

"GOOD SERMON, PREACHER": THE EFFECTS OF AGE, SEX, AND EDUCATION ON HEARER RESPONSE TO PREACHING

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Several studies have suggested that demographic characteristics of sermon hearers influence how those hearers respond to sermons. Post-hoc analysis of experimental data confirms this general finding. Specifically, this study found that older people respond to sermons they hear more positively than do younger sermon hearers and that sermons have greater impact on women than on men. Different levels of education had no significant effect on response to sermons. These specific findings confirm some earlier findings, but contradict others. Possible explanations for these differences are discussed. In conclusion, comments about general methodology for researching response to sermons are given.

Despite the centrality of preaching in the life of the Christian Church, especially in Protestantism, relatively little empirical research on preaching and the hearing of sermons has been conducted. Pargament and Silverman (1982:33) exaggerate only slightly when they report that "empirically derived information" is largely "missing from the literature" about preaching. Much of the research that has been conducted focuses on identifying characteristics of the message or the speaker that promote particular types of response. Less attention has been given to a complementary issue of equal theoretical and practical importance: differing responses among hearers of the same sermon.

The individual characteristics that lead hearers to respond differently to sermons are undoubtedly complex, and will be uncovered only through intensive investigation. Nevertheless, the presumed complexity should not lead researchers to overlook the obvious. A small but growing body of evidence indicates that simple demographic differences—sex, age, and education—constitute significant variables affecting hearers' response to sermons.

The evidence about the impact of such demographic variables on response to sermons is, however, far from clear. Newman and Wright (1980) surveyed a self-selected sample of Catholic lay people, seeking to determine the degree of sermon effectiveness and to identify "social variables" that explain why hearers respond to sermons differently. Among other results, they found that the age and sex of the hearers were not significantly related to sermon effectiveness, while education did prove to be a significant factor. Sermons had less impact on well-educated people. Pargament and Silverman (1982) conducted a similar survey, questioning a different, systematically selected sample of Catholic lay people. In contrast to Newman and Wright, they found that sermons had more impact on well-educated hearers than on those with less education, and that age and sex were both significant variables, with men reporting greater sermon impact than women, and older hearers reporting greater impact than younger ones.

Both of these studies used similar multiple-question scales to measure sermon impact or effectiveness. Typical questions were "Do sermons provide you with a sense of God's love?" and "Do sermons relate the Message of Christ to the problems of your own life?" (Newman and Wright); and "Does the preaching of your clergy: Help you better know Jesus Christ? Move you to lead a more Christian life? Help you to understand and respond to the word of God in the Scriptures?" (Pargament and Silverman).

An extensive West German experiment (Daiber, et al., 1980, 1983), involving 6687 Protestant subjects who responded to 93 sermons of two distinct types, provides a cross-cultural comparison. This study found that, with only minor exceptions, as the age of the hearer increased, so also did the reported "meaningfulness" (*Massgekräft*) of the sermon, the degree to which the hearer felt his or her own views were reflected in the sermon, and the willingness of the hearers to describe the sermon they heard as especially good. Higher levels of education, however, produced the opposite effect: lower reports of sermon meaningfulness, a greater sense that one's own views were contradicted by the sermon, and a lower percentage of "especially good" ratings (Daiber, et al., 1983:304-307). Thus, the West German study supports Newman and Wright's findings in respect to education, but it supports Pargament and Silverman in finding a positive correlation between the age of the hearers and their evaluation of sermons.

Obviously, there is much yet to be learned about the effect of sermon hearers' age, sex, and education on their response to preaching. The current study presents further evidence and will offer possible explanations for some of the contrasting results.

METHOD

This study is a secondary analysis of data gathered in an experiment conducted for another purpose (Howden, 1986). Subjects were 89 lay worshippers at four Presbyterian churches in New Jersey. All were volunteers, not chosen by random selection. Of the 89 subjects, 59 were female and 30 were male. Most were middle-aged or elderly (81% aged 40 or older) and well-educated (64% were college graduates).

The subjects were randomly divided into four groups. Each of the groups heard a different sermon, recorded on audiotape (all by the same speaker). All four sermons suggested similar courses of action for the hearers, but differed from one another in specific content and structure.

After hearing the sermon, subjects completed a questionnaire. Response to the sermon was measured by two separate scales. The evaluation scale contained four items: three questions answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale ("How helpful was this sermon for you?" "How much did this sermon influence you?" and "How much would you like to hear this preacher again?"), and a 5-point semantic differential scale on which the hearers rated the sermon as good or bad.

The agreement scale consisted of six items measuring the subjects' agreement or disagreement with positions taken in the sermon, using a 7-point Likert-type scale. The topics addressed were pornography, fairness in personal relations, and Christian responsibility to fight hunger. There was no pre-test of the subjects on the agreement scale, nor was there a control group. Therefore, scores on the agreement

scale should not be interpreted as indicating *changes* in the level of agreement with the positions advocated in the sermon. Scores indicate only the level of agreement after having heard the sermon.

Higher scores on a scale indicate more positive evaluation of the sermon, or greater agreement with the positions advocated in the sermon, respectively.

The methodology employed in this study has two limitations that require that it be considered only as an exploratory study. First, the subjects were not randomly selected, so that generalizing the results for wider populations is questionable. Second, the use of tape-recorded sermons, rather than live presentations, may change the dynamics of hearer response. For one thing, the tape-recorded sermons stood alone, largely divorced from the usual liturgical setting for preaching. Furthermore, the medium by which a message is communicated influences the amount and type of information that is conveyed and subtly alters the relationship of the participants in the communication process (Cathcart and Gumpert, 1983; Chaiken and Eagly, 1983). Therefore, response to tape-recorded sermons might be different than response to sermons delivered by a preacher in the presence of the hearers.

RESULTS

Age

Table 1 shows the mean agreement and evaluation scores for all age groups, along with the F ratio computed by one-way ANOVA.

Table 1

MEAN SCORES ON AGREEMENT AND EVALUATION SCALES, BY AGE			
Age	N	Agreement	Evaluation
Under 20	3	4.945	3.083
20 - 29	6	5.556	2.458
30 - 39	8	5.625	2.281
40 - 49	18	5.935	2.931
50 - 59	20	5.958	3.488
60 - 69	21	6.214	4.000
70 and over	13	5.821	3.962
F (6, 82 df) -		1.368	7.767*

* $p < .001$

Age is a significant variable for the evaluation scale. The youngest hearers evaluate the sermon they heard almost in the middle of the 5-point scale. The score then drops for the next two age groups, before turning steadily upward, with the two

oldest age groups giving the highest, nearly equal, evaluations.

The drop in scores from teen-agers to people in their thirties may be illusory, however. Because of the small number of subjects in the first three age groups, the differences between these groups, taken alone, are not significant ($F(2, 14) = .796$). Therefore, grouping the subjects into three age groups, rather than seven, probably provides a clearer picture of the results. With such a grouping, those under 40 years old have a mean evaluation score of 2.486, those between 40 and 59 have a mean score of 3.224, while those 60 and over have a score of 3.985 ($F(2, 86) = 19.597, p < .001$).

The differences between the mean agreement scores in table 1 are not significant. (However, when subjects are grouped into three age groups, as above, a weak tendency can be observed: Those under 40 have a mean agreement score of 5.480, those between 40 and 59 have a score of 5.947, while those 60 and over have a score of 6.064 [$F(2, 86) = 2.628, p < .10$].)

Education

The mean agreement and evaluation scores for the various education levels are reported in table 2. Neither of the F ratios achieves statistical significance at the .05 level.

Table 2

MEAN SCORES ON AGREEMENT AND EVALUATION SCALES, BY EDUCATION			
Education	N	Agreement	Evaluation
H.S. grad or less	15	5.700	3.767
Some college	17	6.137	3.691
College grad	27	6.049	3.324
Grad school	30	5.739	3.042
F (3, 85 df) -		1.256	2.652

Sex

The mean agreement and evaluation scores for the two sexes are found in table 3, accompanied by t scores. On both scales, women responded to the sermons significantly more positively than did men.

Because both age and sex proved to be significant variables for the evaluation scale, two-way ANOVA was conducted for these variables on this scale. No interaction effect between the two variables was found.

Table 3

MEAN SCORES ON AGREEMENT AND EVALUATION SCALES, BY SEX			
Sex	N	Agreement	Evaluation
Male	30	5.522	3.033
Female	59	6.096	3.547
t =		3.014**	2.368*

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed test)
 ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed test)

DISCUSSION

Before turning to the specific results, a few words should be said about the agreement scale. As noted earlier, the absence of both pre-test and control group comparisons makes the validity of this scale as a measure of sermon impact questionable. The attitudes it measured (regarding pornography, fairness in personal relations, and Christian responsibility to fight hunger) could very well have existed previous to the experiment, and not been affected at all by listening to the sermon.

Indeed, one would not expect that listening to one tape-recorded sermon would greatly change people's attitudes on the topics addressed. Is there any evidence, then, that the agreement scale measures response to the sermon, rather than pre-existing attitudes? Only a little. If the different experimental sermons had produced different scores on the agreement scale, that would have been convincing evidence. But the differences between the four sermons were not significant (Howden, 1986:179-182). However, it was hypothesized that a particular moderating variable (liking the preacher) would be significant for determining the effectiveness of one of the sermons. A significant correlation was found between that moderating variable and the agreement scale, for that sermon only. Therefore, there is some evidence to indicate that scores on the agreement scale do reflect responses to the sermons, at least to some degree (Howden, 1985; 1986:185-190).

That evidence is hardly conclusive, however. And, if it should be that case that the agreement scale measured only pre-existing attitudes, that might also seem to call the validity of the evaluation scale into question: Subjects might have evaluated a sermon more highly simply because it reinforced their pre-existing attitudes. Here, however, the evidence is clear. Scores on the evaluation scale are largely independent of the agreement scale: they cannot be dismissed as merely reflecting the pre-existent attitudes of the subjects. To be sure, there is a statistically significant positive relationship between scores on the two scales ($r = .319$; $p < .01$). However, even if one interprets the agreement scale as measuring one of the causes for scores on the evaluation scale, rather than measuring a parallel effect, it is a fairly weak cause ($r^2 = .101$). Scores on the evaluation scale are influenced by other factors as well. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that scores on the evaluation scale merely reflect pre-existing agreement, measured by the agreement scale.

Age

Scores on the evaluation scale show clearly that older people evaluate the sermons they hear more highly than do younger people. This result is consistent with the majority of previous studies (Pargament and Silverman, 1982; Daiber, et al., 1983).

The observed pattern of response appears to be largely independent of the specific sermon that was heard. There were no marked differences between responses to the four experimental sermons used in this study. Daiber and his colleagues also report that their findings apply generally, not just to certain of their experimental sermons. Pargament and Silverman did not consider specific sermons, but surveyed Catholic lay people in 15 parishes about the general impact of their clergy's preaching. Against this background, Daiber and his colleagues (1983:305) are probably correct in concluding that the greater impact reported by older hearers is not so much a reflection of their response to specific sermons as it is an indication of their more positive evaluation of preaching as an institution.

The reasons for this positive attitude toward preaching are not clear. It may simply be that younger generations in Western Europe and the United States have grown up and been socialized in a more secular age, wherein the church and its preaching plays a less significant role. It could also be, however, that people (at least the church members who participate in such studies) develop a more positive attitude toward preaching over the years. Only a longitudinal study (as Daiber, et al. suggest) will allow us to answer this question.

Education

As noted earlier, previous studies of this topic have produced conflicting results. Newman and Wright (1980) and Daiber, et al. (1983) found that subjects with lower levels of education responded more positively to sermons. Pargament and Silverman (1982) found the opposite to be true among their subjects. The nonsignificant results of this study do little to clarify the situation.

Nevertheless, one may cautiously call attention to a tendency that can be seen in table 2: The higher the level of education, the lower the evaluation score. ANOVA produces an F ratio with $p < .10$. Such weak evidence, however, hardly settles the issue.

One should actually not be surprised to find contradictory results regarding the effect of educational level on sermon effectiveness. Communication researchers have long realized that there is a complex interaction between the educational level (or intellectual ability) of message recipients and the effectiveness of persuasive messages (Howland, et al., 1953:181-184). Certain message characteristics appear to be more effective for well-educated persons, while other message characteristics appear to have more effect on less-educated persons. Daiber, et al. (1983:315-333) investigated the degree of assent to various types of perlocutionary speech-acts (cf. Austin, 1963) in sermons. They found that hearers with lower education levels responded more positively to perceived advice and expressions of thankfulness, while hearers with higher educational levels responded more positively to perceived assertions, requests, expressions of doubt, and warnings. Even these patterns, however, varied to some degree according to the overall style of the sermon

in which the speech-acts were embedded.

Therefore, general conclusions, such as sermons have more (or less) impact on well-educated people, are open to question. At best, such conclusions are generalizations that may not apply in specific cases. The results might vary greatly when different types of sermons, or different types of impact, are considered.

(The score patterns in table 2 for the two different measures of response—agreement and evaluation—are noticeably different. Although the failure to attain statistical significance cannot be ignored, the patterns at least suggest the possibility that agreement and evaluation might be affected differently by the educational level of sermon hearers.)

It is certainly possible that extensive research would confirm the finding that sermons are generally less effective for better-educated people. One could well hypothesize that the skills of critical thinking learned in higher education might lower sermon impact. But it will take truly extensive research, taking a wide range of variables into account, before such a position could be substantiated.

Sex

On both the agreement and the evaluation scale, women indicated a more positive response to the sermons they heard than did men. Again, one should recall that the agreement scale may reflect pre-existing agreement rather than sermon impact. It is striking that the differences between the sexes revealed in table 3 are stronger for the agreement scale than for the evaluation scale, a pattern that is not found elsewhere in the results from this experiment. It could well be that at least a part of the difference is not the result of the sermon, but represents pre-existing attitude differences between the sexes.

However that may be, the evaluations of the sermons by men and by women are markedly different. Several possible explanations for this difference come to mind. Other studies (Newman and Wright, 1980; Pargament and Silverman, 1982; Daiber, et al., 1983) have consistently shown that subjects who have greater involvement in the life of the church rate the effectiveness of sermons more highly than subjects who are less involved in church life. Degree of church involvement was not measured in this experiment. It is a matter of common knowledge, however, that women tend to be more actively involved in church activities and feel closer ties to the church than do men (Carroll, et al., 1979:21, 116, 118). Therefore, one is tempted to assume that the differences reported in table 3 might reflect differences in church involvement rather than actual differences between the sexes in sermon response. Such a conclusion would, however, be false. If the subjects for this experiment had been randomly selected church members, such a conclusion might be warranted. The subjects, however, were volunteers. The greater involvement of women in church life is reflected in the fact that nearly twice as many women as men volunteered to be subjects for this experiment. There is no reason, however, to assume that the female volunteers were more active in church life than the male volunteers.

Data from this experiment suggest another possible explanation. Subjects were asked to report the degree to which they liked the preacher, by answering two questions on Likert-type scales: "How much did you like the preacher as a person?" and "How much would you like to be the kind of person this preacher

seemed to be?" Women reported liking the (male) preacher more strongly than did the men. On a 1-5 scale with 5 as the maximum, the mean score for women was 3.593; for men, 2.967 ($t = 2.584$; $p < .02$ [two-tailed test]). Furthermore, there was a very high correlation between scores on the liking scale and scores on the evaluation scale ($r = .906$, $p < .001$). (Unlike the agreement scale [see above], the correlation between liking and evaluation was significant, at the .001 level, for all four sermons; r values ranged from .863 to .954.) One could conclude that those who better liked the preacher evaluated the sermon more highly. Since women liked the preacher better than men did, the women's evaluation scores were higher.

This conclusion would be compatible with a number of studies (Avery and Gobbel, 1980; Baric, 1972; van der Geest, 1981) that conclude that the effectiveness of a sermon is heavily influenced by the attitude of the hearer toward the preacher. When the hearer has a more positive attitude toward the preacher, the sermon will be more effective. There are, however, problems with interpreting the results of this experiment in this way. What exactly does "liking" the preacher mean in the context of this experiment? Subjects had no information about the preacher other than the audiotape of a sermon. Given the lack of other bases for judgment, it is quite possible that the subjects "liked" the preacher to the degree that they evaluated his sermon highly, rather than evaluating the sermon according to the degree that they liked the preacher. With correlational statistics it is impossible to tell. Although there is limited evidence to suggest that liking is—at least to some degree—the cause, and evaluation scores the effect (Howden, 1985), the evidence is far from clear. Even if one concludes that causality flows from liking to evaluation, that only shifts the puzzle to another point. Why should women like the preacher significantly more than men do? Again, there are no definitive answers. One should also keep in mind that Pargament and Silverman's study (1982) produced findings contradictory to those of this experiment: among their subjects, men reported greater sermon impact than women. We are simply not in a position to generalize about different responses to preaching among men and women on the basis of the few studies that have yet been published. It is possible that certain types of sermons would be more effective for female hearers, while other types would be more effective for males. Only further study will tell.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this experiment, together with those of the other studies reviewed, lead the author to the following conclusions:

A. Given the current state of the research, all generalizations about the impact of the sex, age, and education of hearers on sermon response and effectiveness are suspect. The results of the various studies are too often contradictory to allow generalizations. One possible exception to this is the fairly common result that older people respond more favorably to sermons than do younger people. Even here, however, further study is called for.

B. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that demographic characteristics of the hearers do play some role in determining the impact of sermons. Therefore, all empirical studies of response to sermons should take such factors into account.

To take just one example, experiments regarding sermon effectiveness, like many empirical studies, often make use of college undergraduates as subjects. For

example, Pargament and DeKosa (1985) studied memory and distortion of religious messages using undergraduates as subjects. If it is true that younger hearers respond less positively to sermons than older hearers (as seems likely), and if it is true that well-educated people respond less positively to sermons than people with lower education levels (as seems possible), then young, well-educated college students are not ideal subjects for studies of response to sermons. (This general point in no way invalidates the specific findings of Pargament and DeKosa, who responsibly urge caution in generalizing their results to natural settings in congregations [p. 190].)

In light of the available evidence about the demographic characteristics of sermon hearers, all those conducting research about preaching should take demographic characteristics into account when defining the population for studies and choosing their samples. Consideration of demographic factors as moderating variables is definitely in order.

C. In investigating the impact of demographic factors, attempts to replicate previous experiments or surveys would be helpful, rather than each study using different measures of sermon effectiveness and different statistical tests. Given the complexity of the preaching event, no one measure of sermon effectiveness will be adequate to measure the impact of sermons (see point D). Nevertheless, there would be great value in replication. Pargament and Silverman (1982), for example, used a seven-question measure of "perceived sermon impact." This scale demonstrated internal consistency, and the questions (see the examples given earlier) seem well-designed to probe sermon effectiveness in theologically responsible, common-sense terms. Replication of their survey with other subjects would be relatively easy to undertake. A number of such surveys would offer a solid base of evidence from which to develop hypotheses for further study. These hypotheses, then, could be more specific about the variables under study.

D. To discuss sermon "effectiveness" implies a clear understanding of what an effective sermon would be, i.e., what the intended or expected result of preaching is. If empirical studies are to adequately address sermon effectiveness, then measures of sermon effectiveness (dependent variables) should be developed with more theoretical and theological sophistication. Many studies rely on two types of measures of sermon effectiveness: (a) Subjective response of the hearers (e.g., the sermon was "helpful" or "meaningful"); or (b) Measures adapted from secular communication research (e.g. the agreement scale used in this experiment), implicitly presupposing that the effectiveness of sermons can be measured by the same standards applied to other types of messages.

The first type of measure (a) is not without value, but it is terribly vague. Avery and Gobbel (1980:46) found their subjects to have a "pervasive lack of clarity and consistency concerning the purpose of the preaching task. . . . The respondents did not listen to preaching with the expectation that sermons would have clear and definable effects in their lives." If that finding can be generalized, and most sermon hearers do not have clear ideas of what they expect from a sermon, a hearer's statement that a sermon was "helpful" or "meaningful"—or even "good"—is also not clear. "Helpful" or "meaningful" could mean nothing more than "pleasant" or "entertaining." Dahm (1971:239-241) found that three-fourths of worship attenders, questioned no more than one day after the service, reported the sermon they heard to have been good or very good, even though two-thirds of the same subjects could not accurately remember what the sermon had been about.

"Helpful how?" and "Meaningful in what way?" are questions that need to be asked.

The types of questions used by Newman and Wright (1980) and Pargament and Silverman (1982)—e.g., "Has a sermon made you want to praise and thank God?", "Does the preaching of your clergy give you new food for thought and prayer?"—are steps in a helpful direction. Even so, Newman and Wright (p. 58) are correct in describing their questions as "broadly stated" and in calling for greater specificity. The problem with measures of the second type (b) is that they are not sensitive to the specific religious character of the preaching act and the theological claims made about it. One of the axioms of empirical research is that operational definitions of variables should be derived from and obviously related to the conceptual definitions of the same variables. In this case, operational definitions of sermon effectiveness should be related to theological claims about the purpose of preaching, if empirical studies of the effectiveness of preaching are to be perceived as getting at what preaching is "really about."

Unfortunately, many theological statements about the purpose of preaching do not lend themselves easily to operational definition. Barth (1963:21-22) said that the task of the preacher was "to reproduce . . . the gift of God's grace," and that the intended effect of preaching was reconciliation to God. Empirical measures of grace and reconciliation to God are difficult to find. Other theological statements even sound like deliberate attempts to challenge the validity of all empirical research: After writing that preaching "is a form of the word of God," is "God talking," Davis (1961:199) went on to say, "Preaching is therefore a unique kind of speaking, of language. It is like no other form of communication." Presumably, measures applicable to normal human communication would not be appropriate.

Other theological statements, however, are more promising. Consider the following, taken from recent books about preaching: "Preaching is understood as making present and appropriate to the hearers the revelation of God" (Cradlock, 1985:51); "The purpose . . . of preaching is to present a life-world that is credible, that can be appropriated, out of which the community is authorized and permitted to live a different kind of life" (Brueggemann, 1988:143). Operational definitions, and appropriate research designs, are not immediately apparent for either of these statements. Nevertheless, both seem to be conceptions from which operational definitions could plausibly be derived. Other conceptual statements offer even more help to empirical researchers. William Skudlarek (1981:71) describes preaching as "the interpretation of our concrete situation by the word of God in such a way that people are led to turn to God in acts of praise and thanksgiving." Acts of praise and thanksgiving are amenable to empirical measurement.

It is possible for empirical researchers to develop measures of sermon effectiveness that demonstrate a higher level of theoretical and theological sophistication. If that is done, it could contribute greatly to an increased dialog about preaching between theologians and social scientists, a dialog that is much to be desired.

E. As important as this last point is, it should not obscure the fact that study of response to sermons is more comprehensive than study of sermon effectiveness. To study sermon effectiveness is to ask, "Do hearers respond to sermons as they are intended to respond?" To study sermon response is to ask, "How do hearers actually respond to sermons?" regardless of the intentions of preachers or theological pronouncements about the purpose of preaching. Both questions need to be asked, but the latter is more basic. As Nichols (1980:228-229) said, "In terms of

the living human 'documents' we work with, we really do not know what preaching does or does not do. . . . The tragedy is that we have seldom asked."

Both theologians and social scientists are, thankfully, beginning to ask. Albrecht (1982:145) raises an important point, however, when he identifies what he sees as the central problem with empirical studies of response to preaching: "Really, who is asking whose questions here?" Most studies, says Albrecht, are asking the questions of preachers interested in the effectiveness of their sermons. Hearers, by and large, are limited to answering the questions posed by others, not allowed to speak for themselves. If empirical research is to enlighten our understanding of the full scope of responses to sermons, methods that go beyond asking question about effectiveness—i.e., the questions of preachers—should be employed. Discussion groups (cf. van der Geest, 1981) and open-ended interviews with hearers are among the methods advisable.

Nevertheless, given the limited empirical research published to date, nearly all empirical studies of response to preaching are to be welcomed. The results may be modest, as they admittedly are in the current study. Even modest results, however, contribute to our knowledge about response to preaching. In this case, phenomena have been identified—the effects of age, education, and sex on response to sermons—that deserve further study and theoretical elucidation.

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