Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling

Ronald J. Allen

St. Louis: Chalice Press

2004

ISBN: 0-827205-01-5

Allen's book is part of a four volume series called ***Channels of Listening***. All four books are reporting on some detailed research on how people hear sermons. The research was conducted through Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. The study, funded by the Lily Foundation, was conducted in 2000-2001. In the study, individual and group interviews were recorded with 263 lay people from 28 Midwestern protestant congregations. Sixteen of those congregations were predominantly Anglo in membership, nine were predominantly African American, and the other three were racially mixed. The congregations came from thirteen different denominations (including the ELCA). A few congregations in the study were non-denominational.   The congregations represented rural, small town, suburban, and urban settings (144).

This book in the series, ***Hearing the Sermon: Relationship, Content, Feeling***, focuses on a particular discovery the researchers made as they poured over thousands of pages of transcripts from the 263 interviewees. The conclusion they drew was that hearers process sermons through three distinct settings that correspond to what Aristotle identified as the three critical elements of rhetoric: logos, ethos, and pathos.

What does that mean? There was a large group of listeners who, even if the question the researcher had asked involved the emotional appeal of the sermon (pathos) or the trust factor between preacher and congregation (ethos), would very quickly bring the discussing back to the content and ideas of the sermon (logos).   It was the soundness, depth, and logical presentation of the ideas that these hearers valued most of all. While this level of logos preference varied from person to person, 40% of the hearers in this study listened to sermons through what the book calls "the logos setting."

Then there were the listeners who, even when interview questions sought to engage them in the sermon's appeal to emotion (pathos) or the content and ideas (logos) of the sermon, quickly turned the conversation back to the relationship factor (ethos) between the congregation and the preacher. Once again, the level of the predominance of this ethos preference in listening to sermons varied from interviewee to interviewee, but 40% of the hearers in this study listened to sermons through what the books calls "the ethos setting."

Finally, there were the listeners who, even when the interview questions sought to get their opinion about the importance of the relationship factors with the preacher (ethos) or the sermonic content (logos), quickly turned all comments back to the emotional quality (pathos) of the sermon. Once again, the degree of this pathos preference varied among these listeners, but 20% of the hearers in this study listened to sermons through what the book calls "the pathos setting."

When speaking of hearers processing sermons through a logos, ethos, or pathos settings, the metaphor the researchers used in the study is taken from the mixing board that is a part of the sound system for many churches. As the microphone captures the preacher's voice, the various settings (bass, treble, etc.) can impact how the congregation hears the sermon. Changing the settings can greatly impact how the listeners hear the sermon.

In this study, the researchers suggest that those in the pew have their own personal "sound board" that greatly impacts what draws their attention in any particular sermon. Every hearer, as he or she listens to a sermon, will have a unique mix of the settings for how much they have turned up or turned down the dials marked "logos," "ethos," and "pathos." The three groups identified above are those whose settings are very high in one of those three, while the other two, by comparison, are more muted. That's not to say, for instance, that a person who tends to listen to sermons on a "logos setting" completely disregards issues of ethos or pathos in preaching. But to a noticeable degree, the ethos or pathos elements of preaching are not their focus.

Why is knowing this of value to the preacher? Knowing what elements tend to capture the attention of each sub-group of listeners can help the preacher take steps to include elements that capture the attention of each group, if possible, in every sermon. For example, this research suggests that sermons that are heavy on content, packed with ideas and concepts, and delivered with logical precision, will be offering precisely what about 40% of listeners rate highest in sermons (the logos listeners). But if that sermon makes little or no attempt to show the impact of those ideas in relation to real life joys and sadnesses (pathos), or fails to make it evident that the preacher is delivering those ideas because he loves and cares for the souls to whom he is preaching (ethos), 60% of the congregation may find little in the sermon to which they can relate (and even those listening on "logos settings" may benefit less).

While we know and trust that only the Holy Spirit can enable hearts to believe and put into practice what is heard, yet what is at stake here is whether the message will even be heard or pondered at all, or whether it will be simply disregarded. We know that the Word works both psychologically and supernaturally. To ignore the different avenues by which different hearers find their initial connection to the sermon, may mean we miss even having the opportunity to engage those hearers with the message through which the Holy Spirit works.

While the research did not mention this at all, it is also very likely that each preacher, as he approaches the task of writing and delivering a sermon, will tend to go about that work with his own logos, ethos, or pathos preference. This reviewer found himself reflecting often on what his own preferred setting may be, and how that impacts my own sermonizing. To recognize the "setting" toward which we most easily gravitate can help us make sure we don't leave out the other two groups of hearers in how we approach the preaching task.

There are two sections of this book that this reader found most helpful. In chapters 2-4, the author spends one chapter on each setting to help us to understand how people in each of the three settings process the preaching they hear. The author provides us with fascinating excerpts from the interviews themselves as we hear one interviewee after another share how he or she processes the sermon.

The other helpful section comprises Appendix B and Appendix C. In Appendix B, Allen captures in a two page concise chart the unique emphases of all three channels of listening. Insights about how each group perceives the purpose of preaching, how they perceive the preacher, and what each would consider a high point in a sermon, help us understand each of the groups in relation to others. Appendix C offers the kinds of statements about a sermon you will tend to hear from people who listen from each setting. A pastor, attuned to how people from each setting speak about preaching, could learn to discern when a sermon seems to have struck a chord with one particular way in which people process sermons – or where it missed them. That might help him in the future to think about those who process sermons in that way as he puts his sermon together.

A significant caution needs to be sounded in all of this, and to Allen's credit, he sounds it in several places in the book.   Knowing what each of these groups finds engaging in a sermon could lead to preaching what "itching ears want to hear."   Here is one place (among several) where Allen sounds this warning.

> The Introduction to this book contains brief descriptions of three people in the same congregation who hear the sermon on different settings - Ethel through ethos settings, Lorenzo through logos settings, and Pat through pathos settings. What can a preacher do in a single sermon, or across a season of preaching, to have a good opportunity to communicate in a significant way with all three of these listeners and with the myriad of other combinations of settings that are found in people in the typical congregation? Even more important than communicating in a significant way with a community in whom people manifest diverse listening settings is developing appeals in sermons that are consistent with the deepest theological convictions of the preacher and the historic Christian tradition to which preacher and congregation belong.
>
> This chapter first cautions preachers against using the findings in this volume simply to "give people what they want." Implicit in the vocation of the preacher is measuring all attempts to communicate through sermons against theological norms to determine the relative faithfulness of the sermon….
>
> When we outlined some of these findings at the public conference to which reference was made in chapter 1, a perceptive lay listener made the following observation in a question-and-answer session: "You have done a good job in describing what listeners want. But does that mean the preacher should give them what they want? What if what they want is unfaithful?" This listener raises an important issue for the preacher. Much of the data in this study is descriptive of how people listen, but a minister cannot stop with absorbing such data. For the preacher, of course, is called to interpret the gospel faithfully for the world of the congregation. The preacher cannot simply "give the people what they want" if what they want is theologically inappropriate. Preachers must consider the degree to which a listener comment reported in this study (or heard in another setting) is consistent or inconsistent with the deepest theological convictions of the denomination, congregation, or pastor. (96-97)

The discerning reader will also note some other cautions, but this time the cautions are not recognized by the author as such since these cautions are a reflection of the author's theological perspective. Ronald Allen describes his theological perspective, and some of its implications, in one of the book's end notes: "As a revisionary theologian in the process school of theology, I do not believe that, in a single apocalyptic cataclysm, God will end the present world, consign people to a fiery condemnation, and manifest the divine realm" (151). Process theology emphasizes human free will and postulates ongoing change in God as he is affected by the actions of his creatures. Salvation comes bit by bit as this world is transformed as more people see in Christ a new way to live so that they "repent" and live in keeping with his kingdom. Needless to say, a wide theological gap opens up between process theologians and Confessional Lutherans.

Where does this impact this otherwise very useful volume? When Allen is more focused on reporting the insights gained from those interviewed in this research project (chapters 2-4), there are often many useful insights shared that can be of great value to a Confessional Lutheran preacher. However, in chapter 5, when Allen begins to give specific suggestions and cautions to preachers in how to make use of what the research uncovered, the bias of his theological perspective becomes more pronounced. This reviewer often found himself at odds with Allen's conclusions. This reaches its pinnacle in chapter 6 as Allen seeks to apply the insights of the study to a particular text and a particular sermon. Having dispensed in this theology (and his text!) with any eschatological Last Day that ushers in eternal judgment for those living without faith in Jesus, Allen therefore dispenses in his sermon with anything that a Lutheran would call a proclamation of the gospel. Without any eternal judgment to be saved from, the concept of the vicarious atonement of Christ falls silent. In fact, except for some brief passing references, Jesus is almost completely absent from Allen's sermon, even though the sermon was preached during Advent and focused on the words of John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for Jesus.

Despite these very real flaws, the glimpse into the minds of listeners afforded by this study and the insight for the different settings through which people listen provide significant benefits for anyone who wants to proclaim law and gospel in ways that are able to capture the attention of a broad spectrum of hearers. For we are convinced, that once the Word is heard, the Spirit is at work powerfully in a way far beyond what any reference to logos, ethos, or pathos could ever explain!