	Sandy	Debra	Wayne
Joan	Chuck	Ralph	Shirley
Ho Chin	Megan	Gabe	Beverley
Sherri	Al	Carol	Allen
Richard	Lynne	Bill	Sally
Tommy	Heather	Jay	LaTeisa

If you cannot use a grid with specific names, or if you want to focus on a specific group or a specific situation, adapt your grid by plugging in categories similar to those on the grids below.

	Home	Work	School	Church	Subculture
Children					
Single					
Married					
Widowed					
Divorced					

	Self-employed	Employed	Work part time	Work on commission	Retired
Male Children					
Single Men					
Married Men					
Widowed Men					
Divorced Men					

Conclusion

I know one preacher who places a collage of pictures from his congregation in front of him as he prepares each message. Whatever the tool—an application grid of names or a collage of pictures—know the people to whom you will speak so that you can prepare from the pew's perspective, for in preaching with relevance, perspective is everything.

YOU TRY IT!

1. Use the Tool for Audience Analysis presented in this chapter to analyze *your* audience.
2. Develop an Application Grid for *your* audience.
3. Decide what adaptations to your audience may be appropriate.