

A HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER IS AN EXPOSITIONAL LISTENER

What is “expositional listening”? Before answering that question, we need to define “expositional preaching.” The first and most important mark of a healthy church is expositional preaching. “Expositional preaching is not simply producing a verbal commentary on some passage of Scripture. Rather, expositional preaching is that preaching which takes for the main point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture.”¹ If churches are to be healthy, then pastors and teachers must be committed to discovering the meaning of Scripture and allowing that meaning to drive the agenda with their congregations.

There is an important corollary for every member of a local church. Just as the pastor’s preaching agenda should be determined by the meaning of Scripture, so too should the Christian’s listening agenda be driven by the meaning of Scripture. When we listen to the preaching of the Word, we should not listen primarily for “practical how-to advice,” though Scripture teaches us much about everyday matters. Nor should we listen for messages that bolster our self-esteem or that rouse us to political and social causes. Rather, as mem-

bers of Christian churches we should listen primarily for the voice and message of God as revealed in his Word. We should listen to hear what he has written, in his omniscient love, for his glory and for our blessing.

So what exactly do I mean by “expositional listening”? Expositional listening is listening for the meaning of a passage of Scripture and accepting that meaning as the main idea to be grasped for our personal and corporate lives as Christians.

What Are the Benefits of Expositional Listening?

Expositional listening benefits us, first, by *cultivating a hunger for God’s Word*. As we tune our ears to the kind of preaching that makes the primary point of the sermon the primary point of a particular passage of Scripture, we grow accustomed to listening to God. We become fluent in the language of Zion and conversant with its themes. His Word, his voice, becomes sweet to us (Ps. 119:103–4); and as it does, we are better able to push to the background the many voices that rival God’s voice for control over our lives. Expositional listening gives us a clear ear with which to hear God.

The second benefit follows from the first. Expositional listening *helps us to focus on God’s will and to follow him*. Our agenda becomes secondary. The preacher’s agenda becomes secondary. God’s agenda for his people takes center stage, reorders our priorities, and directs us in the course that most honors him. The Lord himself proclaimed, “My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Listening to the voice of Jesus as it is heard in his Word is critical to following him.

Third, expository listening *protects the gospel and our lives from corruption*. The Scripture tells us “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:3–4). The failure to listen expositionally has disastrous effects. False teachers enter the church and hinder the gospel. Ultimately, the truth is displaced by myths and falsehoods. Where members cultivate the habit of expository listening they guard themselves against “itching ears” and protect the gospel from corruption.

The fourth benefit, then, is that expository listening *encourages faithful pastors*. Those men who serve faithfully in the ministry of the Word are worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17). Few things are more discouraging or dishonoring to such men than a congregation inattentive to the Word of God. Faithful men flourish at the fertile reception of the preached Word. They’re made all the more bold when their people give ear to the Lord’s voice and give evidence of being shaped by it. As church members, we can care for our pastors and teachers and help to prevent unnecessary discouragement and fatigue by cultivating the habit of expository listening.

Fifth, expository listening *benefits the gathered congregation*. Repeatedly, the New Testament writers exhort local churches to be unified—to be of one mind. Paul writes to one local church, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there may be no divisions among you, but that you may be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10; see also

Rom. 12:16; 2 Cor. 13:11; 1 Pet. 3:8). As we gather together in our local churches and give ourselves to hearing the voice of God through his preached Word, we're shaped into one body. We are united in understanding and purpose. And that unity testifies to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (John 17:21). But if we listen with our own interests and agendas in mind, if we develop "private interpretations" and idiosyncratic views, we risk shattering that unity, provoking disputes over doubtful matters, and weakening our corporate gospel witness.

How Can Church Members Cultivate the Habit of Expositional Listening?

Well, if expositional listening is so vital to the health of individual church members and the church as a whole, how does a person form such a habit? At least six practical ideas can foster more attentive listening to God's word.

1) MEDITATE ON THE SERMON PASSAGE DURING YOUR QUIET TIME

Several days before the sermon is preached, ask the pastor what passage of Scripture he plans to preach the following Sunday. Encourage him by letting him know that you'll be praying for his preparation and preparing to listen to the sermon. Outline the text in your own daily devotions and use it to inform your prayer life. Learning to outline Scripture is a wonderful way of digging out and exposing the meaning of a passage. You can then use your outline as a listening aid; compare it to the preacher's outline for new insights you missed in your own study.

2) INVEST IN A GOOD SET OF COMMENTARIES

Add to your quiet times some of the greatest minds in Christian history. Study the Bible with John Calvin or Martin Lloyd-Jones by purchasing commentaries on books of the Bible as you read and study through them. If your pastor is preaching through John's Gospel, pick up D. A. Carson's or James Montgomery Boice's commentary on John. Let these scholars and pastors help you hear God's Word with a clear ear and discover its rich meaning. *The Bible Speaks Today* commentary series is an excellent starting place for those wanting to build a library of good commentaries. Also, you might want to purchase an Old Testament and New Testament commentary survey to help you sort through the range of commentary options available. Tremper Longman's *Old Testament Commentary Survey* and D. A. Carson's *New Testament Commentary Survey* are excellent resources.

3) TALK AND PRAY WITH FRIENDS ABOUT THE SERMON AFTER CHURCH

Instead of rushing off after the service is over, or talking about the latest news, develop the habit of talking about the sermon with people after church. Start spiritual conversations by asking, "How did the Scripture challenge or speak to you today?" Or, "What about God's character most surprised or encouraged you?" Encourage others by sharing things you learned about God and his Word during the sermon. Make particular note of how your thinking has changed because of the meaning of Scripture itself. And pray with others that God would keep the congregation from becoming "dull of hearing" and that he would bless the congregation with an

increasingly strong desire for the “solid food” of his Word (Isa. 6:9–10; Heb. 5:11–14).

4) LISTEN TO AND ACT ON THE SERMON THROUGHOUT THE WEEK

We can cultivate the habit of expositional listening by listening to the sermon throughout the week and then acting upon it. Don't let the Sunday sermon become a one-time event that fades from memory as soon as it is over (James 1:22–25). Choose one or two particular applications from the Scripture and prayerfully put them into practice over the coming week. If your church has an audio ministry or a website that posts recent summaries, take advantage of these opportunities to feed your soul with the click of a mouse. With your pastor's support, establish small groups that review and apply the sermons. Or, use the sermons and your notes as a resource in one-on-one discipleship relationships. I know of several families that have a regular sermon-review time as their Sunday evening family devotional. There are a hundred ways to keep the sermon alive in your spiritual life by reviewing God's Word throughout the week. Be creative. It's well worth the planning.

5) DEVELOP THE HABIT OF ADDRESSING ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TEXT ITSELF

Jonathan Edwards resolved that he would never let a day end before he had answered any questions that troubled him or sprang to mind while he was studying the Scripture.² How healthy would our churches be if members dedicated themselves to studying the Scripture with that kind of intentional effort and resolve? One way to begin is to follow up with your

pastor, elders, or other teachers in the church about questions triggered by the text. Moreover, don't be passive in your private study; seek answers by searching the Scripture yourself and by talking with accountability partners or small groups. But don't forget that the pastor has likely spent more time than most in thinking about that passage and is there to feed you God's Word. Follow up the sermon with questions and comments that would be an encouragement to your pastor and a blessing to your soul.

6) CULTIVATE HUMILITY

As you dig into God's Word, listening for his voice, you will no doubt begin to grow and discover many wonderful treasures. But as you grow, do not become a "professional sermon listener" who is always hearing but never learning. Beware of false knowledge that "puffs up" (1 Cor. 1:8; Col. 2:18) and tends to cause strife and dissension. Mortify any tendencies toward pride, the condemnation of others, and critical nit-picking. Instead, seek to meet Jesus each time you come to the Scripture; gather from the Word fuel for all-of-life worship. Instead of exalting ourselves, let us remember the apostle Peter's words: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Pet. 5:6).

Conclusion

It is hearing the message and the Word of God that leads to saving faith (Rom.10:17). Church members are healthy when they give themselves to hearing this message as a regular discipline. Expository listening promotes such health for individual members and entire churches.

For Further Reflection

1. How would you rate your ability to listen for the meaning of the Word during private devotions? During sermons?
2. How do you plan to strengthen your listening ability?

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