

Weekly Newsletter: 14 January 2025

Reflection: How to Listen to a Sermon

By Joe Barnard

My guess is that you've heard of "active" and "passive" listening. There is one form of listening by which we nod and look into the speaker's eyes, but are no more engaged in what he is saying than a fish is in touch with a cloud. There is another form by which we follow the speaker's train of thought as closely as a fox chasing a hare. The first mode maintains civility, but does nothing in terms of learning. True *communication* only happens through the second mode.

It's interesting to reflect on what active listening looks like on a Sunday morning. I'll be honest to admit, for all the thought I've given to preparing sermons, I've not given much at all to what it should look like to consume them. This is a point of embarrassment. Anyone who has led a classroom knows that teaching well and learning well are not the same. Teaching only results in learning when personal engagement is present. Ultimately, the teacher can only do so much to generate this. For learning to happen, pupils must care enough to listen. The same is true of Christians on Sunday morning. What we get out of a sermon will be largely determined by what we put into it.

So, how should we actively engage with a sermon? As someone still working through this himself, let me offer some humble advice.

First, we need to be aware that our experience of Sunday morning begins the night before. In an essay on the Puritan Sabbath, JI Packer talks about how great pastors like Richard Baxter would exhort their congregants to prepare themselves for worship. Packer says,

Preparing the heart is the most important matter of all, for the Lord's Day is pre-eminently 'a day or heart-work'. From this point of view, the battle for our Sundays is usually won or lost on the foregoing Saturday night, when time should be set aside for self-examination, confession, and prayer for the coming day.

For Baxter, such preparation includes the simple discipline of getting to bed on time. He says, "Go seasonably to bed, that you may not be sleepy on the Lord's Day."

One of the interesting features of Holyrood's past is that the prayer meeting used to be on a Saturday night. While I'm not suggesting this pattern should be reinstated, I have no doubt that those who used to attend these meetings probably can attest to the benefit of doing so – not just on the Saturdays themselves, but

perhaps even more so on the Sundays. I always enjoy a meal more if my stomach is grumbling. The heart is the same. Prepare the heart on Saturday night and you might be surprised by the pleasing-aroma of worship the next morning.

Let's move on to thinking about the act of listening to a live sermon. How should we do so? Here it is worth noting that there are two competing models, each with different strengths and weaknesses. I remember an old Highland minister telling me, "When Scots listen to a sermon, they close their Bibles and look up at the preacher; when Americans listen to a sermon, they open their notebooks and look down at their Bibles." Although this is a caricature, it is helpful for thinking about different aims for listening to a sermon. On the one side, the so-called Scottish manner of listening recognises that preaching is a real engagement with the living Word. No patient takes a notebook into heart surgery. Following the same logic, the goal of sitting under God's word is less about learning information than having one's soul healed. The old Highlanders understood this.

That said, the Americans also grasp something important. Passive listening is often lazy listening. I can attest to this. If I'm not careful, the words of a sermon often pass in one ear and out of the other without touching my heart. A pen and paper are sometimes helpful for making sure ideas linger in my head long enough to impact my soul.

On balance, what should we do? Here I don't think we need a set rule, but good judgment. Do you struggle to pay attention and retain the core truths of a sermon? See if a sharpened pencil is of use. Do you struggle to experience God in the midst of worship? Perhaps it's time to shut the notebook and be more present during the act of preaching.

Finally, a word about what to do after worship is finished. Most modern Christians think the work of listening is done once the service is over. Here we can learn something from an older generation. It was not uncommon in Scottish homes in the past for families to discuss a sermon over lunch. The point of the exercise was not to pick apart the preacher's faults – that's easy pickings. The purpose was to chew on whatever truth had been communicated for the sake of digestion. Sermons and food are more alike than many realise. Both must be broken down and swallowed for there to be benefit. This happens not during a sermon, but afterwards.

I can't say that I've been personally faithful to these instructions in the past. Like I said before, I'm trying to grow in this myself. But, perhaps we can grow together and, as we do, figure out what it means in an age of relentless distraction to listen well to the Word of God.

This Wednesday

This Wednesday we are having a meal before the prayer meeting. Come to the church from 5.45pm, food will be served at 6pm and we'll meet to pray from 7-8pm.

There will be a separate online prayer meeting for those not able to join us in the building. Contact Liz (liz@holyroodevangelical.org) for the Zoom codes if you don't already receive them.

Women's Bible Studies

We're looking forward to getting together on Thursday morning from 10:30am – 11.30am to study God's word, pray and enjoy fellowship together (and one or two scones!). Please join us if you can!

Thanksgiving Service - Margaret Johnstone

A Thanksgiving Service for the Life of Margaret Johnstone will take place on **Wednesday 22 January** at 2.30pm at Meadowbank Church. Everyone is welcome to attend.

Christmas Appeal 2024

Thank you to everyone who has given generously to our Christmas Appeal. **The final total came to £14,273.26** and the appeal is now closed.

The money has been distributed as follows:

- Onesimus Fund – Cornhill Scotland. Helping to train useful gospel workers for Scotland and Beyond: £4282.12 (see below)
- Delhi Bible Institute – supporting DBI's 'Loving The Poorest' appeal: £4282.12
- Merchant City Church Plant – supporting Neil Longwe and David Trimble as they plant a church in the Merchant City in Glasgow: £1427.38
- Bethany Christian Trust – supporting their Buy-a-Bed campaign: £1427.38
- Friends International – to help provide trips for international students in 2025: £1427.38
- Sparkle Sisters – a Christian led charity born out of the desire to share the love of Jesus and enhance the lives of women, of all faiths or none, who have in some way been affected by homelessness and/or abuse: £1427.38



Christmas Appeal – Thank You from Cornhill Scotland

Dear Holyrood,

That is wonderfully generous and we are so humbled by your investment in the ongoing work of training people for gospel ministry in Scotland.

This money will be invaluable in strengthening churches and training gospel workers and we will keep you fully informed of new and ongoing projects as plans coalesce in the coming weeks ready for September.

We are currently looking hard at revitalisation/training opportunities in Fife, South Lanarkshire and Midlothian and this money will be a tremendous help in seeing new and strong gospel witness restarted in different locations.

With warmest good wishes and sincere thanks for your gospel partnership, Jon

Book Group

This month's book group meets at 3.30pm on **25 January** at 9 Craigentenny Avenue and we are reading *To a Different Drum* by Pauline Hamilton. For more information speak to Anncris Roberts.

SU Scotland - Quiz Night

On **Saturday 1 February** at 7.30pm the es-team from SU Scotland are holding a Fundraising Quiz Night at a Ferniehill Evangelical Church, Edinburgh EH17 7AA. Suggested donation of £5 per person. Refreshments included and contact Alasdair Roberts if you're keen to attend or for more details.

Church Calendar

For your info and prayers:

- Wednesday: Meal at 6pm and Prayer Meeting at 7pm (with a separate Zoom option)
- Thursday:
 - Women's Bible Study at 10.30am in the church
 - Session Meeting at 7pm in the church
- Sunday:
 - Morning service at 10.30am – Joe Barnard preaching (live streamed)
 - Evening service at 6pm – Joe Barnard preaching (live streamed)
- Monday:
 - Baby & Toddlers Group 10am – 11.30am
 - Warm Space 12 noon to 3pm
 - Mission Team meeting at 7.30pm



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