

**Sermons That Have Changed My Life:
A Qualitative Study of the Factors in Sermons that Elicit Change**

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Abstract: *Can people be changed by sermons? This study focuses on the impact sermons can have on people's lives, and the factors involved. A qualitative study was conducted among a group of sermon listeners. The results show that all the respondents experienced a change in their lives through sermons. Moreover, the respondents show remarkable unity in their views about which factors in the sermons caused them to change. The results illustrate that the connection between the message of the sermon and the actual question, the listener's challenge or field of interest, and the preacher's ability to communicate in a surprising and novel way are key factors in a sermon to elicit change.*

Introduction

With the revival of the speech as a mode of presentation, persuasion research on the aspects and results of oral communication needs to be intensified. Because sermons are and continue to be a mode of mass communication, there is considerable scope to learn about their effects on people. However, insights into how sermons can influence people remain limited. Numerous books and articles have been published reflecting the opinions of homileticians, but research into this realm is remarkably scarce. In this paper, we contribute to effect-research in homiletics, and to understanding the reasons why certain sermons influence people more powerfully than others. The aim of our research is to gain a better understanding of the factors in sermons that play a role in influencing peoples' lives.

Our research question is as follows: when people recall sermons that have influenced their lives, which factors play a prominent role? To answer this question, we conducted a qualitative study among respondents from various denominational backgrounds. The following section discusses the theoretical background of the study, and is followed by a discussion of the design and results of our study.

Theoretical Background

There has been an ongoing debate about the extent to which sermons can change people. Normally, researchers tend to underestimate the change effect of sermons. At best, what a sermon can do is reinforce already existing ideas. Abbey has noted that people tend to filter messages that agree with the positions they already hold.¹ Nye, Savage, and Watts have

¹ Merrill R. Abbey, *Communication in Pulpit and Parish* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

concluded, “We cannot make someone change their attitude or behavior.”² At the same time, homiletics refuses to accept these notions and persists in claiming that communication in general and sermons in particular not only have the duty but also the power to change people.³ Carrell has stated that effective sermons express a clear call for change, are well organized, delivered well (i.e., with emotion and connection), and connect the content of messages with the needs of listeners.⁴

The impact of communication does not depend solely on the speakers’ choices or philosophy; the audience plays an important role, too.⁵ Geertz speaks of symbolic webs of significance among any given group of people who gather on a regular basis and thus develop a shared culture. These webs of significance should be studied and interpreted to gain an understanding of the influencing factors in the given subculture.⁶ Every preacher needs to find a way to bridge the cultural gap between the Bible and contemporary society. However, Long sets aside the need for analyzing the congregation, as he presupposes that preachers are deeply embedded in the church culture, and are thus unable to distance or disconnect themselves from it. Although Long stresses the importance of being connected with the public, he claims that this connection has already come about in a natural fashion.⁷

The New Homiletic movement, with its focus largely on the form and content of sermons, advocates a form of communication that leads to learning and experiencing new things.⁸ At the same time, hearers’ contextual settings have attracted great interest.⁹ The preacher-hearer relationship demands both dissonance and consonance. If there is a lack of consonance, hearers will not feel inclined to connect with preachers and be persuaded by them. Where there is a lack of dissonance, surprise, or even conflict in the interaction, there will not be adequate grounds for effective communication. When probing the effect of communication on hearers, the aforementioned factors need to be considered, illuminating aspects that may influence preaching.

Method

Semi-structured interviews

Since we were primarily interested in learning about the effect of sermons on participants’ lives and why such an effect, if any, occurred through that particular sermon, a qualitative approach was identified to be most appropriate. Interviews with participants lasted 90 minutes. All of the interviews were audiotaped by permission. The participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. During the interviews, participants

² Rebecca Nye, Sara Savage and Fraser Watts, *Psychology for Christian Ministry* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 135.

³ For example Andy Stanley and Lane Jones, *Communicating for a Change: Seven keys to Irresistible Communication* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2008).

⁴ Lori Carrell, “Communication Training for Clergy: Exploring Impact on the Transformative Quality of Sermon Communication,” *Communication Education* (58, 2009), 15-34.

⁵ For example, Hanneke Schaap-Jonker, *Before the Face of God: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Meaning of the Sermon and the Hearer’s God Image, Personality and Affective State*, Vol. 6 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008).

⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

⁷ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

⁸ David J. Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching in the 21st Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

⁹ Rochelle L. Cathcart, “Culture Matters: How Three Effective Preachers (Tim Keller, Rob Bell, Father Pfleger) Engage Culture in the Preaching Event,” *Trinity Journal* (Vol. 33, 2012), 209-222.

were invited to share their history of sermons to find the general number of sermons that each participant would have heard in his or her lifetime.

We started the interviews by asking the participants to describe the history of their church attendance in general, and church services and sermons in particular. Then we asked participants about their expectations when attending a service and listening to a sermon. Next, we focused on the sermons that participants could recall, which enabled us to identify which sermons stood out from the hundreds of sermons that the participants had heard in their lifetimes. We asked the participants to describe the sermons that had made a lasting impression on them. This helped us gain insights into the reasons these sermons were recollected. Afterwards, we focused on the sermons that had changed the participants' lives. Not only were the participants asked what sermons had changed their lives, but also how their lives were affected and why they thought the changes came about through those sermons. In addition, participants were asked about the role that these sermons played in their lives on a regular basis. In this way, we were able to gain an understanding of the long-term effects that sermons could have on people, and investigate how deeply sermons could influence peoples' lives. During the interviews, the main focus was invariably on *why* and *how*: why did a particular sermon result in a particular outcome? How exactly did it stand out?

Participants

A total of 15 participants were asked to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. To be invited, the participants met four required selection criteria. First, we aimed at people who had attended church for a considerable number of years; this would prevent the participants from simply sharing their recollections of the last two sermons they had heard, and would allow them to delve into the experiences that had really shaped their lives. Second, participants were required to represent a broad denominational spectrum; this would prevent the findings of our study from being limited to a certain branch or subculture of a church, and would rather reflect wider congregants. Third, we strived for a balance between males and females. Finally, we selected the participants from three age groups: early (aged 20–30), which comprised six participants; middle (aged 31–49), which included five participants, and late (aged 50–70), which involved four participants. This age range gave us the opportunity to explore whether sermons have had any long-term impact. All of the invited participants agreed to take part in this study. The participants were not rewarded for their participation.

All the participants (nine men and six women) attended church on a regular, weekly basis for multiple years. The participants were between 20 and 68 years old (mean age = 38 years). The participants came from ten different church backgrounds, from Catholic to Dutch Reformed, Evangelical, and Pentecostal.

Data analysis procedure

All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 146 pages of text. Using a multistep content-analytic procedure, we analyzed the data with three coding rounds. In the first round of coding, the first author read the transcripts multiple times and generated a list of reasons why certain sermons had had a lasting impact on peoples' lives. In this phase, the first author looked for patterns in the answers by the different participants.

In the second round of coding, the first and the second author looked for categories, while maintaining an open discussion regarding the categorization of the comments. The categories were compared with literature regarding persuasion and communication. Additionally, the

researchers searched for words such as *changed, remember, new, surprise, process, move, image, and person*. Applying an iterative procedure, we moved back and forth between the data and literature on persuasion and communication and adjusted our framework when necessary. The resulting subcategories were labeled to capture the meaning reflected by the group of comments. All of the categories and subcategories were then carefully defined in a codebook. Since the purpose of our analysis was to look for common ideas and patterns in the participants' convictions, (sub)categories represented by single comments made by one participant were not taken into account.

In total, we identified 79 statements that gave information as to why sermons had had an impact on the participants. Of these, 34 statements were grouped under "connection to process." All the participants contributed to this list of statements. Another 22 statements illustrated the importance of surprise and novelty in presenting old truths in a new fashion; these statements were made by all but two participants. The final category consisted of 13 statements related to the personality of both the communicators and the hearers.

In the final coding round, the codebook was given to an independent coder. This coder re-categorized each of the comments into the defined (sub)categories. This independent coding resulted in an initial kappa of .39. After extensive discussion with the first author and a repetition of the steps described in rounds 1 and 2, the kappa increased to .95. The quotes presented in the "Results" section are illustrative of the 15 interviews.

Results

We identified three categories of influence: (a) connection to process, (b) presenting old truths in a new fashion, and (c) factors related to the personality of the preacher and the hearer. Before we discuss the results for the categories of influence, we first present the ways in which people have experienced change through sermons.

Areas of change through sermons

The participants indicated three different areas of change that occurred in their lives because of sermons: in their thinking about or connection with God, in their behavior, and in their inner world (i.e., self). Table 1 shows the change people experienced through sermons in their lives.

Table 1. Indicated areas of change through sermons

Category	Definition	Sample comments
<i>Spiritual</i>		
<i>Image of God (10)</i>	The way a person thinks about God	<i>A sermon on Jesus being our Lord and our Savior influenced me. If he is our Lord, it suits me to be humble and obedient. Although I am an independent person, I try to be humble.</i>

<i>Connection to God</i> (7)	The devotion a person experiences in relationship to God	<i>The sermon of that pastor really turned my life upside down. It was everything: the sermon, the setting, the ritual. That combination resulted in me being overwhelmed with a sense of God's grace for me.</i>
<i>Behavior</i>		
<i>Behavioral change</i> (8)	Change in behavior on the basis of faith	<i>A sermon on the armor of God made me realize that I have to keep certain things out of my life. I work in the corporate world and with the right excuses and a little bit of lying one can make a lot of extra money. Through that sermon, I decided to protect myself from going along in those patterns of behavior.</i>
<i>Social engagement</i> (4)	The involvement of a person in activities of social justice	<i>A sermon on justice had a great impact on me. A picture was shown of a vulture waiting next to a starving child. I was so impressed. Since that sermon, I have been engaged with compassion, helping liberate children from poverty.</i>
<i>Self</i>		
<i>Encouragement</i> (6)	The reception of inner strength and peace in concrete situations	<i>Listening to a sermon strengthens me. That during the week it dawns on me, "Would this be connected with the message of last Sunday?" And that I conclude, "Yes, I do think so."</i>
<i>Image of self</i> (4)	The convictions a person has about him- or herself	<i>A sermon on the prodigal son radically changed my life. I was an action- and result-driven man. This sermon made me realize that being loved does not have to do with what you do, but rather with what you have or what others say about you. One is loved because of Jesus' presence.</i>
<i>Destination of life</i> (2)	The purposes a person dedicates his or her life to	<i>My wife and I love to play music. Through a sermon, we realized we had to invest in the next generation. So, that is what we do now. We coach church music groups throughout the country.</i>

Spiritual

As sermons take place in a religious setting aimed at experiencing spirituality and seeking knowledge about God, it is not surprising that the primary area of change acquired through preaching involved how people think about God and shape their relationship with God. The interviewees stated that through sermons they began to alter their views about God. Often this

change was described as a differentiation between distant and personal, aloof and caring, and judgmental and gracious:

I was raised with the image of a holy God that should be revered. God was a God from afar, from on high. He was distant. Through the sermons I heard, he has come closer. It is difficult for me to describe it, but it has become something of my everyday life. I have discovered it is possible to walk with a holy God.

The change people experienced in their views about God and self was not limited to conviction or thinking. The participants indicated that sermons had also changed their perceived connection with God. The knowledge about God changed something on the inside:

We are all lost sons. To come to the conclusion that we accept the gift of a Father saying, “come, in spite of everything you have done” is... I have cursed God; I blamed him for everything that happened. And then to find grace, to receive mercy, that is difficult.

In the interviews, some of the participants were lost for words to describe the change they had experienced from within. The holy God from afar had become a loving father with whom the respondents experienced an intimate connection.

Behavior

Change did not only occur in the spiritual realm but in practical behavior, too. The respondents pointed out that they had changed the way they viewed and reached out to people, as well as the way they spoke, dealt with money, used their time, raised children, and prioritized their tasks. The change the respondents had experienced resulted in caring more for people:

I heard this sermon “God gives people.” That message encouraged me to share more love with people. I mean, one can remain passive...but this sermon made me realize I can influence peoples’ lives by doing something small, like sending a card or a message or reaching out to a person in need.

Moreover, it made people aware of social injustice and prompted them to rise and be the change for people in need:

A sermon on the Good Samaritan challenged my thinking on people in need. It made me look at them differently and encouraged me to come to their aid.

Self

Lastly, the respondents said that they experienced change in the way they viewed and felt about themselves, as well as how they wanted to live their lives. The respondents indicated that they felt strengthened by the sermons. In times of need or loss, they sought fresh courage or perspective to carry on:

That sermon made me realize, “Wait a minute! God can handle everything, and I belong to God, so everything will be alright.”

In addition, it helped them come to peace with who they are, and feel loved and accepted:

I am both a perfectionist and chaotic. That's not a good combination. Through a sermon of Jacob's fight with God, it dawned on me that I am okay the way I am. That was a crucial turning point in my life.

Through the sermons they had heard, some respondents were strongly encouraged to change the course of their lives and navigate in new directions:

That sermon literally made us do new things; it helped us leave our comfort zone and make choices in our lives.

Categories of influence in sermons

Connection to process

In their interviews, all the participants indicated that sermons that had made a profound impact on their lives made a strong connection with the process they were going through when they heard the sermon. Table 2 shows the types of connection that the hearers experienced.

Table 2. Communicative impact in sermons: connection to personal process

Category	Definition	Sample comments
<i>Personal process (13)</i>	The sermon is connected with a process the hearer is going through at that moment	<p><i>The fact that these sermons have changed me the way they have is because they were the right sermons at the right time; it's the right place, the right time.</i></p> <p><i>The sermons that have meant the most to me are those sermons that were preached at that moment of my life when I was really working on those issues. Those sermons were connected with my actual situation in life.</i></p>
<i>Crisis (7)</i>	The sermon is delivered during a time of personal crisis or loss	<p><i>Through the sermon on "It's Friday, but Sunday is coming," I found myself in a situation where I thought, "I just feel...I do not know how to move on. I didn't know what to do. I had a crisis in my faith, many problems in my private world...my sister being very sick, my business not taking off, being cheated on by someone. Everything hit me at the same time. And I felt "Where is God?"...And this sermon fit my situation in that moment. I felt like Friday, but it will be Sunday, and there is hope. That message landed in my heart.</i></p> <p><i>Fourteen years ago, I had a burnout. At that time, I read a story about a prodigal son. That was a revelation to me: it's not about what I do, but about what Jesus has done for me...I heard the writer of this book, Henri Nouwen, had preached on this subject three times...That sermon changed my life.</i></p>

Confronting personal beliefs (7)	The sermon is experienced as a confrontation with one's beliefs or values	<i>I heard a sermon on this subject, "Is Jesus your Lord and Savior?" That really spoke to me because I am an independent person. This sermon stayed with me because it encouraged me to apply the message to my life. It also caused me to reflect on my life.</i>
Special occasion (4)	The sermon is delivered during a memorable occasion	<i>Two of the three sermons I remember were delivered at funeral services. The sermon on the barren bones made a deep impression on me. I heard it 29 years ago but still remember it. I think this is also the case that we buried my father-in-law the Thursday before and baptized my daughter on the Friday before the sermon.</i>
Personal identification (3)	The sermon is connected with the past or personality of the hearer	<i>I remember the sermon on the prodigal son. It made me realize what had happened in my own life. My father had one brother and, through an argument over inheritance, they would not talk to each other anymore. I was 19 when I left home. I was sent away and coming home was never nice. So, this story made an impression on me. The idea that God would never drop me. That Father always says, "Come home and bring the fattest calf." ...And also, the reaction of the oldest brother, the one that stayed at home the whole time. I recognized myself in him, too.</i>

Personal process

The participants often stated that the influence of a sermon was determined by the connection they experienced between the sermon and their personal phase of life or process at the time. Some indicated that they had already been contemplating the subject of the sermon when they heard the message. The hearers' life circumstances created a new openness to receive the message that was being delivered. One respondent even said that s/he hopes for the sermon to be connected with the specific situation where s/he is in at that given moment:

I always hope that a sermon connects with the process I am in at that moment, that, for example, when I am busy, the sermon is about being busy and creating balance. I hope to receive some good advice, and that it really motivates you to start working on it.

The processes that create openness for a certain message can be very different. In any given message, people have personal issues, questions, hopes, and dreams:

There was this sermon on dreams and how to explain them, and I responded to the altar call to receive prayer because I had this same dream over and over again.

Talking about dreams may not be the first subject that comes to mind when trying to choose a subject that connects with a broad audience, but for this specific listener, it was a subject s/he was processing already. Someone else said:

I remember a sermon I heard 29 years ago on the barren bones from Ezekiel. That was about this valley that was full of dead and dry bones, but they were brought back to life. And I remember that sermon because that still is what I hope will happen to me one day.

This specific sermon apparently addressed a question this person was already dealing with at the time when s/he heard the sermon, and this same question continues to be relevant today. The questions we have, the things we go through, or the challenges we face all prove to be elements that make communication resonate in deeper ways. For sermons to be remembered, it is important that they connect with the processes people are going through. One particular category of process people go through creates a special receptivity in communication: crisis.

Crisis

In studying the results of the process connections that the hearers experience, we noted that the impact of the sermons often occurred in a phase of life that could be described as “being vulnerable”:

There’s a world of difference between the way I listen to sermons before and after my divorce. It’s like living two lives. Before, I was the man who had everything under control. Then I got a divorce and burned out. The sermons have never been the same since then. I have become more vulnerable and emotional during the sermons.

Respondents described situations of burnout, despair, depression, and loss that connected with sermons that had a profound impact on their lives. One needs only to take heed of today’s statistics of divorce, burnout, or sickness to realize that in any given audience there are people who are grappling with moments of darkness. Similarly, there are processes that people go through in connection with certain events in their lives or society. A public tragedy such as a plane crash or terrorist attack can unsettle people and create new openness to receive the gospel:

I remember this sermon that was held by the previous pastor of my parents’ church right after MH17 plane crash. Two teenagers of that church had been killed. The pastor returned from his new church to comfort the congregation, and that really was a special service. The pastor himself was really moved, and he handled the loss in a beautiful way.

This quotation helps connect various elements that are important in creating an impact. The respondent describes that the pastor was moved himself, illustrating authentic communication. The shock of MH17 plane crash was intertwined with the shock in society, unsettling people and rousing fear. At the same time, the impact of this event was palpable among the congregants themselves, as two of their teenage members had been killed in the tragedy. The broad shockwaves of this act of terror particularly affected this church, thus creating a delicate common ground for communication. It seems that having to deal with personal crisis, illness, divorce, or loss creates an opportunity for communication to resonate in more profound ways than otherwise.

Confronting personal beliefs

A subcategory in the connection between hearers’ process and the message may sound counterintuitive: a few respondents indicated that a sermon that confronts their beliefs and values

could result in change. The sermon first connects with the hearer's system of beliefs and values, but takes it further or flips it around, thus resulting in changed beliefs and values. A respondent who described himself as "independent" was persuaded to abandon his independence and become a Christ follower based on a sermon that stressed the importance of service and following. It seems that because the notion of the sermon was so counterintuitive to the way the hearer saw himself, he decided to change his beliefs:

I heard that sermon, and it spoke to me in such a powerful way that I wanted to hear it again. It connected with me at that moment. That sermon made many pieces fall together. That faith requires action that your partner can lead you to the entrance of the gate, but that you yourself have to step across the threshold.

The respondent apparently believed that faith did not require action, and that the faith of the partner would suffice for God. This sermon was experienced as a wake-up call, mainly because it connected with the set of beliefs and values that the hearer espoused. However, by taking them to a new level, the sermon was experienced as persuasive. If a preacher intends to persuade his or her audience, a key initial step involves connecting the sermon with the personal process of the people in the audience. This connection is multifaceted and complex. In one audience, there can be one person battling burnout, one grieving over a divorce or a loss, and another pondering how to interpret his/her recurring dream, and yet another celebrating 25 years of marriage. It seems impossible for every sermon to connect with everybody at the same time. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why most people who listen to many sermons in their lifetime only find a few that really make all the difference.

Memorable occasion

A specific category of crisis occurs during funeral services. Both collective and personal tragedies can render individuals vulnerable, resulting in an openness to the message being preached. People may end their marriage, lose their health, or, more seriously, lose loved ones:

Two of the three sermons I remember were delivered at funeral services.

The significance of the moment of the funeral creates receptivity to the message. Conversely, joyful occasions may also create an atmosphere for memorable communication. This is what a participant said:

I remember sermons that are connected with significant moments of my life, such as my wedding, New Year's Eve, and other days of celebration, like my confession.

It seems there are certain memorable occasions, both sad and joyful, which create great opportunities for successful communication.

Personal identification

Apart from the connection with a personal process of questions, beliefs, challenges, or crises, it appears that on a more existential level sermons can connect with the basic beliefs and views people have of themselves, and thus create an impact. In one instance, a respondent explained how the story of the prodigal son reflected his own life for many years, creating

identification between him and the story, and thus leading to change in his life. Another interviewee made the following remark:

When the pastor preached about Esther, I just felt like her. *I was Esther.* I even wrote the pastor an anonymous letter, saying that I felt like Esther. I felt so stupid that I did it. I asked myself, “Why?” I don’t know why this happened at that sermon! Why did I feel like Esther?

Apparently, stories from the Bible can result in close identification by hearers even in such ways that they may not be able to explain what really happened—only that it had such a profound impact that it convinced the participant above, for example, to write an anonymous letter to the pastor.

Making old things new

In the delivery of sermons is a peculiarity: the main body of the audience consists of people who have usually attended numerous services throughout their lives, have read the Bible, and know the stories presented to them from childhood. The audience is familiar with the stories and their outcomes, which renders sermons predictable—a major disadvantage. During the analysis of the interviews, it became clear that sermons that had created an impact were those that were *not* predictable; rather, they were delivered as though they were new, causing the hearers to awaken to fresh and/or surprising understandings. It seems that ambiguity and the ability to reach deeper layers of the traditional text are critical. Table 3 shows the elements that help make old things new.

Table 3. Communicative impact in sermons: making old things new

Category	Definition	Sample comments
<i>Surprise (10)</i>	The sermon contains a spark: new, surprising elements	<p><i>A good sermon awakens me to something. It is like someone turning on the light. You think, “Ah yes! That is the way it is, indeed.” It works like affirming, in the sense that it affirms what you already know or believe, but it sheds new light on it.</i></p> <p><i>The sermons that appealed to me are those sermons that are out of the ordinary. Something happens in those sermons and that stays with me.</i></p>

<i>Text and context</i> (6)	The sermon successfully bridges the gap between “then” and “now”; it turns the truth into reality	<i>I love it when a preacher succeeds in disclosing hidden treasures; “little secrets” that are new and make an old story speak to you in a completely new way.</i> <i>There was this preacher in my parents’ church who was very old; I think he was in his eighties, and you just sensed that this preacher was very intelligent. And the way he preached, using historical background and painting the picture of the context of the story, helped me learn many new things and thus get to know God better.</i>
<i>Visuals</i> (6)	The sermon uses rich imagery through multimedia or mental pictures	<i>I heard this sermon on social justice, and the preacher showed a picture of a vulture waiting to eat a starving child. I was deeply impressed. I was confronted and knew that I had to do something.</i>

Surprise

The respondents described the sermons that they remembered and had made an impact on them as “shedding new light,” “out of the ordinary,” “surprising,” “eye-opening,” or “intriguing.” The respondents described that the “new” in the newness of the impactful sermon is not a total and complete new, but one that elaborates what is already known.

It works like affirming, in the sense that it affirms what you already know, but it sheds new light.

The content and form of impactful sermons are intertwined in such a way that a surprising, new experience is delivered:

I remember sermons that have surprised me. I love it when the preachers take a story from the Old Testament, for example, and apply it to our daily lives. That is such a surprise. They take me by surprise, and then the sermon sticks with me. Just a few weeks ago, I heard this sermon on the Good Samaritan, and the way the pastor unfolded this familiar story was just marvelous. And that makes me remember the story.

The stories are familiar, yet there is something in the way impactful sermons are presented that causes the old stories to receive new flavor. The point of reference is changed, new perspectives are offered, or people point out that the way the familiar story was presented made the message “come to life.”

Text and context

A second aspect of making old things new involves the skillful manipulation of text and context, which preachers of impactful sermons exhibit. The findings of our research show that

people like to learn new things, and that learning new things enhances the probability that sermons are remembered and impactful. One respondent said the following:

It is important that the explanation of the scripture is intriguing. When people read for themselves, they do not discover the new things; but when a preacher explains the scripture clearly, that sounds beautiful.

An element that appeals to people involves explaining the text in an enlightening and fresh way. This does not just have to do with the text only, but with the context, too. The broader scope of the text and the history in which the stories are delivered shed new light on old knowledge. This is what a respondent had to say:

Our pastor spoke on the building of the tabernacle, and how everybody sacrificed goods to make this happen. He explained the happenings in such a way that I was awestruck. He talked about the mirrors and what they meant. Every item was listed. He could explain it historically so well.

Historical context adds new meaning to an otherwise predictable, complicated, or dull text.

Visuals

A third element in creating novelty amidst preconceived ideas of familiar texts is the use of visuals. Various respondents mentioned that it was the surprising use of visuals that illuminated a message, leaving them feel deeply affected. Visuals do not only mean the use of pictures or videos; the language itself can also create vivid pictures, causing the message to stick with people. One participant said:

I remember sermons that have really communicated to me. Sermons that have deeply moved me, that have given me the realization, “O yes, indeed...” because the sermon used such powerful imagery. I love it when the sermon becomes a small play and you just see it unfold before your eyes. When there’s no clear picture, I forget the sermon.

For this respondent, the receptivity to the sermon became possible when the sermon was able to elicit surprise, “O yes, indeed...” This surprise does not comprise totally new information, but is connected with the knowledge that is already present, hence the use of “indeed.” Old, latent information is presented in such a new way that arouses excitement. The sermon paints a picture in its own right.

The influence of communicator and hearer

Apart from the importance of connecting with hearers’ process and preachers’ ability to present old truths in a new fashion, our research introduces several conditions conducive to creating the environment for successful communication. The first of these conditions involves the person of the preacher, and the second includes the person of the hearer. Table 4 shows the results of the role of the preacher and the hearer in the sermon process.

Table 4. Personal conditions for communicative impact in sermons

Category	Definition	Sample comments
<i>The preacher</i> (8)	The person of the preacher plays an important role in the reception of the message	<i>The person of the preacher is very important for the impact of the sermons. When you can sense that they are authentic, connected with God, and preached in a loving way, this speaks volumes.</i>
<i>The hearer</i> (5)	The person of the hearer determines in part how the message comes across	<i>One has to be willing to be confronted. I really believe so. When you enter the room with a hard, distant attitude, then the sermon will not have as much impact. Still, a preacher may sometimes have the ability to break down your walls.</i>

Person of the preacher

The respondents emphasized the importance of the preacher's manner through which the sermon comes across. The authenticity of the communicator is a factor that creates the right atmosphere for people to tune in and receive the message. Likeability and knowledgeability were described as aspects that create authenticity. A participant stated that:

I have been changed through the sermons but also through the person of the preacher. He is so forbearing and friendly.

Sharing human interest stories at a personal level can enhance the credibility and likeability of a preacher:

I love it when a preacher becomes personal and has the courage to share his personal life.

Person of the hearer

In addition to the person of the preacher, the condition of the hearer plays an important role in determining how the communication comes across. An interviewee commented:

It matters if I have had my morning coffee or not. When I am tired or do not feel like going to church, I am not motivated to learn. The way you attend a service determines your level of openness to receive something. And sometimes the only thing you are thinking about during the service is getting home.

If people are not prepared to learn or receive a message, it becomes difficult for a preacher to effectively convey the message—although he may still succeed on special occasions, as one participant observed. When the hearers' minds are occupied with different things, when they are physically present but mentally absent, or when there are internal barriers to receiving the preachers' message, a communication breakdown is almost inevitable. This is how a participant concluded:

I believe the most important factor for retention lies in oneself. I mean, how busy you are inside your head. Apart from that, it's important how the pastor preaches.

Discussion

Three factors of importance

The aim of this study was to examine, from the perspective of the hearers, the factors that create impactful communication in sermons. Our study shows that three factors are crucial: (a) the connection of the message with hearers' internal processes and needs, (b) the preachers' ability to present old truths in a new fashion, and (c) the role of both preachers and hearers in the preaching process. The prominent role of connection with the personal process of the hearer is congruent with the findings of other researchers.¹⁰ Our results show that connection with personal processes often occurs in times of personal crises, during memorable occasions, when personal beliefs are challenged, or when there is personal identification.

The importance of presenting old truths in new ways as a distinctive feature of effective sermons is supported by Mulligan and Allen when they advise preachers to present the message in a lively manner for listeners, both in content and delivery.¹¹ Our research illustrates that presenting old truths in fresh ways becomes possible when preachers deliver the content of the message in a surprising manner, present new elements from the text and context, or use strong visuals or images.

Previous sermon-effect research confirms our findings but challenges some of the past findings, too. Our core findings are all supported by several theorists and researchers.¹² Nonetheless, not all the findings of previous research featured in our findings. For example, the duration of sermons or the clarity of the call to action did not figure in our investigation. However, data from our interviews advance our understanding of how communication works and what happens in the moments when memorable communication takes place.

Theoretical contributions

This study makes at least five contributions to the homiletical and communication literature. First, the results show that sermons can have considerable impact on peoples' lives. Not only did every respondent have at least one memorable experience connected with a sermon, these experiences could also be traced back as many as 29 years. Our research shows that change occurred not only in the spiritual realm but also in behavior and view of self. Although previous research has shown that sermons have limited or no impact on hearers, our data suggest that long-term commitment to sermons gives hearers a great chance of being significantly influenced

¹⁰ Mulligan and Allen, for example, comment that the message needs to relate in practical ways to listeners' lives (Mary Alice Mulligan, and Ron J. Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005). Alan Ehler insists on the importance of relevance in sermons (*Preach to Reach: Seven Characteristics of Effective Evangelistic Preaching*, D.Min. diss, George Fox University, 2007), and Ian Hussey states that a key aspect of effective preaching is the connection of sermons with the practical issues of life ("The Other Side of the Pulpit: Listener's Experiences of Helpful Preaching," *Homiletic*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 2014).

¹¹ Mulligan and Allen, *Make the Word Come Alive: Lessons from Laity*, 2005.

¹² For example Long, *Witness*, 2016; Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001); Ehler, *Preach to Reach*, 2007; Mulligan and Allen, *Make the Word*, 2005; Carrell, "Communication Training," 2009; Hussey, *Other Side of the Pulpit*, 2014.

by at least one specific sermon. However, what is clear is that the impactful sermon remains a rarity; people are not deeply moved week after week. Once in a while, a sermon occurs that has a profound impact on listeners. Our conclusions provide ample evidence that preachers should communicate for change; at the same time preachers should realize that change through sermons requires sermons and hearers' settings to connect in unique ways.

Second, our study offers new insights into the connection between hearers' personal process and the preachers' message. The importance of the connection of communication with the hearers' personal process is not new. Furthermore, studies in the homiletical field have suggested that the influence of a sermon is limited to the possible strengthening of already existing beliefs. Our data show that this is not always the case. Almost half of the respondents indicated that conflict with their already existing beliefs created the impact. There was sufficient connection with the hearers' personal process to enable the communication to work, providing preachers with the opportunity to stretch or challenge the hearers' beliefs without causing a communication breakdown.¹³ Confrontation is a means of connecting with hearers. Confronting and confirming hearers' worldviews should be balanced to allow connection with personal conviction in order to bring about change.

Third, it is crucial for preachers to know their audience and the questions they have, the challenges they face, and the values they espouse. In the past decades, there has been a move from the text to the hearer. But how drastic should this move be? Does it require the scrutiny of the congregation to be able to connect well with an audience? Is there a need to study postmodernism and its effects on society, as some advocate? Especially when a preacher stays with a congregation for a long period of time, or when one preaches on a regular basis to the same public, it is worthwhile to immerse oneself in the dynamics of that specific situation. Mere intuition does not suffice. If intuition had been able to accomplish the job, there would be no doubt about the impact of preaching today. However, these doubts are widespread. It is not self-evident that sermons will be impactful, mainly because too often people do not realize the connection between the message and their lives. For preachers to connect well with their audience, it is vital to have a profound understanding of the culture in which people live, the pastoral reality that can take place in a person's life, and the dominant processes that a congregation goes through. Since the connection between preachers and hearers is central to the effectiveness of sermons, we propose further research to be conducted in this realm. A good way to gain further insights is by conducting qualitative research among top communicators in the church, which will allow for exploration of how successful preachers deliberately create connection in their preaching.

Fourth, our data show that inductive preaching—making use of ambiguity—as advocated by Craddock and Lowry, is a strategic way of communicating if one wants to create an impact.¹⁴ The respondents indicated that many of the sermons that influenced them were communicated in a narrative style. The use of biblical stories can help hearers register close identification with the message. To enable this, the message should be presented in the full form of a story without abridgement. Many of the influential sermons that the respondents referred to were well-known narratives of the Bible, such as the story of Esther, the story of the prodigal son, or the story of the good Samaritan. Apart from presenting sermons in a narrative style, our research illustrates

¹³ Long, *Witness*, 2016.

¹⁴ Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 2001; Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001).

that surprise is a key element in impactful communication. The respondents reflected on the familiar stories, yet the way they were presented was surprising and novel, and hence impactful. Perhaps the point of reference was changed or new perspectives flourished. The respondents indicated that the way the familiar story was presented made the message “come to life.” Our research encourages pastors to narratively preach even the stories that may be considered too familiar by the audience. Moreover, there are benefits to integrating the fields of rhetoric and homiletics. Work on the art of storytelling provides training for both corporate and religious communicators, where both serve as positive role models and learn from each other.

Finally, this study shows that there are many variables at play in sermon effectiveness. It is impossible to ascribe persuasion to the message and the messenger alone. Peoples’ attitudes, opinions, and events all determine the extent to which sermons are effective in persuading congregants. The person of the hearer serves as a hygiene factor for the impact of communication. Whether the hearer has missed his or her morning coffee, last night’s party finished too late, or one’s mother-in-law visits for coffee right after church, for example, can all undermine the impact of the message. Conversely, in times of crisis people may be more receptive to the message than ever before. In moments of vulnerability, there may be unusual openness to receive the word from the pulpit. Our results illustrate the multiplicity of different factors causing change. It cannot be restricted to the novelty of communication, though it is an important factor in effective communication. Further, communicators’ authenticity cannot produce persuasion on its own; the actual process listeners experience can greatly influence the extent of persuasion a message can elicit. In short, this qualitative inquiry demonstrated a nuanced and theory-based exploration of the underlying dynamics that may create impact preaching.

Limitations and Future Research

We believe that this study is a useful, albeit inconclusive, attempt at examining the factors that can transform sermons into impactful events. Several limitations should be noted. First, this is a typical single-perspective study, mainly because we did not involve preachers in our study. We encourage researchers to examine how preachers prepare their messages, how they deliberately work on bridging the gap between the text and the audience, and what they believe are the determining factors that create an impact in their sermons. There has lately been greater attention to the role of hearers in the preaching process, and throughout centuries, concern for the text has been predominant in the preaching process. However, the role of the person of the preacher has received limited attention in research. Traditionally, preachers were viewed as the machines of study, as mouths, whose job involved proclaiming what was written in the ancient text. Homiletic textbooks provide detailed, multistep processes to arrive at a robust sermon, but they often overlook the complications involved in communication, and tend to be oblivious to strategies necessary to bridge the gap between the audience and text. Thus, it would be useful to examine how experienced preachers influence their congregations, and to find out what this means in light of the findings of our current study.

A second limitation is that we only focused on sermons as a form of mass communication. In the political, corporate, and educational realms, communicators try to persuade their audiences into new modes of thinking or behavior. Although the respondents spoke about communication outside the context of sermons, our analysis focused only on change effected through sermons. While the results of this study shed light on different communicative

arenas, perspectives on eliciting impact through communication allow for a broader investigation than the one presented herein.

Further, our findings are based on a small number of respondents ($N = 15$). Although theoretically data saturation can be achieved with twelve interviews, we do not claim that the identified factors influencing impact in communication are the only ones that may play a role. We eagerly anticipate similar studies using larger samples to enable comparison with and extension of our findings.

Conclusion

Our research among a selected group of listeners of sermons illustrated that every respondent had experienced decisive change through a sermon at least once. This change was effected in the spiritual, behavioral, and self domains. In the spiritual realm, people experienced a change in their image of God and a change in their connection with God. In the realm of behavior, the respondents experienced a behavioral change and a greater involvement in social justice. In the domain of self, people experienced encouragement, a change of convictions about self, and a discovery of the destination of life. The factors in the sermon processes that effected these changes included a connection between the sermons and the listeners' personal processes, and the preachers' abilities to present old truths in a fresh, surprising way. Lastly, the person of the preacher and that of the hearer played a role in the process. The connection with the listener's personal process is especially experienced in times of crisis or on special occasions, and when the preacher succeeds in confronting listeners' personal beliefs without causing a communication breakdown. Listeners experience old things being presented in new ways, especially when they sense that sermons successfully bridge the cultural gap between "then" and "now," and when sermons in content and delivery contain new, surprising elements.