Communicating the Word

Jefferson is a black male who grew up in a Baptist church in Ohio. His primary preaching models are older black males who evidence a slow, hoarse, staccato, yet rhythmic cadence in preaching. He is caught between his "proper" academic speech and his acculturated speech pattern. The result is an odd blend of "standard" English pronunciation of some words on the one hand, and a regional-cultural dialect—omission of word endings, substitution of /f/ for /th/—on the other hand. Part of the class verbally responds positively to his rhetorical style, but part of the class seems to have lost something in the cultural translation.

Elizabeth stands stock still, barely raising her head as she begins to read the text in a barely audible monotone. She is a diminutive white female preaching her first time in public. She apologizes for what she is about to say and repeatedly pleas for forgiveness as she gives her views on the text. Her articulation is flawless, but her energy level borders on flatlining. After ten minutes of wandering through the text she abruptly stops and takes her seat. She clearly communicated her fear, but any sermonic intent was lost.

Terry eagerly approaches the front of the classroom, lays his sermon manuscript on the podium, and proceeds to preach while walking back and forth across the front of the room. He leans on the podium once or twice as he points toward the listener or uses both hands to form a concept. He seems to have memorized his text and looks at each classmate as he clearly and concisely relates the good news. His facial expressions and gestures mirror the emotions in the text. He pauses for effect and paces his words as if he is sharing the best news he has ever heard.

5

Language 101

Language is the study of sound production in nature and the means by which it is perceived, received, analyzed, processed, and responded to by another entity. In human communication this transmission of information may occur through hearing, body movements, eye contact, technological media, touch, cultural rules, experience with the information sender, or other channels. The efficacy of language is dependent on the quality, quantity, and timing of such information transmission.

Language is a means of self-expression and disclosure and falls into two main categories: receptive language (understanding what is said, written, or signed) and expressive language (speaking, writing, or signing). *Orality* is spoken language. *Aurality* is word connection with the listener. One chooses and uses words, pictures, signs, objects, emotions, and beliefs that the listener or receiver understands and then chooses to ignore or to respond to the intent of the communication. Words are present, dynamic, living verbal and nonverbal signs, signals, and symbols that represent the climate of beliefs, attitudes, values, common sense, common talk. Verbal communication is direct, immediate, and interdependent feedback or understanding of the message.

Language provides a means for building community between speakers and listeners.[1] Linguist Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the communicative act a "language game" with a set of moves, rules of usage, and possibilities for changing the rules of engagement.[2] The language interaction is a space for transmission of thoughts. This chapter will review the basics of communication theory, speech development, and oral-aural language. It will also discuss the importance of verbal and nonverbal communication as part of the preached word. The discussion grows out of questions students and preaching seminar participants frequently ask regarding the *whys* and *hows* of communication in the preaching moment.

Preaching Communication 101

In basic communication theory there is a sender (preacher/proclaimer/speaker) and a receiver (congregant/listener). Sacred rhetoric is transmitted through various oral and written communication channels or conveyances: sermons, scholarly commentaries, multimedia recordings, plays, denominational position papers, small-group discussions, Bible studies, art, music, and various translations of the biblical text. Preaching is an oral medium for sharing faith-centered messages. Preaching is informational and dialogical, melding the call and response of preacher and congregant. In order for this paradigm to work properly, however, there must be a sense of mutuality (see fig. 1.1).

Both parties send and receive information in a feedback loop or two-way communicative flow.

Figure 1.1 • Basic Communication Paradigm

The sender initiates the communication, understanding that the receiver is ready to listen. The congregant trusts the preacher to impart information without force, manipulation, prejudice, or offense. The speaker awaits feedback from the receiver. The receiver may use *nonverbal cues*, such as a nod, turning the body, facial expression, physical gesture, or *verbal cues*, such as saying *Amen* or some other sort of vocalized assent, to let the speaker know that message was received, affirmed, and/or understood.[3] This feedback loop, or call and response, continues as the conversation either builds or terminates.

The form, intensity, and duration of the exchange of information are based on the relationship and experience of the speaker and the listener. Language is relational. Because language is socially shaped through traditional and/or contemporary values and usage, it allows people to experience their concept of reality,[4] shapes human consciousness, and organizes a person's world. Language has the power to bring about changes in perspectives or worldview.

Religious language is a distinct type of relational discourse that theologian Paul Van Buren describes as "a fruitful source of rule breaking." It is a means of attempting to describe God and faith issues in imperfect yet creative ways. The speaker bends the language to express a sense of reality that exists beyond what can be seen, felt, or even fully understood. She walks the edge of meaning to talk insightfully about spiritual realities and understands that word-meaning changes with the setting, context, or community.[5] Religious language is consciously retrospective as persons strive to relate clearly their beliefs. It is demonstrative in its orthodoxy and identity as exemplified in prayers, invocations, sermons, and songs. It is imaginative and exploratory as the speaker responds to existential claims of belief.[6] However, religious language may also be filled with sound and fury signifying nothing when the verbosity of the speaker overshadows the intent of the message. It may be groundbreaking as new words are created in the delivery of homiletical material or monotonous due to obscure, inert, elitist, or canned linguistic rudiments.

Individual preachers use language in different ways and exhibit different points of communicability. They utilize language based on their experience, comfort level, role models, and physical ability. In *Orality and Literacy: The*

Technologizing of the Word, linguist Walter Ong states that language allows humans to voice experiences in concrete terms, to enflesh experience in sensory imagery.[7]

Each of the preachers described above attempted to express his or her theology and textual understanding, and to address a faith issue in the context of a classroom of diverse listeners. It is important to understand that what works in one situation will fail miserably in another if one is unaware of the dynamics of language.

Language in the Preaching Moment

In the "language game" of preaching, the preacher and congregation exchange faith talk in a give and take, call and response, verbal and nonverbal, vocal and nonvocal, and logical and emotive manner. The preacher must *mine the deep.* He or she should spend time listening to the language pattern of the congregation and considering ascribed and actual patterns of faith talk: What is the primary translation of the biblical text used in the worship services? Is the language informal or informal? Is the language of faith exclusive to select groups or inclusive of all persons? What names for God hold primacy? Who holds the power to engage in or end the conversation, the preacher or the listeners? Who speaks most often in a worship experience? Are there portions of the liturgy reserved only for ordained persons? If so, whom and why? The words of the preacher must be in the language of the people, the vernacular. This facilitates a participatory, inviting interchange between the preacher as oral interpreter of the written text and the people as cultural interpreters of the message. In the preaching moment numerous elements of language—orality, aurality, semiotics (symbols and signs), and nonverbal language or metalanguage—are interconnected, combined in a communicative channel with or without distractions and interference.

Preaching is communication in the concrete, filled with language and images from day-to-day details—dynamics, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, texture, and life-scenes. Preaching revisits the familiar through recognition of the frame of reference of listener and identity with the hearer's environment. One delivers the sermon in a manner in which the hearer is able to see and hear him- or herself within the sermon.[8] According to Henry Mitchell, preaching is "depth to depth" communication. Fred Craddock stipulates that preaching involves the self in "the longest trip a person takes is from head to heart."[9] Holistically, preaching involves issues of life that stir memories and plant new ideas in the hearer. For the pastor, preaching must involve an intimate, personal identification with the existential situation of the listeners, even to the point of gut-level emoting. Also, the preaching moment brings us face to face with

God. The efficacy of the sermon may lead to a reinforcement, correction, or transformation of the convictions the listeners already have as the speaker and the listener are invited to think again about beliefs. Using vivid, attractive, and engaging language enjoins the intellect and emotion as persons reconsider their faith.[10]

Language is manifest in rhetoric through a communication channel, encoding-decoding symbols, and signs between a speaker and listener. Joseph Webb, in *Preaching and the Challenge of Pluralism*, discusses "symbolicity," the signs and symbols of communication. *Signs*, he says, are sensory inputs that prompt our senses to respond. A red hexagon with white lettering is a stop sign. In the Bible, a miracle was thought to be a sign of a divine action. The star in the east was a sign of where the infant Jesus was born. *Symbols* represent something that is absent. The cross is a symbol of Jesus' sacrifice. Signs and symbols form the basis for human response to cultural, conscious, and visual stimuli. Each symbol stands for ethical, moral, religious, or cultural meaning.[11] Response to symbols is either positive or negative, cognitive, and emotive. In the preaching moment, "symbolicity" affects language production and nonverbal presentation.

The concept of *signification* assigns symbols to "mean" a thing or an idea. The signifier may speak in agreement with a point of view, while the tone of the voice creates doubt in the very act and word of agreement. For example, if the preacher is talking about the "joy of the Lord," a smile or facial expression that depicts exhilaration assists in communicating the emotion. The signifier adds comments to move the conversation in a particular direction, makes a comment that has nothing to do with the context of the discourse, or critiques or analyzes a particular person or group. Language signification or symbolization verbalizes a visual sign with many meanings, such as bread and wine as Christ's body and blood, or air meaning the Holy Spirit, or water as indicative of chaos or nurture. Language is *denotative*, effecting enhancing understanding of clarity, cultural imperatives, or common words. Language is *connotative*, through use of metaphor, images, symbols, dialogue, or ambiguity to "hook" the information being transmitted.[12]

Effective communication[13] in the preaching moment is grounded in cohesion. Both sides of the transmission know the forms and conventions of language. The communication has an intentionality of purpose. There is a valid reason for the sermon. It makes sense. The listener responds to what is said either through immediate verbal or vocal means or in a delayed manner through change in behavior or through increased learning. Both the preacher and listener are able to relate the information to other bodies of knowledge. A sermon is not preached in a vacuum. It is a living speech act and in some

manner the information has been related before the present situation. The sermon undergirds the continuity of one's faith journey within a particular context.
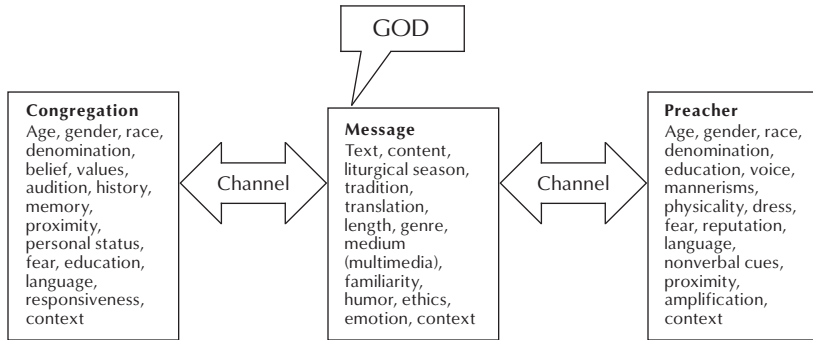
Efficient Message Transmission

Basic communication theory speaks of a channel or media corridor for transmission of a message from one source to another. In preaching, God and the (hopefully) God-inspired message are central to a feedback loop between the preacher and congregation. Several factors impinge on whether or not the message is successfully communicated. The preacher should be aware of the multiple cultures and human elements present in any group of listeners. What is the age distribution of the listeners? How much older or younger than the average congregant is the preacher? Do the preacher and the listeners share values? In an age of transdenominationalism, what are the understood and actual denominational or belief affiliations of the listeners? In the twenty-first century a significant portion of the faith community has shifted to denominations that possess a more syncretistic view of faith than was common in the early to mid-twentieth century. Similarities in gender, race, and sexuality between the congregation and preacher also enhance the preaching moment rather than diminish potential barriers between them. The reputation, personal status, education, experience, and familiarity of the preacher as perceived by the congregation at times provide an immediate rapport between the communicative parties, particularly when the majority of the congregation identifies with the preacher.

Finally, the message itself potentially enhances the communicative execution. The familiarity the preacher and congregation has with the text, the illustrative information, and the liturgical season each have an impact on the content of the message. How the preacher chooses language to denote humor, the length and genre of the sermon, the use of multimedia, manuscript or extemporaneous presentation may generate attentiveness to the sermon. The following diagram (fig. 1.2) illustrates the sermonic feedback loop.

Communication Disruptions

The factors listed in figure 2.1 are representative rather than exhaustive. There are a number of other factors that may have an impact on the transmission loop and either enhance or destroy the clarity of the message. Consider the way something as simple as the choice of the biblical text upon which the sermon is based can disrupt communication. Choice of a text may be predetermined by the local congregation, the liturgical season, the denomination, or the use of a particular lectionary, or the preacher may choose the text herself.

Figure 1.2 • Sermonic Feedback Loop

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                        ┌──────────┐
                        │   GOD    │
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┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
│ **Congregation** │   │ **Message**      │   │ **Preacher**     │
│ Age, gender, race,│◄═►│ Text, content,   │◄═►│ Age, gender, race,│
│ denomination,     │Channel liturgical season, Channel denomination,   │
│ belief, values,   │   │ tradition,       │   │ education, voice, │
│ audition, history,│   │ translation,     │   │ mannerisms,      │
│ memory,           │   │ length, genre,   │   │ physicality, dress,│
│ proximity,        │   │ medium           │   │ fear, reputation, │
│ personal status,  │   │ (multimedia),    │   │ language,        │
│ fear, education,  │   │ familiarity,     │   │ nonverbal cues,  │
│ language,         │   │ humor, ethics,   │   │ proximity,       │
│ responsiveness,   │   │ emotion, context │   │ amplification,   │
│ context           │   │                  │   │ context          │
└──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘
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But one must remember that the contemporary church contains people with varying degrees of knowledge of the text. For example, at different ends of the spectrum are those who have no previous connection to the text and those who know the text well but have a distorted understanding of what the "text really says" and a different theology from the preacher. Both circumstances may result in resistance to the message. Also, the translation of the text read in worship can cause a disruption. If the preacher uses a paraphrase version in a congregation that traditionally uses the King James Version or the King James Version in a congregation used to contemporary critical translations, the listeners may feel a disconnect before the preacher even begins to speak her sermon.

Surface barriers to meaning are language, images, and appearance. Deeper barriers to meaning are anxieties, resistance, and defensiveness on the part of either the preacher or the listener. Static in the communication channel may emanate from the language meanings or type of language used in the tradition, by the preacher, or in the other elements of worship. Preachers have little power to control some of these, while they are responsible for others. Some examples that the preacher can influence include:

• Power and authority disparities between the preacher and the congregation

• Preconceived notions about the preacher's oratorical skill, reputation, personhood, or faith

• Condescending terminology, mood, tone, and presence in the sermon

- Noise emitted from the environment—something as "minor" as the hum of a heater or as disconcerting as a screeching, tinny microphone

- Sermonic humor (or what passes for humor), inappropriate or risqué language

- Varying theological worldviews and ethical stances between the preacher and congregation or among factions of the congregation

- Sermons that stop earlier or last longer than what the congregation generally expects and experiences

- Challenges from the preacher for a quiet congregation to respond or less verbal responses from the preacher in the midst of a vocally engaged congregation

In addition to these types of disruptions, there are a number of language signals of which the preacher must be aware and must address to enhance the effectiveness of the communication loop. Every preacher experiences one of these at some point, so understanding their possibility rather than striving for perfection is our goal.

- Incomplete sentences and inaccurate sentence structure (some simply lose the sentence on the page or in their head due to anxiety or some physical disruption)

- Incorrect pronouns, plurals, and possessives (at times this is a function of dialect or regionalism rather than incorrect speech)

- Omission of parts of a story or punchline (if it is your story you should know it well enough to retell it with or without hyperbole)

- Run-on sentences. (I usually caution students to edit down sentences. The longest one I counted in class was fifty-two words long. This affects the preacher's breathing cycle, sentence phrasing, and general reception of the majority of the sermon content, and often leaves the listener confused.)

The overall use of verbal and nonverbal language is vitally important to the transmission of the message. There are several basic guidelines for linguistically efficient sermons. In reviewing my notes from the only preaching class I took in seminary, I recall that Dr. Charles G. Adams, Senior Pastor of Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, in his authoritative voice, advised neophyte preachers on communicative sound in preaching. As I remember, he intoned:

• Don't be dull, tedious, or laborious

• Don't apologize for the sermon

• Don't be inaudible—reach the furthest person from the pulpit

• Don't preach at, under, or over the people, but to, with, and for the people

• Don't imitate others—be yourself

• Don't preach too long[14]

I have found these principles invaluable in the development of my preaching voice, and in maintaining relevant content and purposeful connection with the listeners. Each element takes into account both the needs of the listener and the authenticity of the preacher. The following exercise provides another way to consider all the players in the preaching communication paradigm.

Exercises for Communicating the Word
"Just" Text Selection and Use Exercise
In this exercise, select a pericope. Then reflect on the following questions:

• Read it in several translations out loud.

• How does the text parallel my context?

• What personal bias do I bring t this text?

• Does this text in any way slight or degrade any culture, gender, ethnic, national, denominational, social, economic, or age group?

- Will I be able to earnestly use this pericope and my imagery to help listeners view all persons as equals?

- Am I able to reframe the text in light of language that may "other" some listeners?

Foundations of the Preaching Moment Exercise

In sermon preparation, preachers do well to engage in self-interpretation and interpretation of their context before they turn to exegesis of the biblical text. A fuller list of the arenas of critical exegesis includes

- exegesis of self
- exegesis of congregation
- exegesis of community
- exegesis of world
- exegesis of text
- exegesis of reception of the Word

Each of these stages should begin and end with prayer. After jotting notes about each area, prepare a sermon outline in consideration of the answers. Preachers need to engage in exercises in portability of communication—learning to tailor sermons for congregations that are both identical to and distinct from one another, especially congregations whose demographics are different from the context of one's "home" congregation.

Preaching is an opportunity to use God's gift of language to its fullest. Words affect the heart, soul, and mind. The preacher must be committed to oral communication, keeping words simple, clear, and appropriate. One must invite the listeners, both as individuals and as a community, into self-examination and fuller personal engagement of the biblical text. The preacher must relay hope for change from present realities to future possibilities. Finally, the preacher must lead the community in celebration of what God has done, is doing, and will do in their lives. The preacher seeks to open up means for all of God's children to stand on equal footing, which by necessity involve the critique of inequities in interpersonal relationships, families, communities, churches, and in the world.

Language is verbal and nonverbal signs, signals, symbols that represent the climate of beliefs, attitudes, values, common sense, common talk. It allows us to assign meaning to life. It makes creating order to our reality possible. The language of preaching must be carefully considered in order to support, inform, change, or broaden the listener's faith experience.