

A Survey of the Phenomenological Research of Listening to Preaching

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Abstract: *The preaching literature overflows with normative definitions of preaching – preachers ought to do this, because this is what Paul, or Jesus did. The listener has been understood as a constant, whom the preacher sought to educate and persuade. Against this backdrop an interest developed in what listeners “do” with sermons. A new vein of homiletical research followed – namely the phenomenological study of what listeners “do” when hearing sermons. Within this vein is the Dutch/German practical theological research, highlighting how sermon themes, life situation, the preacher’s connectedness to the congregation, or how listeners’ personality type affect engagement with the sermon. Conversely there arose American liberal arts driven homiletics, utilizing communication or rhetorical frameworks to understand what listeners are doing. This paper reviews all the phenomenological research from both fronts, and attempts to summarize, highlight the recurring themes, and clarify the points of tension and difference therein.*

Introduction

Ronald J. Allen entitles his review of a recent trend of preaching as “The Turn to the Listener.”¹ In this article he tracks a widespread if not universal theoretical shift towards acknowledging the authority and reality of the listener as co-creator of meaning in preaching theory. This being the case, we might anticipate a groundswell of empirical studies into what listeners actually hear in sermons. Regrettably this is only true in an embryonic sense. This paper will review what empirical studies there have been, bringing together both the North American, often seminary-centered vein, and the continental European vein, where the study of the phenomenon of preaching in congregations and its effects is more widespread.²

Having surveyed the research, this paper will also identify the similarities – the recurring themes; as well as the differences – the points of tension. Finally, this paper suggests areas for further empirical study that might advance the discipline of homiletics, with particular reference to the insights gained from listeners.

Before commencing, one “thorny” matter requires our attention; namely the place of David Buttrick. We have not included the work of Buttrick in our review. Buttrick’s approach is often described as phenomenological, and though he distances himself from this term,³ it is an appropriate descriptor of his method. Buttrick asks what people hear and understand in the preaching event. Furthermore, he regularly makes claims about preaching based on researching listeners. For example: “Research indicates that in a reasonably good sermon, only about 35 percent of the language will be functional.... As far as we have been able to determine, any ‘this’ sentence [i.e. any sentence beginning with ‘This’] will *instantly* delete from consciousness.”⁴ This (pardon the pun) prescriptiveness, founded upon research, troubles fellow homileticians. Buttrick indicates that “though the technical information I offer does rest on some years of research, at the risk of dogmatism I neither describe nor document studies.”⁵ Others counter that given Buttrick’s reliance on empirical studies, the lack of documentation and verification weakens his thesis. Further they observe that there are

¹ Ronald J. Allen, “The Turn to the Listener,” *Encounter* 64.2, 2003.

² Otis C. Edwards Jr., “What Makes Preaching Effective,” *Anglican Theological Review* LXIX: 2, 1987, 181.

³ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1987), xii.

⁴ Buttrick, 211, emphasis his.

⁵ Buttrick, xi.

“successful” sermons that fall outside of Buttrick’s tenets and question whether consciousness is more pluralistic than Buttrick permits.⁶

Given Buttrick’s lack of empirical and methodological documentation, his intermittent over-reaching conclusions, and his controversial status as a researcher, we have not included his work in our survey. In any case, the phenomenological research of listeners of sermons, we suggest, began in Europe and not in North America.

Phenomenological studies of listeners

Sterk (1975), Preek en toehoorders [Sermons and Hearers]

In 1975 Sterk undertook a sociological study that explored connections between listeners’ demographics and expectations, and their evaluation and recollection. He interviewed 1231 German Catholics. He found that a positive evaluation of the sermon correlated positively with higher levels of church involvement, and being more advanced in years.⁷ Listeners appreciated sermons that were captivating, pleasant, credible, clear, and biblical in character.⁸ He also found that a positive attitude towards the preacher correlated with a positive reception, whereas familiarity with the preacher did not affect levels of appreciation.⁹ Finally he reports two thirds of listeners could not recall the essence of the sermon, even if asked soon after its completion.¹⁰

Daiber et al. (1980, 1983) Predigt und Hören: [Preaching and Hearing]

Also in the 1970s in Germany, Daiber et al. conducted a large study of 6000 listeners and 200 preachers in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church. The intent of the research was to test the effectiveness of two types of sermons, namely a personal-dialogical and a dogmatic-proclamation sermon. Listeners reported no single preference, appreciating the relevancy to life of the former, and the instructive and directional elements of the latter.¹¹

What listeners most valued was the sermon as a source of comfort, as providing direction, and a means through which to interpret life experiences.¹² Hearers viewed sermons more positively when the sermon was delivered well and with conviction when the content connected with the listener’s life experience and when listeners could find and explore identify within the message.¹³ They also found younger listeners to be more negative, and more educated listeners to be more critical.¹⁴

Van der Geest (1978), Du hast mich angesprochen: Die Wirkung von Gottesdienst und Predigt [Presence in the Pulpit: The Impact of Personality in Preaching]

Hans Van der Geest, a Dutch pastor, supervised other clergy undertaking Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) in a Swiss Hospital. His methodology was simple, if not rigorous. Clergy would preach in the hospital chapel, and the congregation of other CPE clergy and

⁶ Thomas G. Long, “The Significance of David Buttrick’s Homiletic,” *Homiletic* 12 No 2, 1987, 1–5; Allen, 182.

⁷ Johannes G.M. Sterk, *Preek en toehoorders: sociologische exploratie onder katholieke kerkgangers in di Bondsrepubliek Duitsland* (Nijmegen: Instituut voor Toegepaste Sociologie. 1975), 89–90, 218–19.

⁸ Sterk, 99, 218–223.

⁹ Sterk, 209.

¹⁰ Sterk, 187–90.

¹¹ Karl F. Daiber et al. *Predigt und Hören: Ergebnisse einer Gottesdienstbefragung. Band II: Predigten, Ananlsen und Grundausswertung* (München: Kaiser, 1983), 184, 303–11.

¹² Karl F. Daiber et al. *Predigt und Hören: Ergebnisse einer Gottesdienstbefragung. Band II: Predigten, Ananlsen und Grundausswertung* (München: Kaiser, 1980), 29.

¹³ Daiber et al. 1983, 182, 359.

¹⁴ Daiber et al., 1980, 43; 1983, 357.

laity would, after the service, provide feedback. Van der Geest recorded 200 such instances. His findings are not presented as conclusions drawn from research data, rather as reflections from the overall experience. He distills the following elements in what makes for effective preaching.

Sermons must be personal. Whatever else may follow, a sense of personal security in God's love is foundational. They must address the congregant as an individual, through the use of pronouns, content and body language. Van der Geest warns against the overuse of "we." Identification and empathy are achieved through "I" and "me" being like "you." This sense of relationship is more fundamental than content.¹⁵

Second, preaching must communicate hope. The preacher must take what is relevant from the text, and find balance between the "law" – means and hope for personal improvement; and "grace" – hope of fulfilment. This is achieved through what transactional analysis would frame as adult – adult communication, as opposed to parent – child.¹⁶

Third, a sermon must engage with people's thought, doubts, questions and insecurities. A preacher task is to bring understanding to these concerns. But it is an understanding borne out of lived faith. While questions may not be neatly answered, they are explained in terms of living with the consequences in light of God's sovereignty. A combination of image and metaphor, as well as content is required to communicate such truths.¹⁷

One can imagine how the themes of security, hope, and understanding in the face of doubt would be almost universal themes in a hospital setting. How universal are such themes in a congregational setting is not known. However, the observation that communicating security requires an interpersonal connection; and that preaching requires image and metaphor as well conceptual content correlates, as we shall see, with the findings of others.

Pieterse (1991) Gemeente en prediking [Congregation and preaching]

Researching in South Africa, nonetheless influenced by the continental Reformed Protestant Europe, Pieterse undertook a qualitative study exploring connections between congregation type and what he termed the "homecoming" of sermons. Listeners were identified as residing in one of three types of congregations: a shepherd-flock hierarchical church, a body-of-Christ diverse egalitarian church, or a hybrid of the above. Listeners from each congregation type reported regular encounter with Christ experiences through preaching that entailed thoughts, feelings, and motivation to act dimensions.¹⁸

What did vary by congregation type was the propensity to discuss the sermon afterwards. In shepherd-flock type church it was not customary to discuss sermons post event, whereas in body-of-Christ type churches sermons were commonly discussed. Further, when a more collective understanding of the sermon emerged as a result of discussion, corporate meaning-making correlated to more broad and long-term applications by the listener. Individual meaning-making as experienced by shepherd-flock listeners resulted in narrower band of personal applications.¹⁹ In other words, the context of hearing impacted the scope of meaning-making.

Carrell (2000), The Great American Church Survey

Lori Carrell, who holds a Ph.D. in speech communication, published *The Great American Church Survey*. Her assumptions are stated as follows: "The communication

¹⁵ Hans Van der Geest, *The Impact of Personality in Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 31–49.

¹⁶ Van der Geest, 90–103.

¹⁷ Van der Geest, 116–30.

¹⁸ Hendrik J.C. Pieterse, *Gemeente en prediking* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1991), 20–34.

¹⁹ Pieterse, 30–34.

perspective asserts that listeners and preachers are partners in interaction, mutually responsible for the co-creation of meaning during the sermon...²⁰ Her stated aim was to “compare and contrast preacher and listener perceptions of ... the ‘sermon.’”²¹

In terms of methodology, Carrell conducted in-depth interview with seventeen preachers and thirty listeners. From this ground work, Carrell settled on twenty-two open questions that she asked of 102 preachers, and eleven questions she asked of 479 of their listeners.

In broad terms Carrell reported the following: 31% have a generally negative reaction sermons, whereas 69% have a positive reaction; few listeners ever talk to the preacher about the message; a good sermon is described as relevant, organized, with content of substance; whereas a bad sermon is disorganized, has futile content and is poorly delivered; people tended view the sermon as having more spiritual impact than any other component of a service; listeners want their preachers to be God centred and biblical, relational, a model of spiritual vitality, and organized.²²

Regarding our thesis, Carrell reports that listeners regularly talk about their sermons, with family and friends ... but not with the preacher. Listeners perceive “sermons” to be monologues. Feedback to the preacher is rare. “Preachers are attempting to affect listeners, yet they are frequently protected from knowing many of the meanings their listeners have made from their sermons.”²³

In terms of expectations Carrell identifies several similarities and differences between preachers and listeners. There is consensus regarding the length of delivery, preparation, the importance of preaching, and the lack of conversation that occurs before and after. There is discrepancy in that most preachers aim to change their listeners in some way (54%), whereas most listeners desire inspiration (35%). Most preachers desire to teach biblical knowledge so that listeners will become more personally responsible for their own spiritual lives, whereas listeners expect their Scripture for the week. Most preachers sense their listeners want to be entertained, whereas listeners seek relevance and inspiration.²⁴

Carrell’s research leads her to conclude that sermons are not as effective or as dialogical as they could be. Her supposition is that with more dialogue greater effectiveness would be achieved.²⁵ Carrell offers very practical suggestions as to “how-to-do-this, before, during, and after the sermon.”²⁶ These conclusions, however, sit in tension with her findings that neither preachers nor listeners believe the sermon to be dialogical at present, and both appear to accept that as the status quo. Admittedly the most common reason given why listeners do not choose to converse with the preacher is that they believe the preacher is too busy or does not want our feedback (64%). Nonetheless the sermon-as-monologue expectation is shared and entrenched.²⁷

Carrell, like McClure and Rose, is also an advocate for preachers actively pursuing the perspectives of listeners and then incorporating them into their message.²⁸ Yet this too sits in tension with her finding that many congregants agree that preachers do have biblical

²⁰ Lori Carrell, *The Great American Church Survey* (Wheaton: Mainstay, 2000), 6.

²¹ Carrell, 6.

²² Carrell, 81–104.

²³ Carrell, 82.

²⁴ Carrell, 145–58.

²⁵ Carrell, 198–99.

²⁶ Carrell, 213–17.

²⁷ Carrell, 141.

²⁸ Carrell, 210; Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), 89–118, John S. McClure. *The Roundtable Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 48–58.

expertise, and that they ought to spend hours in preparation, both private and relational, prior to delivery.²⁹

In short Carrell's research and reflections upon her findings highlight an unresolved tension in contemporary preaching. There is a move in the literature towards framing the sermon as dialogue, towards underpinning it with a transactional model of communication, and towards regarding the congregants as an equal co-creator of meaning in preaching, both in preparation and in interpretation. It is argued this will make preaching more effective. Yet in practice this appears to be neither the expectation nor the experience of listeners not to mention preachers.

Allen, McClure et al. (2000), *Listening to Listeners*

Listening to Listeners is a collaborative North American study, overseen by homiletician Ronald J. Allen. In 2000, 263 lay people and their preachers, from 28 congregations in the Midwest USA were interviewed. From this research, four books and several journal articles have flowed.³⁰

The questions were arranged using the Aristotelian categories of *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*, and a grouping they termed "embodiment." Listeners were asked questions regarding their response to sermons in terms of: their perceptions of and relationships to the preacher, the content of the sermon and its reasoning, the feelings and affect of the sermon, and how the preacher embodied the message in his delivery and the impact thereof.³¹

The research validated Aristotle's categories as "central to understanding what happens in the hearts, minds, and wills of listener's when they hear sermons."³² Most listeners hear the sermon through one of these settings.³³ That is to say, some listen because of a relational connection with the preacher (*ethos*), some listen because of an engagement with the content and a desire to understand the point, and for others listening centers around an emotional engagement with feelings elicited by the sermons.³⁴ This affirmation is qualified by the observation that the dynamic between these three elements is more complex than Aristotle suggested and not simply cumulative.³⁵ Further, there is also a corporate dimension to the reception of sermons.³⁶ Nonetheless these findings bolster the renewed emphasis on rhetoric of Buttrick and Long contra Barth.³⁷

Herein, however, lies the central limitation to this research. Given that the Aristotelian categories were adopted prior to empirical interviews, the study has an implied verification methodology. The researches have subsequently become aware of this, and acknowledge this limitation.³⁸ Given this methodological orientation, Pleitzier stereotypes this study as asking "how the rhetorical qualities of the sermon work for the listener."³⁹ Allen's response would be two pronged. First, the Aristotelian categories have been affirmed, enhanced, and theologically reframed. Likewise the recent focus on the rhetorical nature of preaching, and the "turn to the listener" evident in homiletical theory have been verified. Further, some theological dimensions of listening have been articulated. With Calvin, listeners must use

²⁹ Carrell, 135–40.

³⁰ Ronald J. Allen, "Listening to Listeners: The Board Reflects Critically on the Study," *Encounter*, 68.3, 2007, 71.

³¹ John S. McClure et al., *Listening to Listeners*, St. Louis: Chalice, 2004) 181–82; Allen 2007, 70.

³² McClure, 138.

³³ Allen, 2007, 78.

³⁴ Ronald J. Allen, *Hearing the Sermon* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 7.

³⁵ McClure, 138.

³⁶ McClure, 9–10.

³⁷ McClure, 138.

³⁸ Allen, 2007, 75, 77.

³⁹ Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons*, (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010). 14.

their own reasoning to assess the sermonic content as to revelatory value.⁴⁰ Again, with the Reformers, Aristotle's notion of *pathos*, like Burke's notion of identification is akin to Calvin's notion of identification: we all (preacher and listeners) stand equal, fallen before God.⁴¹ In part this research affirms that listeners identify with the preacher (*pathos*), allowing the preacher to reason with biblical content (*logos*), then apply the scriptures so as to allow the congregational reframe their life choices (*ethos*).⁴²

Second, Allen points to the third and fourth volumes capacity to "identify broader trends in hearing perception with little explicit reference to the Aristotelian categories."⁴³ We shall note only six of the ten findings, being those pertinent to our study.

In this study, when listeners are asked what the purpose of preaching is, two thirds respond it is to teach or instruct. Less common but nonetheless prevalent answers include: applying teaching, to deepen listener's relationship with God, to inspire, and to unify God's people. Respondents value listening to sermons, and they expect to be taught and to grow.⁴⁴ As regards what the researchers termed "embodiment," listeners notice non-verbal cues and value features such as eye-contact, voice, dress, and gestures as points of connection. Greater connection facilitates greater engagement on the part of the listener.⁴⁵ Beyond the delivery, listener's value content that places the preacher as "one of us." Such a connection can be facilitated by disclosure from the pulpit, or experiences with preacher in and beyond other parts of church life.⁴⁶

Mulligan et al. note a threefold variegated response in listener's attitudes as to how being in a congregation shapes listening. Less than one third understand preaching as speaking to individual faith listeners, others perceive an aggregate of individual listeners, and yet others sense a communal identity. Those who hear the sermon as speaking to "me," struggled to answer questions about how preaching shapes a community. Those who hear sermons as speaking to an aggregate of individuals, talk about the sermons as moving individuals in a similar direction. Finally those who sense a communal hearing, also sense a communal responding, facilitated by the work of God's Spirit.⁴⁷ How being in congregation affects listening is an emergently salient yet imprecise theme.

Likewise, in sensing God's participation in the preaching event, respondents were divided between those who perceived God to be active, while others believe God is passive. On the active side, listeners may identify God as providing the theme or passage, inspiring the preparation, assisting listeners, or moving somehow among the people. On the passive side God is seen as present, or as listening, but not overruling the natural processes of communication.⁴⁸

Finally, in terms of outcomes, listeners respond that the outcome of preaching is a deepening of faith, or thought, feeling, and or a call to action. These answers are responses to any one sermon, whereas others highlight a cumulative effect to hearing regular preaching as a more apt description of their response to preaching. Disturbingly, Mulligan notes that at times listeners respond negatively to sermons, believing them to be untrue, misapplied, or disingenuous on the part of the preacher.⁴⁹

⁴⁰ McClure, 36.

⁴¹ McClure, 83.

⁴² McClure, 84–85.

⁴³ Allen, 2007, 76.

⁴⁴ Mary A. Mulligan et al., *Believing in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2005), 7–14.

⁴⁵ Mulligan, 46–61.

⁴⁶ Mulligan, 68.

⁴⁷ Mulligan, 127–45.

⁴⁸ Mulligan, 152–58.

⁴⁹ Mulligan, 169–89.

In sum, this research suggests that *ethos, logos, pathos*, embodiment and congregational culture are the five key elements to listening.⁵⁰ None of these themes are, however, new to homiletics. Beyond that, this research gives one the impression that within the preaching event there are any number of other variables (in *Believing in Preaching* they list ten), within which the listener can make any one of several responses. These variables are the product of recorded observations, grouped together (or codified), then commented upon. What the research fails to do is to reveal correlations or dynamic interactions between variables and responses. Beyond the Aristotelian categories, no theory of preaching or listening to preaching is offered.

McKinney (2004), View from the Pew

McKinney, daughter of a third generation preacher, writes from within the African-American Baptist tradition in the USA. Despite being a researcher with a doctorate in psychology, she fails to explicitly reveal any methodology. Instead, among other matters, we read that “*View from the Pew* is my thoughts and prayers for the preachers....”⁵¹ No doubt McKinney interviewed listeners, and at times she informs preachers what listeners want or need. At other times she shares from her own experiences, or draws on popular preaching literature, or scripture, or folklore, or even hymn lyrics in order to substantiate her point.

Given the above, it is difficult to prioritize themes in McKinney’s “research.” We propose that the following concepts are the most repeated and fundamental themes: preach the word,⁵² connect the head and heart,⁵³ pastorally connect with the congregation,⁵⁴ have organized material,⁵⁵ but preach to inspire.⁵⁶

Stark (2005), Proeven van de Preek [Samples of Preaching]

Stark undertakes to explore the sermon as the Word of God and its development within Protestant theology. As such much of his dissertation falls outside the interest of this study. He identifies sermons as containing six dimensions, namely the sermon, the listener, the (biblical) text, the preacher, the liturgical context, the ecclesial sociological context, and work of the Holy Spirit. Further, he offers a taxonomy of preaching based on two sets of variables. On the one hand preaching can be text driven, or application driven. On the other hand sermons can have a kerygmatic, a didactic, or a paracletic mode.⁵⁷

In his thirteenth chapter however, he presents the findings of his 246 surveyed listeners and their preachers. He reports the following. Most churchgoers enjoy church attendance and the sermon in particular. They do so, primarily desiring an “encounter with God”; believing God speaks to them through the sermon. That is, they understand the sermon to be the word of God. All sermon types may facilitate this, and Stark does not identify any one sermon type as more effective to this end. Having said that, preachers are focused towards the exposition of a text, listeners are focused towards the relevance of the text for everyday life.⁵⁸ One of the themes Stark identifies as warranting further research is the tension that exists between meaning being found in the text versus in the act of appropriation.

⁵⁰ Allen, 2004, 78.

⁵¹ Lora-Ellen McKinney, *View from the Pew* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson, 2004), xxviii.

⁵² McKinney, 7, 11, 17, 32–38.

⁵³ McKinney, 5, 9, 18, 27, 77–82.

⁵⁴ McKinney, 27, 44–45, 62–74.

⁵⁵ McKinney, 12–16, 36–37, 55.

⁵⁶ McKinney, 12–16, 36–37, 55.

⁵⁷ Franciska Stark, *Proeven van de Preek: Een praktisch-theologisch onderzoek naar de preek als Woord van God* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2005), 470.

⁵⁸ Stark, 245–56, 471–74.

Schaap-Jonker (2008), *before the face of God*

This very question is explored by another Dutch researcher, Schaap-Jonker, from a psychological perspective. She grounds her methodology within the epistemology of British psychoanalyst Winnicott, and his object relations theory. For Winnicott, objects are both “created” in the individual’s intrapsychic world, and “found” in the “external” world. The subjective and the objective come together in a transitional experience. Meaning is discovered and constructed by a knower in the very process of knowing. Yet the “other” that they come to know is a real object. The process of knowing involves an interaction between the subject and a real other.⁵⁹

Consistently, Schaap-Jonker contends that meaning is both created and found by listeners in sermons. Several variables influence the process of listening and meaning making. First, sermonic language is not merely referential; rather it is often transcendent and metaphoric. Second, the situational context: preaching occurs as part of a liturgy – call and response. Ritual creates a context in which we not only hear from God’s word, but become God aware. Third, preaching is an exercise in transformation, in exploring who we are at present and imagining what we might be. The subjective appropriation of the objective is sharpened in listening to sermons, because of the ethereal nature and themes of preaching.⁶⁰

Like Rose and McClure, all of this leads Schaap-Jonker to an interactional model of communication. Within the preaching event itself are three variables: the preacher, the content, and the congregation. These variables dynamically interact with each other. As a listener, the individual may appropriate the sermon as a whole (i.e. preacher, content and congregation dynamic), or any combination of these three factors. Further, the preaching event itself takes place in both a localized religious context, and a broader socio-cultural context, both of which affect the interpretation. Somehow, in all of this, the listener encounters God, hears from him, and finds personal comfort, support, transformation and or growth.⁶¹

Beyond a model of communication, Schaap-Jonker offers a five part model of listening. Listening involves: the *reception* of sensory impressions, the extent to which the listener pays *attention*, hearing *meaning* as evoked by the message and discovered within the hearer’s framework of reference, *reacting* to the sermon with agreement or disagreement, and *remembering* the sermons cognitive content and one’s emotional response to it.⁶² The concern of Schaap-Jonker’s research is how listener’s frameworks of reference affect attention, meaning, reaction and remembering.

In order to clarify a listener’s framework of reference, Schaap-Jonker draws upon Rizzuto’s theory of God image. Rizzuto, another psychiatrist seeking to build on Winnicott, draws a distinction between “God concept” and “God image.” A God concept is founded upon knowledge about God, is rational in nature, and can be comprehended without stirring the soul. A God image is the experience one has of God, resulting from one’s emotional responses, images, and memories of God. While neither Rizzuto nor Schaap Jonker seek to drive a wedge between these two, for both the notion of “God image” is primary and highlights the personalized and constructed nature of understanding God.⁶³

Schaap-Jonker research is both quantitative and qualitative. In the former she used questionnaires with 460 participants from three Dutch Protestant congregations. One questionnaire regarded the sermon/service, another regarded God image, another was a

⁵⁹ Hanneke Schaap-Jonker, *Before the face of God* (Zurich: Lit Verlaag, 2008), 47–48.

⁶⁰ Schaap-Jonker, 72–81.

⁶¹ Schaap-Jonker, 81–92.

⁶² Schaap-Jonker, 92–98.

⁶³ Schaap-Jonker, 107–09.

personality type test (NEO-FFI), another measured the affect (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule), and two other surveys.⁶⁴

Respondents found a sermon to be most meaningful when it was relational. By relational Schaap-Jonker means listeners attained a sense of encounter or connection with God, hearing from God, or sensing prospects beyond the limits of life. Those with a God as support image heard the sermon as more encouraging; whereas those with anxiety towards God were left feeling more guilt, shame, and anxiety.⁶⁵

Regarding the content, a similar pattern to finding the sermon as meaningful emerged. Those with a positive God image heard positive content, and those with anxiety about God heard more negative content. Positive and negative God images were found not just to be individual constructs, but part of localised congregational theology.⁶⁶

The second highest correlate to finding meaning was listener attention. Attention capacity, however, did not correlate to personality type.⁶⁷ The single most effective predictor of attention is attitude towards the preacher.⁶⁸

In the second part of her study, Schaap-Jonker switched to a qualitative methodology, interviewing seven respondents, in order to better understand the process of individual meaning construction. From this research, Schaap-Jonker identifies three stages of meaning making. First there is *focusing* – where listeners concentrate on the content. Second, there is *dialogizing* – where listeners reflect on the sermon in relation to their own situation. Third, there is *actualizing* – where listener's make the message concrete in their own context.⁶⁹

Of the seven respondents, two people heard the same sermon, another two a second sermon, and yet another pair a third sermon. When asked to recall sermonic themes, the persons who heard the same sermon gave different answers. For Schaap-Jonker:

This implies that the sermon does not automatically lead to an unequivocal meaning on the level of content; although what people hear is based on the words spoken by the preacher, results show that hearing is in fact a selective process in which hearers make meaning of specific words or fragments of the sermon while leaving aside other parts.⁷⁰

However when meaning is correlated with personality type, strong links emerge.

Persons who have similar personality structures report comparable themes, even though the sermons they heard were different, delivered by different preachers, concerned different Scriptural passages, and sometimes during different times in the ecclesiastical year.⁷¹

While Schaap-Jonker frames her research within the subjective-objective tension in Winnicott's theory, her methodology and results highlight the ways in which listener's construe messages, and not the reverse.

⁶⁴ Schaap-Jonker, 132–41.

⁶⁵ Schaap-Jonker, 204–09, 222.

⁶⁶ Schaap-Jonker, 210–14.

⁶⁷ Schaap-Jonker, 223.

⁶⁸ Schaap-Jonker, 210.

⁶⁹ Schaap-Jonker, 240–48.

⁷⁰ Schaap-Jonker, 264.

⁷¹ Schaap-Jonker, 265.

Pleizier (2010), Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons

Also writing in Holland, and asking the question “what do listeners do with sermons?”⁷² is Theo Pleizier. Consistent with his grounded theory methodological approach, Pleizier commences with a descriptive (as opposed to normative) definition of preaching as “an instance of both religious and human communication.”⁷³ That is, preaching combines a human-human(s) and a divine-human dynamic.

As regards the human-human(s) encounter, preaching is a social act, which contains three dimensions. First, despite being delivered as a monologue, it is pseudo-discourse. The listener is a silent but necessary partner. Second, it has shared intentionality. Both listener and preacher are there for like reasons: to rehearse the historical Christ event, to participate in a common faith sharing moment, and to be called to live a particular life. Third, this involves activity on the part of the listener. Listeners are not isolated individuals as receptacles of truth. Rather they are active participants who listen in community as part of a preaching event.⁷⁴

As regards the divine-human encounter, Pleizier notes that neither preacher intentionality nor listener consciousness sufficiently describes the preaching event. Preaching exists in three temporal modes. The past Christ-event entails a kerygmatic dynamic that must be pronounced, the exploration of the consequences of this in the light of present context requires an interpretative dynamic, and the eschatological dynamic must anticipate the future and implications for current trajectories.⁷⁵

These three dynamics find expression in a preaching event that is, to use Pleizier’s descriptor, “religious”: that is, preacher and listener suppose God is present and active. Thus the preacher is more than communicator; functioning as prophet or performer. The preacher’s words carry more than concepts, they have illocutionary function (c.f. Searle) and force beyond the preachers authority as a human communicator.

Pleizier, flowing from his research, generates a theory of listening to preaching as involving three stages. The first is “opening up to listening.” The listener’s involvement in the preaching event begins even before the sermon does. The listener needs to be ready to listen, to receive.⁷⁶

Three factors will contribute to this readiness. The flow of the service, or the liturgy, will help position the congregant as being ready to listen. Different local churches will possess differing traditions and cues. The liturgy, outside the control of the individual, gives cues to the listener to put other things aside and prepare to pay attention. Second, the “situated receptivity” or expectations, fears, concerns, or distractions that flow from everyday life will position the listener as attentive to certain themes, and less receptive to others. When external concerns are more trivial, the listener is more open to the preacher raised themes. When external concerns are substantial and do not correlate to the sermon, the listener may be distracted. Third, the extent to which an individual listener affiliates with the congregation within which they are seated also determines receptivity. This affiliation may be both relational and confessional. Higher affiliation correlates with greater receptivity. Liturgy, life situation, and congregational affiliation all combine to determine the listeners’ receptivity to the impending message.⁷⁷

The second phase of listening in Pleizier’s theory is called “dwelling in the sermon.” Preaching events are more than just listening to lectures. According to Pleizier’s research,

⁷² Pleizier, 12.

⁷³ Pleizier, 31.

⁷⁴ Pleizier, 39–56.

⁷⁵ Pleizier, 58–59.

⁷⁶ Pleizier, 157–60.

⁷⁷ Pleizier, 160–84.

listeners describe preaching events as being related to God; as providing a divine perspective on human existence.

To achieve this, a sermon must perform several functions. It must provide a meditative environment in which a listener can sit and explore. A sermon ought to be a pleasurable experience. Apart from any future functionality, preaching is an event in and of itself, in which a listener sits, within a community of faith, and takes pleasure in the hearing. Listening is thus communal religious enactment where the beliefs of this local community are rehearsed. Listening is also influenced by possible outcomes. Listener's expect practical instruction and to reframe life as a result of the message.⁷⁸

Dwelling in a sermon will produce two outcomes. Listeners will arrive at religious perceptions as a result of the sermons "aboutness." Their attention is focused so that they become aware of something, something they sense God has said or might be saying to them. Second, listeners will identify with the sermon. They will have a sense of – "Yes, that is what I believe." There is an affiliation with the content: with words, images, illustrations. A relational affiliation is also possible: "Yes, this is what we corporately believe, and they (the preacher) are one of us."⁷⁹

The third stage of the hearing sermons Pleizier labels as "actualizing faith." "[L]isteners are very much interested in the preacher's opinion, listening foremost entails how they view themselves, their situation, even the world, in terms of God, the Christian tradition, and the Scriptures."⁸⁰ Faith is actualized in both punctiliar illuminative moments of insight, and through long-term regular exposure to gospel themes. The content of the insight may have to do with the present, or the eschatological. Finally the insight may be affirmative and encouraging, or critical causing reappraisal.⁸¹

Pleizier has provided a fresh, research driven, ground up theory of the listener's function in the preaching event. Listeners are necessarily "religiously" involved in a preacher-listener-divine encounter, and Pleizier provides an account of how so. His research affirms and gives further insight into how preaching is conversational (pseudo-discourse) and communal (c.f. Rose and McClure). His reaffirmation of the sermon as aesthetic as well as functional, and the sermon as an exploration of past, present and future is timely. His metaphor of preaching as a temporary house for kingdom citizens is powerful to say the least.

Lorensen and Gaarden (2013): Listeners as Authors in Preaching

Gaarden and Lorensen are the most recent to engage in phenomenological research of listeners. Studying the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, also using a grounded theory methodology, they are concerned to understand how listeners appropriate sermons. What does it mean, as Paul writes, that "faith comes from hearing" (Rom 10:17)? As opposed to Pleizier, Gaarden and Lorensen explicitly reject the assumption of a religious dimension to listening to sermons. Their stated concern is to understand the listening event as a phenomenon, which occurs within certain theological convictions.⁸²

Gaarden and Lorensen describe listeners as creators of meaning in dialogue with the sermon. Listener's interact with their impressions of the preacher as a person, the content of the sermon, and interpret both within the framework of their own thoughts and experiences. This listener's role is so significant that Gaarden and Lorensen report: "What remained in the memory of churchgoers was not what had actually been said from the pulpit, but their

⁷⁸ Pleizier, 185–207.

⁷⁹ Pleizier, 208–51.

⁸⁰ Pleizier, 253.

⁸¹ Pleizier, 253–70.

⁸² Marianne Gaarden, & Marlene R. Lorensen, "Listeners as Authors in Preaching: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives, *Homiletic* 38.1, 2013, 28–45.

personal meaning production, activated by dialogical interaction involving the listener's own life situation and existential reflections.... *churchgoers are to be understood as the primary authors of preaching and that preachers have the role as co-authors.*"⁸³

At this point Gaarden and Lorensen frame their findings within the epistemological theorizing of Mikhael Bakhtin, an early-to-mid-twentieth century Russian philosopher. Bakhtin proposes that "understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other."⁸⁴

Returning to their empirical findings, Gaarden and Lorensen detail three modes in which listeners engage in sermon engagement and meaning construction. The first and most frequent is "associative interaction." In this mode, the sermon kindles a train in the listener's mind. The listener then makes associations of like content from within their own frameworks and experiences. By way of example, one listener, after hearing a sermon on justification, began thinking about the Islamic concept of justification. Though not mentioned by the preacher, the listener reported this thought as part of their account of the sermon. Such activity on the part of listener was "common."⁸⁵

Gaarden and Lorensen conclude that "the empirical findings do not support an existentialistic tradition of interpretation deriving from Rudolph Bultmann or Søren Kierkegaard, which emphasises the encounter with the Gospel as a moment of personal decision making. Instead, the encounter activated a series of associations in a search for personal meaning."⁸⁶ Though not mentioned, we take it that Gaarden and Lorensen would be even less inclined to accept a Barthian account of encounter with Christ, or a positivist account of an encounter with truth as revealed in God's Word as fitting their data.

The second mode of listening identified by Gaarden and Lorensen, they entitled "critical interaction." In this mode, listeners engage a critical voice in response to the sermon. From within their own preconceptions and experiences, listeners chose to disagree with the preacher's interpretation of the biblical text. Listener's tended to hold a belief that the Bible was true; their disagreement was with the preacher's interpretation of the Bible.⁸⁷

The last mode of listening Gaarden and Lorensen term as "contemplative interaction." Contemplation is described as "a state of being without words"; instead of... having a dialogue with God... she can be said to dwell in God."⁸⁸ As Gaarden and Lorensen acknowledge, the listener can be said at this point to have moved beyond dialogue with the sermon, to creating new, transcendent meanings, stimulated in the first instance by the sermon. (2013, 41–42)

By way of a final metaphor, Gaarden and Lorensen conclude that listener's are the authors and creators of meaning, whereas preachers are the "interrupters" of human consciousness, initiating new lines of thought, to be constructed in the mind of the listener.⁸⁹ Given that congregation members have divergent frameworks of reference, the interpretation of preaching is best understood as a polyphonic event.⁹⁰

Given that the stated aim of this research is to understand "How do churchgoers listen to sermons when they participate *in services*,"⁹¹ it is disconcerting to discover that "eight of

⁸³ Gaarden and Lorensen, 31; emphasis theirs.

⁸⁴ As cited by Gaarden and Lorensen, 32.

⁸⁵ Gaarden and Lorensen, 34.

⁸⁶ Gaarden and Lorensen, 35.

⁸⁷ Gaarden and Lorensen, 36–37.

⁸⁸ Gaarden and Lorensen, 41.

⁸⁹ Gaarden and Lorensen reference Barth as proposing this notion of preacher as interrupter, 45. It must be said that they develop this theme in directions antithetical to Barth.

⁹⁰ Gaarden and Lorensen, 44–45.

⁹¹ Gaarden and Lorensen, 28; 45, emphasis mine.

the 29 interviews were informants listening to a radio-transmitted worship.”⁹² Given their engagement and critique of Pleizier’s research,⁹³ Gaarden and Lorensen methodology demonstrates a lack of appreciation of how sensing being part of a congregation influences listeners.

Whereas some research highlights the effect of sermons, Gaarden and Lorensen’s research underscores what listeners do with sermons – how sermons provide fuel which stimulates dialogue. They helpfully identify three common means by which listener’s construct meaning: by association, by critical interaction, and by contemplation. We await Gaarden’s forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation for a theological reflection on the role of the Spirit of God in preaching and listening to preaching.

Distilling themes in the research

Effect versus audience research

Pleizier, in his brief summary of the literature, offers something of a taxonomy. Research can be divided into effect research, which asks “what do (properties of) sermons do to listeners,” and audience research, which asks “what do listeners do to sermons?”⁹⁴ This is framework with deep roots in philosophy, such as subject-object discussions of Kant and Hegel, and more recently in hermeneutical consensus around the two horizons of coming to knowledge, following Gadamer and Thiselton. Though Pleizier references neither of these traditions, he does acknowledge that neither effect nor audience research is unaware of the other, and the complexity of communication. Rather, both are vying for what is termed to “locus of control” of meaning.⁹⁵

Pleizier identifies among the effect type researchers: Sterk – for whom involvement in church life correlates to sermon appreciation (behaviourism); Daiber et al. – for whom sermon appreciation correlates to relevancy and practical application (communication); and Allen et al. – for whom the rhetorical nature of the sermon influences the listener. Conversely, Pleizier identifies others as having audience research partiality: Stark – in that listeners identify the sermon as the word of God,⁹⁶ Schaap-Jonker – for whom listeners create meaning as a function of personality type, and Allen et al. – whom in their third volume acknowledge that different listeners respond in diverse ways to certain dimensions of the preaching event.⁹⁷

We suggest that the distinction between effect and audience research is of use, but that its use is limited and too forced. All researchers acknowledge both elements. While some may be characterised as locating the locus of control to one side (Schaap-Jonker, Gaarden and Lorensen); other research would point to both without reference to weight (e.g. Pleizier).

Recurring themes

Several categorical groupings emerge from the research as surveyed. Most researchers report that listeners take pleasure in hearing sermons (Sterk, Diaber et al., Carrell, and Stark),

⁹² Gaarden and Lorensen, 37 footnote 31.

⁹³ Gaarden and Lorensen, 29.

⁹⁴ Pleizier, 12.

⁹⁵ Pleizier, 13.

⁹⁶ One suspects Stark would reject this representation of his research. As a Reformed Protestant, he believes the listeners hear the sermon as the word of God because it is the word of God as preached (or modernized would be his term), flowing from the word of God as recorded in Scripture, 470. Having said that Stark does acknowledge that it is “*the listener* who attaches the predicate “Word of God” to the sermon”, 471. The predicament arises, not so much as a consequence of reading or misreading Stark, but because of the dichotomization between effect and audience research.

⁹⁷ Pleizier, 12.

and reflect a sense of having engaged with God (Stark, Schaap-Jonker, Pleizier). When researchers sought to contrast the capacity of sermon type to elicit a sense of connection with God (Stark, Diaber et al.), they found no evidence of any one type as more effective than another. When researchers aim to identify what listeners rated as agreeable content, the themes of being relevant (Sterk, Vander Geest, Diaber, Carrell, Allen et al. and Stark), providing comfort, encouragement, or inspiration (Diaber et al., Vander Geest, Schaap-Jonker, McKinney, Allen et al.), organized (Sterk, Carrell, McKinney), personal (Diaber, Vander Geest), finding balance between logos, ethos, and pathos (Allen, McKinney), and biblical (Sterk, Carrell, Stark, McKinney) were common. Inability to recall content is not synonymous with a devalued sermon (Sterk, Pleizier).

Several studies touched upon the role of the preacher. Partiality to the preacher correlates with attention (Schaap-Jonker), engagement (Gaarden and Lorensen) and sermon enjoyment (Sterk). The role of the preacher is critical in creating a sense of conviction and embodiment (Diaber et al., Allen et al.), connection (Allen et al.), and allowing listeners to explore profound questions such as identity and doubt (Diaber et al., Vander Geest). Listeners at times identify the preacher as “one of us,” increasing sermon receptivity (Allen et al., Pleizier). However, a lack of personal knowledge of the preaching is not an impediment to listening (Sterk). Furthermore, disagreement with the preacher over textual interpretation can even aid listener engagement (Gaarden and Lorensen).

Only two studies sought to identify stages and or processes of listening, namely Schaap-Jonker and Pleizier. Both arrived at analogous conclusions. Both offer three phases of sermon engagement, including focusing or opening up, followed by dialoguing or dwelling in the sermon, and finally actualizing the sermon.

Several studies sought to understand the variable of context. Pieterse found that congregation type shapes post-sermon conversation, which expands the range of perceived sermon application. Mulligan found that one-third of listeners perceive the sermon as being addressed to an aggregate of individuals, and another one third to a communal identity. Schaap-Jonker found that salient themes may be the result of localised theology as well as individual personal traits. Pleizier found that listeners with higher levels of congregational affiliation are more receptive. Both Schaap-Jonker and Pleizier found that personal life context situated listeners to be either attentive, selective or distracted.

Differences, tensions, and gaps in the research

While there is some convergence apparent in the literature, several core elements of listening to sermons remain unclear. Foremost is the question: How dialogical is the sermon? Carrell sets the parameters for this discussion. On the one hand she is ideologically committed, as a communication theorist, to “listeners and preachers [as] partners in interaction, mutually responsible for the co-creation of meaning during the sermon.”⁹⁸ She concludes that preaching is not as effective as it could be, and affirms her assumption that greater interaction is the solution.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, she concedes that sermon as monologue is shared entrenched supposition of preacher and listener alike.¹⁰⁰

Schaap-Jonker’s research positions listeners as selectors and constructors of meaning, rather than co-creators. The preacher delivers a message, containing a raft of themes. The listener retains salient themes and disregards others, depending on their personality, God image, and affective state. The relationship is more sequential than dialogical.

Pleizier also proposes a modified form of dialogue, which he labels as “religious involvement” and “pseudo-conversational discourse.” By religious involvement he means

⁹⁸ Carrell, 6.

⁹⁹ Carrell, 210.

¹⁰⁰ Carrell, 141.

that the listener picks up on the topic or “aboutness” of the sermon, identifies with the concepts and or the preacher, listens to preacher’s opinion, and somehow in all of this attributes illuminative moments as God having spoken. By “pseudo-conversational discourse” Pleizier recognises that sermons are not conversation proper, where there must at least two complete turns.¹⁰¹ But nor are they monologue. Sermons assume a present and ongoing involvement on the part of listener, they assume a shared purpose, they assume a listening community with the capacity for ongoing conversation, and they assume the capacity for divine-human encounter.¹⁰²

Gaarden and Lorensen take an alternate view from Pleizier. They understand *a priori* theological convictions of God as active in the communication event are contrary to grounded theory methodology.¹⁰³ They bracket the role of God. Instead they encounter listeners who hear, engage, interpret, disagree, and add - in effect constructing idiosyncratic versions of the sermon. As with Schaap-Jonker, sermons are more so sequential than dialogue.

If there was perceived merit in increasing the sense of sermon as dialogue, one avenue for possible further research could be the roundtable preaching as proposed by Rose and McClure. One can see how, just as personality type affects listener selectivity, so the personality type of the preacher could limit preaching themes. Roundtables are thus tools to help preachers hear more biblical themes than the limited ones that may flow from their own God image, personality or affective state. Does roundtable sermon preparation lead to more effective sermons because it includes conversational turns in the groundwork? Will helpful associations and possible objections be identified in the preparation, and incorporated accordingly? Does roundtable preaching ensure that the theologizing and application of sermons is appropriately localised? Do listeners find roundtable generated sermons more engaging, relevant, and practical?

A second and related point of tension regards meaning construction. Gaarden and Lorensen advocate for sermons as polyphonic events. Schaap-Jonker suggests meaning construction is a function of preconceptions. Conversely, Pleizier proposes that, as both preacher and listener have a shared intentionality, namely to rehearse the Christ event and explore its implications, that will facilitate some convergence of meaning. Put another way, there is an “aboutness” of the text that both preacher and listener are seeking to understand.

This tension highlights a gap in the research. Pleizier suggests that what listeners hear could be assessed against the intentions of the preacher, or the text.¹⁰⁴ While it may not be possible to validate all readings of the text or the sermon, we would certainly wish to falsify some. Do listeners hear what the preacher is trying to say? Do they hear what the preacher is trying to say about the biblical text? Or do listeners use the sermon as a departure point from which to construct idiosyncratic readings? Are divergent contemplations listening? Can we, at times, pronounce a listening as incorrect? And if so, what factors correlate with any given listener, sermon, or congregation and incorrect hearings of the message.

Deep theological and hermeneutical convictions undergird these questions. Rather than avoidance, phenomenological research coupled with practical theology provides a grounded alternate path into exploring such matters.

A third point of tension in the research is the apparent non-correlation of sermon reception with sermon structure. Stark and Diaber et al. claim that, when they contrasted differing sermon types, they found no evidence of different outcomes. Yet the most recurrent

¹⁰¹ That is, the preacher talks, and the congregation speaks back. See Pleizier, 46–47, for greater analysis of the communication theory and terminology.

¹⁰² Pleizier, 44–45.

¹⁰³ Gaarden and Lorensen, 29 footnote 8.

¹⁰⁴ Pleizier, 289.

theme among the researchers was strong evidence for relevant sermons as being more meaningful. This raises questions about types of sermons.

Pleizier asserts on logical and theological (and not on empirical) grounds that sermons exist in one of three temporal modes. Either they can be set in past, that is the kerygmatic cross event; in the present exploration of the consequences of the cross; or in the future eschatological dimension of anticipation and its relation to the present trajectory. More to the point, for Pleizier all preaching ought to cover all three modes, and preaching in the present mode requires interpretation on the part of the preaching. The preaching event is not merely a rehearsal of sin and the cross, but an interpretation of the gospel and its implications for today, both for preachers and faithful hearers.¹⁰⁵

Stark proposes six types of preaching. All of them, however, speak to the present, to use Pleizier's modes. Likewise, Daiber et al. contrasted personal-dialogical with dogmatic-proclamation sermons. Both also have an element of present mode. It is possible then, that if relevancy correlates with finding meaning, that past focused sermons without relevant present application are less well received. This matter could be an avenue for further research.¹⁰⁶

A fourth avenue for research, related to the above, could be the exploration of congregation types. Pieterse found evidence that congregation type had no influence on the listener's sense of being close to God. It did, however, affect and the breadth of perceived application. Mulligan et al. reports three levels of awareness of being part of a congregation, and connects this awareness to a breadth of application. Those with a greater sense of congregation as one entity, of which they are a part, hear communal application and perceive communal response; whereas those who perceive the congregation as a conglomerate of individuals perceive more individual engagement. Pleizier reports that at each of his three stages of listening, listeners sense they part of a congregation.

The above findings suggest that being-part-of-a-congregation awareness is a factor in listening. At the very least it affects the capacity to perceive communal applications and responses. But it is unclear how else congregation awareness affects listening, and why people have differing levels of awareness? Is the awareness a product of individual perception, or is congregation type also a factor? Using the categories generated by recent empirical research into congregation types, as opposed to the categories suggested by Pieterse, may bring greater clarity to this question. If there is such a phenomenon as congregation type, it is conceivable that a correlation between sermonic themes and congregation type will increase listener receptivity.

A fifth discrepancy in the research regards the place of feelings. For Schaap-Jonker the affective dimension of God image is critical to understanding what listeners do with sermons. Likewise, the North American study by Allen et al., finds pathos to be a critical variable. Vander Geest concludes an effective sermon engages a person's thoughts, doubts, questions and insecurities. Yet Pleizier, whose grounded methodology ought to detect key elements to sermon receptivity, identifies no codes with high levels of emotional content (except when related to worship).¹⁰⁷ Both Schaap-Jonker and Pleizier interview similar congregations – Reformed Protestant Churches in Holland. So why this discrepancy in what

¹⁰⁵ Pleizier, 58–61.

¹⁰⁶ It is also possible that preaching that is not encouraging, given that encouraging correlates to finding meaning, might be less effective. However Schaap-Jonkers research highlights that both God as support and anxiety about God images can resonate with different listeners, 210–14. Pleizier takes an alternate path. He suggests that sermons that are too encouraging are more like self help than preaching, and sermons that are too confronting become legalistic. He advocates for balance, 283. One could thus also test the sermon receptivity of self help preaching, and hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching. Clearly there are precedents of both. As a first step though, it would be valuable to establish if any one sermon types or structure does limit receptivity. This finding would sit in contrast to both Stark and Daiber et al.

¹⁰⁷ Pleizier, 301–03.

would appear to be a fundamental concern? What is the place of emotions in listening to sermons? Further research could bring greater clarity.

A possible explanation is that the categories of logos, ethos and pathos, are not explicit categories that exist in the consciousness of listeners. So when Pleizier, utilizing a grounded theory approach, asks listeners open ended questions, listener's responses do not reveal recollections of sermons as being so catalogued. Having said, when researchers, such as Allen et al., inquire after reflections within logos, ethos and pathos categories, listeners oblige and report accordingly. Expressed another way, it is possible that listeners are conscious of being either engaged, or not engaged, and do not, in the first instance, differentiate between modes of engagement. When asked, listeners readily use the traditional rhetorical categories. When left implicit, such rhetorical categories are not self evident to listeners.

Understanding the phenomena of listening to sermons is an emerging discipline. While significant insights have been gained, any of the above suggestions would advance our homiletical understanding of what transpires when listening to sermons.

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