Introduction

My mouth fell open as I raised my head from scanning the sermon evaluation sheet just in time to see the five-foot-six, slender, alabaster, hairless, ordinarily quiet student removing his shirt as he began to describe Peter jumping overboard to attempt his famous walk on water. The students smiled, gasped, fell silent as Myron continued disrobing down to his shorts, his voice quaking and his face flushing to bright red. His intent was to symbolize the words of the text but his appearance and obvious embarrassment were a distraction that overshadowed the content of his sermon. He had used this preaching style several times in his home church and it was accepted as an appropriate means of transmitting the gospel. But here, Myron had neglected to assess the variety of people in the class, many of whom would find the format disturbing.

Veronica, a black female student, marched confidently to the pulpit. A Baptist preacher for ten years, she knew how to use her background as a public relations corporate executive to make immediate engagement with her listeners and work the room. Bringing the text to life with her passion, panning the entire room in an effort to connect with each person, punctuating the air with gestures, emphasizing emotion with her face and arms, immersing the listener in the depths of the text, and raising the sermon to a hopeful conclusion, this preacher had her listeners on the edges of their seats. She deftly used humor, volume adjustments, and image-rich language to deliver her exegetical insights. Her volume ebbed and flowed like an ocean tide. Each word was spoken with conviction. She invited each listener to journey with her through the text by her mere confident and engaging presence. The class seemed to hang on her every word, applauding as she finished the sermon. She was able to deliver a dynamic sermon to a receptive audience—a different experience for a preacher who rarely had an opportunity to preach in her home church.

The class responded with barely audible "Amen," "It's alright," "Take your time," and "You can do it," as Frank struggled to begin his sermon. He had had panic attacks before but this time he resolved to preach his sermon in spite of his nervousness. Small tremors began to grip the edges of his mouth but he kept going. The spasms increased to engulf his entire body, undulating upward from his knees to his eyelids. He struggled for air, and at first I thought he was having a full-fledged seizure, but he kept going. His breathing was labored as

he launched into the body of the sermon. He broke out in a sweat, occasionally hiccoughed, and I thought the paramedic call was not far behind. He stood still, gripping the podium as he completed his twelve-minute oral presentation, then he quickly sat down and hung his head. He had sought medical help and was told that it was a psychological issue. He was in therapy and was trying to overcome his fear of public speaking. He explained that for the five years of his preaching ministry every sermon was like this major presentation. He pastored a small Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, where his congregation was supportive of his preaching and had become accustomed to his tremors. His call to preach superseded his obvious delivery issues. The peer evaluations were amazing. They were not put off by his physicality and were able to understand the sermon. His resolve to preach in spite of his idiosyncrasies increased their desire to listen.

The typical twenty-first-century "Introduction to Preaching" class is vastly diverse in student ethnicity, age, gender, denomination, theology, role models, and preaching experience—a diversity increasingly reflected in our church pulpits. Sermon delivery style is no longer a matter of "one size fits all." The role of the preacher is to assist the listeners in the identification of spiritual, social, cultural, psychological, and economic issues that have an impact on daily life. There are as many different styles of delivery as students present in the class or preachers in the pulpit. Delivering the sermon entails basic knowledge of communication and the preacher's use of voice and diction to transmit the message. In the midst of singular definitions of "good" preaching, the study of communication is an essential tool for sound delivery of the good news. The content of the sermon may be excellent, the context fully understood, the exegesis may lead biblical scholars to cheer, but a weak delivery can overshadow all the preliminaries.

My profession as a teacher and practitioner in speech-language pathology has given me expertise in phonation and sound production, human transmission systems, sound perception or hearing, and acoustic, physiological, psychological, and linguistic phenomena of human speech. Part of the profession is proficiency in the measurement and assessment of intelligibility and quality, technological processing of speech analysis, synthesis, and automatic recognition and therapeutic principles for remediation of communicative disorders in children and adults. It was not until 1986 that my profession as a speech pathologist and my profession of faith would intersect, when a homiletics professor asked me to assess his class for possible voice and diction difficulties and recommend ways in which they could improve in their communication of sermonic material or sacred rhetoric. Rhetoric as classically defined is the art

or study of using language effectively and persuasively. Sermons are basically an arrangement of sounds, words, movements, and even silence used to communicate faith claims. The preacher's ability to transmit these faith claims or beliefs clearly and effectively assists the listener in processing the message.

This is one reason the specialized use of the vocal mechanism in speaking and singing must be afforded particular attention in sermon delivery. Cicero writes that persuasive speech is marked by invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery of language.[1] One's ability to communicate a message clearly and effectively is directly affected by the type of voice and diction one possesses. Oral competence is grounded in the intentions of the speaker and receptivity of the listener as he seeks to know what the preacher thinks or feels. In other words, when the preacher's delivery is marked by obscure meaning, monotone delivery, misarticulation of sound, mispronunciation of words in the biblical text, insufficient volume, or failure to consider the language levels or abilities of the listener, the sermon—regardless of the proficiency of exegesis, depth of poetic creativity, or brilliance of attire—will suffer disruptions in communication.

The communication process of preaching begins as the preacher cognitively processes what he or she is going to say, whether through an assigned text or personal choice of Scripture or theme. Parts of speech are then placed in a learned or socially acceptable order. Language is chosen to relate these thoughts based on ethnicity, race, gender, education, age, and ability of one's listeners. Information is prepared to be transmitted to those who share the same coding system and seek the message. The prepared sermon content then may be either accepted or rejected by the listener.

The voice of the preacher must be appropriate to the age, gender, and physicality of the listener or the communication channel is disrupted. That is, the speaker's intelligibility of sounds, omission of sounds or syllables, distortion of phonemes, additional consonants or vowels due to regional, racial, or cultural dialects, language development, or educational level have an impact on communication channels. Moreover, the level and range of the preacher's speaking voice, appropriate loudness, the distinctive quality of the preacher's voice in terms of smoothness, pacing, energy, inflection, emotion, or tonality, "culturally accepted" vocabulary, slang, idioms, acronyms or syntax in particular contexts determine the efficiency of the vocalizations.[2]

The contemporary landscape is filled with conflicting images and proclamation intent. That is, the intent of the gospel is for *all* persons. For example, chronic use of "men" without regard for the presence of "women" in the sermon delivery excludes a significant portion of humanity in reception of the "good news." Moreover, the styles, mannerisms, attire, and even gender

demographics of both preachers and parishioners have changed over the past twenty years. Preachers are in search of their distinctive, unique, particular voice for this day and age. This book introduces preachers to the rationale and methods for effective use of voice (verbal) and body (nonverbal) in the animation of the word in the preaching moment. Each chapter opens with typical examples from preaching courses (like the one used above) to help frame the issues to be discussed.

Chapter 1, "Communicating the Word," reviews basic communication theory, speech development, and oral-aural language. It also discusses the importance of figures of speech, verbal communication, inclusive language, and the power of language in the preached word. The basis of the discussion will be questions beginning preachers frequently ask regarding the whys and hows of communication in the preaching moment.

Chapter 2, "Inculturating the Word," covers cultural variables involving preachers and congregational contexts. These variables include gender, race, ethnicity, geography, denomination, congregational composition, age, education, and electronic (Internet and television) communication.

Chapter 3, "Voicing the Word," includes respiration, hearing, vocal energy, breath control, pitch, volume, pacing, rate, pausing, intensity, duration, rhythm, intonation, and inflection. Special attention is given to identifying one's own voice.

Chapter 4, "Articulating the Word," presents information on basic articulation, phonation, mood, flavor, color, quality, tone, clarity, dialect, and vernacular. It also addresses commonly mispronounced words in preaching and lists suggestions for increased clarity of speech.

Chapter 5, "Embodying the Word," discusses emotion and preaching, mood, facial expression, eye contact, posture, amplification, anxiety, text, sermon, and manuscript form and usage. Brief mention will be made of the connection between sermon form and worship style (liturgical to extemporaneous).

Chapter 6, "Animating the Word," will contain information about physicality (attire, body type, hair, and clothing), kinesics (body movement, gestures, self-touching, and posture), chronemics (meaning, structure and use of time, speed of body movement), haptics (tactile, interpersonal physical contact with listeners, touch), and proxemics (space, distance between preacher and listener).

Suggestions and exercises for enhancing voice, diction, and nonverbal engagement of the listener are included in each chapter. I have used these exercises in preaching seminars and classes I have taught over the course of the last twenty years and these may be used for group discussions or for individual enhancement of sermon delivery. They may be modified to fit the context and interest of the readers.