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# PREACHING RE-IMAGINED

The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith

Doug Pagitt



ZONDERVAN

PREACHING RE-IMAGINED  
by Doug Pagitt

**ZONDERVAN™**

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN 49530 USA



*Preaching Re-Imagined*

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**SECTION TWO**  
**PREACHING BEYOND SPEACHING**

Despite the title this isn't really a book about preaching [1]. It's about more. It's a book about the kinds of communities we're seeking to become and the role preaching plays in the creation of those communities [25]. Preaching isn't an end in itself. We don't participate in Christian communities so we can produce and hear great sermons. We take part in these communities because we believe they're where we're formed and shaped to become the people of God—people who are actively living in the kingdom.

I'm writing with the assumption that most of you who are reading this book have concluded what I have: Preaching doesn't work—at least not in the ways we hope [7]. If it did, pastors wouldn't reach with such anticipation for new books about preaching; we'd already be following the established, tried-and-true methods laid out in the huge array of available preaching resources. We wouldn't have to preach anymore; we'd just replay our perfect sermons and watch our people change.

I believe preaching to be a crucial act of the church. That's why preaching needs to be released from the bondage of the speech making act [1, 4]. Our impulse to tell the story of God in our communities is the right one, but making speeches is the wrong way to do it. Our desire to be a people who is connected with the truth of God is the right one, but speeches won't get us there [17, 21, 22, 33]. This dependence on preaching as speech making has become a form of communication I call *speaching* [1]. Our desire to use our pastoral

gifts of discernment, knowledge, and articulation for the benefit of our communities is the right one, but speaching will keep us from fulfilling that desire [19, 23].

If you know how to listen, you can hear the rumblings that confirm that preaching, as we know it, is a tragically broken endeavor. It can be heard in the halls at every pastors' convention. It can be heard in the conversations among preachers at social gatherings. It can be heard in cars as people drive home from church. You most certainly would be able to hear it if you could crawl into the heads of most preachers during their times of preparation or as they step into the pulpit [6, 10].

It seems clear that we're living in an age containing more great preachers than at any other time in history [4]. We also have greater access to wonderful sermons, and every week in North America more people listen to sermons—live, on the radio or television, on CDs in their cars, and on the Internet—than at any other time in history. But if we look at how Christians continue to struggle with what it means to live in the way of Jesus, we soon realize that great preaching isn't sufficient [11].

Those of us who do the preaching are often the ones who recognize the problem first, not because we think we're bad preachers, but because we know we're good at it [1, 5, 6]. We feel it when our sermons—even those that are technically perfect, those that are relevant and relatable with clever illustrations pulled from popular culture, or those that reveal some deep insight into the text—leave us feeling isolated and

ineffectual [19]. We see it when we look at our congregations and see them diligently taking notes we know they'll never look at or watch them nod in agreement with statements they won't remember once brunch is over. We hear it when our parishioners come to us with the same problems and questions we thought we covered so beautifully during that series on the Sermon on the Mount [20].

### WHY PREACHING FAILS

I looked through preaching books and talked to many other preachers to find out what they had to say about why preaching doesn't work. They offered four major reasons for the failure of preaching:

*The problem is the people.* There are those who suggest the reason we aren't seeing the promised effects of preaching (the creation of communities living in harmony with God) is because the people are "hard-hearted" or refuse to listen to the truth. They seem to believe that when the Word of God is preached correctly, it does its part; but if people aren't changed, then it's because they're "the wrong kind of soil" [7].

*The problem is the method.* Some suggest that we need to add new tricks to our preaching to make our sermons more meaningful to people living in today's culture. They contend that people are different these days and therefore need to have more interactive or experiential communication. We should be using visual reinforcements, fill-in outlines, dramas or well-orchestrated music, and

multisensory media experiences to hold the attention and interest of those listening. Some recommend the use of discussion questions for small groups so the broad message can be brought down to a personal level in a more intimate context. In this justification it's the method—not the message—that needs work [7].

*The problem is the preacher.* If the pastor is the right kind of vessel, some say, then his sermons will work. In other words, if we had better motives or better relationships with God, our preaching would seem fresh, attractive, and powerful [7].

*The problem is the content.* And finally, there are some who suggest that what we really need is to get to a pure or more authentic message of Jesus, and then we'd see preaching's real power [7].

### THE PROBLEM IS SPEACHING

Unfortunately, these reasons fail to tap into the most significant and perhaps most simple reason why speaking doesn't work [1]. The problem is that preaching, as we know it, suffers from a relationship problem. The issue isn't simply how we present the information but whose information it is [15]. The issue isn't simply how we tell the story but the relationship between the teller and the hearers [9, 10]. The issue isn't simply the content we present but where we get that content [21, 22, 34]. The crisis isn't how we preach or what we preach or to whom we preach but the act of preaching itself, which has devolved into speaking [1].

Speaching is not defined by the style of the presentation but by the relationship of the presenter to both the listeners and the content: the pastor uses a lecture-like format, often standing while the listeners are sitting. The speaker decides the content ahead of time, usually in a removed setting, and then offers it in such a way that the speaker is in control of the content, speed, and conclusion of the presentation [31, 32, 33].

Speaching can come in many forms. It can be narrative, didactic, inductive, deductive, or what Len Sweet and Brian McLaren call “abductive” in approach (meaning the sermon seizes people by the imagination and helps them gain a new perspective). Regardless of its form, preaching has so uniformly been equated with speech making that any other means of sermonizing is thought to be trivial and less authoritative. What’s worse, speaching is an ineffectual means of communication, one that goes against the very reason we seek to live in Christian community to begin with—so our lives can be shaped as we journey together toward God [24, 26]. My hope is that the conversation in this book will help us free preaching from the limitations of content [8] and move toward a better understanding of the effect of speaching on our communities [11, 25].

I don’t think we’ve allowed preaching to become speaching out of malice or pride, but rather because we’ve become blind to the ways in which the act of speaching damages our people and creates a sense of powerlessness in them [4, 12]. I don’t believe this is what we want. In fact, I

believe most of us desperately want to be part of something better, something more. I know I do [6, 25].

As a pastor I want to be part of a community where the workings of God are imbedded in all, where the roles of teaching and learning aren't mine alone but instead are something intrinsic to who we are as a people [19, 22, 23]. The priesthood of all believers was among the greatest contributions of the Reformation and has essentially been ignored in the area of preaching in many of our churches to the point that it could be called "an unfunded mandate of the reformation" [21]. It means we recognize the work of the Spirit of God in the lives of every human being, and God's work can play out in ways that are more meaningful than simply viewing people as a means of fulfilling the church's agenda. This concept can—and must—include God's people *being* the church and leading one another in every area of life together [8, 15, 16].

### THE MOVE TO PROGRESSIONAL DIALOGUE

Speaching stands in contrast to what I call *progressional dialogue*, where the content of the presentation is established in the context of a healthy relationship between the presenter and the listeners, and substantive changes in the content are then created as a result of this relationship.

It works like this: I say something that causes another person to think something she hadn't thought before. In response she says something that causes a third person to

make a comment he wouldn't normally have made without the benefit of the second person's statement. In turn *I* think something I wouldn't have thought without hearing the comments made by the other two. So now we've all ended up in a place we couldn't have come to without the input we received from each other [2]. In a real way the conversation has progressed.

This interaction can take place in the very moments in which the comments are made or over time. It may include one of us talking longer than the others or sharing the time more equally. The point is that we are in relationship with one another and we are contributing—through dialogue—to one another's lives [24, 25, 26].

At Solomon's Porch, the church where I'm the pastor, progressional dialogue takes several forms. The two most obvious are the sermon preparation, which involves in-depth conversation with a group of other people from the church [31], and the weekly open discussion that happens during the sermon—I talk for a while and then invite others to share their ideas, input, and thoughts about what's been said [2].

Both speaking and progressional dialogue allow a person to have an opinion or even an agenda. But the progressional dialogue approach doesn't allow us (pastors or parishioners) to stay in one place with our opinions and agendas left unaltered [15, 18]. We're given the opportunity to change, refine, and reframe our ideas about God and our lives as God's people. In other words, we're asked to be the church.

## PREACHING: THE SOCIALIZING FORCE OF COMMUNITY

Preaching isn't simply something a pastor does; it's a socializing force and a formative practice in a community [9, 10]. The way we approach preaching is among the most important considerations for those who are seeking to live with God in new ways. Preaching has a tremendous history in the church [4]. It may be said there would be no Christianity without preaching. Churches typically include some sort of preaching in their collective gatherings, and there are many traditions that use preaching more frequently and with more emphasis than communion, collective prayer, personal testimony, healing touch, or other spiritual practices. In fact, for many, church doesn't really count unless it includes a time of preaching [13].

Because of the power and importance of preaching, it's crucial that the church, if it seeks to be useful in the world, be attentive to the effects of speaching and do whatever is necessary to protect our communities from the significant problems speaching presents.

Please understand I'm not suggesting that speaching is a poison that cannot be consumed in even the smallest amounts [7]. There are times when a community will be well-served by the speaching act. But the cumulative effect is another story; consider that it isn't an occasional practice that provides formation, either for good or ill, but one that is replicated time and time again. Weekly speaching functions like a repetitive stress disorder for both preacher and parish [9, 10, 15, 18, 19]. Occasional usage likely won't hurt anyone,

but to make a regular practice of speaching may well be an act of relational violence, one that is detrimental to the very communities we are seeking to nurture [22, 23].

I can imagine a church—and a people—who see themselves as preachers in one another’s lives. Not preachers with inarguable speeches, but people who engage, inform, and build life into one another. Any preaching practice that results in less collective interaction and building of one another should be used very sparingly and abandoned as soon as possible [25, 39].

This is my hope for what preaching can be: the mutual admonition of one another in life with God. The plain reality is that speaching is not adequate to accomplish this. Preaching is far too valuable to be reduced to speech making. I’m not suggesting we become a people who spend less time telling the story, less time talking, or less time leading one another, but certainly less time using one-way communication as our primary means of talking about and thinking about the gospel [19]. I’m not suggesting a practice that reduces speaking, but one that encourages more. What I’m advocating is that we become communities who listen to the preachers among us, not just the preacher standing in front of us [21, 22].

### A HISTORY OF SPEACHING

I’ve been a pastor long enough to have attended many pastors’ events. At nearly every one of them at least some time has been devoted to conversations about preaching. In

recent years I've been struck by how readily speaking has been accepted as the biblical form of preaching [4]. This saddens me. Preaching has a rich and important history with more usefulness, beauty, commonality, and truthfulness than speaking allows. Preaching means "proclaiming." It doesn't mean inarguable, one-way communication. Look at the places in the Bible where preaching is mentioned, such as this passage from Romans: "For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:13-14). It's inconceivable to insert the words "giving a speech" in place of the depth and transformative power of preaching.

Despite our insistence on speaking, churches know there is often too much influence in this practice of one-way communication, so they attempt to push people into small groups to compensate for it. Still we continue to stand in front of our congregations and offer them our well-crafted speeches, hoping that somehow they'll find meaning in our words [12, 13, 14].

We find ourselves stuck, then, with a way of preaching that doesn't work but without any sense of how to change it. It's ironic to me that those who advocate a more holistic means of communication and spiritual formation have to justify why they want something more than speaking. It's the speaking act that has some explaining to do. It's as if speaking is the orthodox way, and the more communal

approach suggested by progressional dialogue is the new kid on the block who has to prove herself. In reality speaching is quite new, a creation of Enlightenment Christianity in which faith formation was understood as something best handled by the “expert” (aka the pastor) [4, 15, 19].

Perhaps one of the reasons we have a hard time letting go of speaching is that people seem to like it [12]. Good speaching brings good feedback. But the value of speaching is not determined by the number of people who say they appreciate it; there may be more people now than ever before who prefer to sit as passive recipients and trust the expert to tell them what the Bible says and what and how they should think. At a time when we are the most speached-to church in history, our understanding of Christianity has become increasingly fractured and self-absorbed. And to be honest, if numbers were truly the mark by which we judged the success of a church, we’d have little choice but to look at the statistics that say the church population in North America is not increasing at nearly the same rate as the general population and therefore conclude that speaching is indeed failing as a means of “winning souls for Christ.” The value of our practices—including preaching—ought to be judged by their effects on our communities and the ways in which they help us move toward life with God [11, 25].

So far I’ve come up with five specific effects that speaching has on communities of faith (there are undoubtedly more). You might be surprised to discover that the effects on this list may not, on the surface, appear to be problems. Rather we might be inclined to see them as good

things—even benefits to our communities. Some might even find that this list represents exactly what they’ve been hoping their preaching will do; our understanding of preaching is the outgrowth of our assumptions about—among other things—God, people, the world, time, and the church. Certainly there are ways of understanding God, faith, and humanity in which these effects of speaking are quite desirable. But to my mind these effects are detrimental to the kinds of communities I believe we’re all seeking to nurture.

#### CREATES ONE SEAT OF GODLY AUTHORITY

Speaking sets the story of God in a prefabricated context where it all makes sense from the perspective of the person speaking. The context of others is therefore inconsequential. Speaking also creates a belief that even in the presence of dozens, hundreds, even thousands of other Christians, there are a select few who know God’s truth and who get to tell others about God. There is hardly a preacher who wants her hearers to leave with the notion that they must access the truth of God through the preacher. But that is precisely the message speaking perpetuates: The pastor has the authority to speak about God, and you don’t. When communities are convinced they are better off with a unified understanding of God that is best articulated by trained presenters, we end up with people who cannot translate what they hear in church to the way they live their lives [17, 18, 19].

### PROVIDES ONE CLEAR MESSAGE

The message at the heart of Christianity is that there is good news among us, that God is among us, that God has not abandoned us. This good news lives not only in the Bible stories, but also in the lives of people. The gospel expands as it moves out into the world through God's people. When we limit the message to one person's speaking act, we may gain clarity, but we close ourselves off to the ways in which the gospel can seep into the corners of individual lives. The message of the speaker will always be generalized, never specific. It will always be presented from the same understanding of the world, the same set of experiences, and the same framework for what it means to live in the kingdom. The goal of preaching is to build one another with the abundance of good news and the continuous, contagious story of the expanding message of God. When we have a centralized message, we eliminate a terrific amount of understanding about the life of God. When we move away from speaking and give voice to the myriad ways in which the gospel infiltrates the lives of all people, we unleash the depth of life with God and allow it to mean something to us as individuals, not simply as congregations [15, 16, 17].

### OFFERS A SENSE OF CONTROL

It seems to make sense that one of the pastor's jobs is to take the huge, complex mass that is the gospel and funnel it into something more easily handled by the untrained individual. But the story we tell is one of God moving in ways we cannot control or even understand. We are telling the story of God creating and inviting us to create, of God moving in the life

of people all around the world, the story of God using the unlikely—the old, the virginal, the meek, the crucified. We tell the story of God inviting us all into the story. We tell the story of raging seas calmed and raging love lived. We tell the story of the Spirit blowing where it will. Yet we resort to speaching in an effort to protect the story, to make it digestible and applicable. The gospel is simply too powerful for that kind of control [18].

#### REINFORCES A PARTICULAR KIND OF RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BIBLE

Speaching places the story of God in the hands of the presenter in such a way that it creates distance between the hearers and the source of the story. Speaching has a way of making the Bible fit into the presentation. It often becomes the content that supports our presuppositions, rather than being a participant in a conversation. The Bible is more than a source of our faith. The Bible ought to live as an authoritative member of our community, one to whom we listen on all topics of which she speaks. Speaching takes the Bible away from the hearers—many of whom are already intimidated by the Bible—and reminds them they are not in a position to speak on how they are implicated by this story. Instead their relationship with the story of God and God's work in the lives of God's people—a story they are part of, mind you—is controlled by the speaker's choice of text and message [32, 33, 34].

REINFORCES A PARTICULAR  
KIND OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
PASTOR AND CONGREGATION

I crave connection with the people in my community, not because I'm the pastor but because, like all of us, I am meant to live in relationship with others. When the pastor is seen as one whose relationship with the story is to be the teller instead of a community member who shares in the formation of the story, we put the preacher in an unsustainable place of pressure and isolation. There is something dangerous in the life of the preacher who regularly tells others how things are, could be, or ought to be.

Speaching also strips away any chance for people in the congregation to feel known and understood by their pastor. Great speech makers have tricks they use to connect with their audience—picking a couple of people and looking at them during their speech, using examples from the hometown crowd to build a sense of intimacy, that sort of thing. But these are manipulations, not relationships [6]. Like the presidential candidate who uses the story of poor Martha Lewis and her arthritis to help him make a point about insurance costs, the speaker who is disconnected from her hearers risks turning God's children into little more than sermon illustrations [9, 10].

Even those of us who might be aware of the damaging impact of speaching have had a hard time replacing it with something else. As I've looked over my own experiences as a pastor and speaker, I've come to believe there are several

reasons why we continue to use speaching as a legitimate form of communication in our communities [12].

*Our communities demand it.* We know people like to hear us speak, particularly if we're good at it. We believe that if we stop doing it, then they'll stop coming. And that might be true; there are growing numbers of people who not only prefer preaching as speaching, but they also require it. Many people come to church because they want to have a person in their lives who makes Christianity accessible and understandable. The preacher in the speaching act can often do exactly that [8].

But many of us who have seen significant growth in our churches know a dirty little secret: Significant growth has its own ill effect on helping communities develop deep faith. Numeric growth of Christianity doesn't indicate a more harmonious way of life with God. The metaphor of the body is a good one for churches. A body that's too big puts a strain on the systems of the body. At the same time communities who never embrace new people or new perspectives find themselves starving. Both obesity and starvation are pathways to death.

*We have few options.* Even when we do feel a need for change, the way to make that change happen can be hard to figure out. Many of us have the impulse to try something new—sometimes out of desperation, sometimes out of hopeful experimentation—but time and creative energy are the enemies of innovation. When there are dozens, hundreds, even thousands of people waiting in a room to

hear the speech each week, it's daunting to think of doing something different or unexpected. Because the instinct to make a change is not supported, there is great risk in moving beyond the "tried and true" practices into new territory. Who wants to be the one to derail a church by trying some weird new preaching idea [14]?

*We like the kinds of communities that like speakers.* There are many professional and personal benefits to being in communities with high regard for speakers. We are treated well, and we get a strong sense of job security. The role of the pastor and the prestige that comes with it have changed significantly in the last 150 years, leaving few benefits. But if we give good speeches, we earn back that lost prestige. We may get speaking gigs, book deals, TV appearances. Speaking is perhaps the only part of a pastor's job where we get feedback, where we find some standard against which to measure our "success." It can be tremendously difficult to put that kind of acceptance in jeopardy [23].

*There is no call to re-imagine it.* When we don't believe we are called or even given permission to change, we rarely make change happen. There is plenty of support for reconsidering other aspects of church life: worship styles, organization, denominationalism, and so on. But few are calling for a change in speaking. There are many who don't see how providing new ways of being in the world are part of a pastor's role. Instead they focus on providing new tools to better accomplish the conventional ways of being the church. They fine-tune what was created for another time and place but never think about re-creating it altogether [26].

These reasons may have held us back from exploring new ways of preaching, but they're no match for a pastor who is passionate about finding a better way to help the faith community live out its call to live as the people of God. This call to a new way of preaching is a call to being a new people, a new church. Part of becoming this new people is developing a deep ecclesiology.

### DEEP ECCLESIOLOGY

Through the centuries followers of Jesus have sought to live in harmony with God, one another, and their world. This effort has involved the creation of Christian communities who articulate, express, and embody the hopeful message of God in their lives. Preaching is meant to contribute to this. I'm not suggesting we need a new kind of preaching to reach a target market. Rather we need a new kind of preaching because we need a new us. It's simply not legitimate to continue with the same practices but expect new outcomes. New outcomes are precisely what we need if the church is going to remain prophetic in the lives of God's people [24, 25, 26].

This call for a deep ecclesiology is a cry from the inside. There might very well be benefit to those on the outside who are interested in learning more about living lives of faith, but the move away from speaching is essential for those of us who are already on the inside of these communities and who long to become a new people.

## IMPLICATION OVER APPLICATION

One of the greatest areas of change for communities of faith who make an adjustment from the speaching model to the progressional dialogue approach is in our understanding of the role of the story in our lives. As speachers we've become proficient at making every speech applicable to the widest cross-section of people [8]. We've become very good at telling people how this story applies to the lives of strangers [9]. But the very nature of speaching—one person choosing, re-searching, and preparing the content of the speech—makes it impossible for our speeches to apply to anyone in concrete, meaningful ways. It's an isolated act with an isolated effect.

Because we've been wed to speaching for so long, we've trained our communities to respond to our speeches by asking themselves, *How does this apply to me?* as though the Word of God is some topical ointment. More often than not they will come up with some generic application—be nice to my neighbors, be honest in my relationships, and so on. But is that really the best we can offer our communities?

A better response, one that comes out of a progressional approach to preaching, is one that invites those who take part in the sermon to ask, "If this is our story, what will this mean for our lives?" Consider what would happen if the people in our communities felt *implicated* by the story of God, if our preaching became the impetus for them to become part of the story itself and start arranging their lives around it [11].

One night my wife, Shelley, and I were driving on a major highway in Minneapolis. There is a digital sign positioned on one of the overpasses that allows the traffic department to make road announcements. On the evening we were driving the sign was lit with this message: Amber Alert: Child Abduction. Grey Chevrolet Blazer License JAB 934. Without a word Shelley and I instantly started looking at all the vehicles around us. This was not our child who was abducted. We knew, or at least assumed, our children were safe. But we were drawn into the story and instinctively knew we had a part to play in it.

Our response to seeing the Amber Alert was different than it would have been had we simply read about the abduction in the paper. We were not spectators of the story but participants who were being asked to do something with this information. We were not asking how this alert applied to our children or to the safety of children in general. This was a call for us and for everyone else driving on that highway to do what we could to remedy the situation. While the chances were remote that we would see the wanted vehicle, we were implicated in this event nonetheless. It became *our* event, if even for a brief time.

We've all been in situations where we suddenly understood that our lives had just changed forever. You find out you're having a baby, you lose your job, the police show up at your house with your 16-year-old in tow. When these situations arise, we don't ask, "How does this apply to me?" We understand that this new chapter in our story will require something of us—a change in our assumptions, our actions,

our priorities. The question of implication is not one made by a removed, objective decision maker but by a participant in the story. Our role is to locate ourselves in the story of God, not simply to see how other people's experiences apply to our lives.

Implicatory preaching cannot happen when our speeches are created in isolation [31]. It cannot come from one person's perspective delivered in the broadest generic terms for a mass of passive strangers whose only role is to listen and try to apply thoughts that may or may not have any bearing on their lives [8, 9]. It takes an incarnated story, one that finds its place in the reality of our lives, to reach implication. Implication is more than poignant application. Application is born in the speaker who predetermines the main points with hopes of specific application. Implication is birthed in the dance between the story and the lives of the participants in that story.

This isn't an effort to create hip churches with a novel way of telling the same story. I'm suggesting we need a new story—not just new content but new ideas about the way the story is lived [7, 11, 25]. This story will require new practices so we can better live out the profound implications of the gospel.

## THE PRACTICES OF PROGRESSIONAL DIALOGUE

Over the years churches have developed particular skills that allow speaching to continue. Very few of these skills come naturally; they are acquired over time and through steady usage. Progressional dialogue will require our communities—preachers and congregations alike—to develop new ways of being the church [27].

## RE-IMAGINED PREPARATION

One of the significant differences between progressional dialogue preaching and speaching is how we create the sermon; the way something is prepared changes its function [30]. If the function of preaching is mutual edification, then the creation of the preaching must be a collective act [31]. Each person and community will need to forge its own path of collective preparation, but it seems to me the following elements need be present in some amount: dialogue, immersion in the story (the Bible, the world, and people's lives) [34], listening, experimentation, disagreement (among each other and within oneself) [29], and openness to others [28, 40].

## DELIVERY

The way communities interact with the sermon is as important as the content itself. Sociologists recognize how culture (the shaping and reinforcing pressure on people) includes thoughts (mental categories), desires (what we want to be), intuitions (assumptions for how things are), and tools (the means of supporting life). These ingredients have a symbiotic relationship: The way we live informs what can be desired.

Our intuitions allow us to think about certain things. The tools we use allow certain desires, beliefs, and longings.

In churches we create the boundaries of what will be accepted in this cultural context. The ways in which we allow and access the thoughts, desires, and intuitions of the community will influence the tools we're able to access. So it matters who speaks and how their words are delivered.

The use of provisional statements ("It seems to me...", "As I understand it...", and so on) is an essential aspect of creating a culture of openness and invitation. These words make room for the thoughts and experiences of others [35, 36, 37, 38].

In addition, it's useful to quote others from the community (these quotes often come out of the communal preparation process). Many of us quote experts or famous people who are rarely part of our community. But the people who are in the midst of our communities often have as much to say about how we pursue the life of God as do famous and brilliant strangers [21].

### LISTENING

For nearly all trained preachers the skill of listening to the congregation is secondary to listening to the text and interpreting it [39]. Just as medical schools have gone to great lengths in recent years to be sure their students know not only medicine and anatomy but also how to engage in the lives of their patients, so does the pastoral field need to expand to

include the skills needed to understand the contexts in which people hear and experience the things of God.

In the last few years preachers have been trained to use mass communication strategies in an effort to increase the impact of their preaching [38]. However, I suggest we instead look at interpersonal communication skills as a means of inviting our congregations into more meaningful lives with God [20].

### ASSUMPTIONS OF PROGRESSIONAL DIALOGUE

To be fair the idea that progressional preaching can implicate us in such a way that we move into a deeper life with God is itself based on several assumptions. Just as the assumptions about speaching inform the reasons we stick with it in spite of the evidence of its failure, so too do these assumptions about progressional preaching suggest something about the kinds of communities in which we see ourselves living [2].

### ASSUMES GOD'S TRUTH RESIDES IN ALL PEOPLE

The only way progressional preaching makes sense is if we believe the people we are progressing with have something to add [22, 40]. While no pastor I know would suggest that he and he alone holds the key to God's truth, few churches live out the idea of the "priesthood of all believers" in this tangible way [17, 21]. Not only is it a theological imperative to allow the Spirit of God to live and find a voice in all

members of our communities, but it's also increasingly a sociological necessity as well. As our churches become more reflective of our multicultural society, we simply cannot pretend to speak to the enormous array of histories, perspectives, and experiences represented by the people who make up our communities of faith [40]. Progressional preaching is perhaps the only way to access the truth that resides in the hearts of our brothers and sisters [15].

The story told about the early church in the book of Acts hinges on the story of Peter and Cornelius in chapter 10. Up to this point the church was still struggling with the “Gentile question.” After this encounter with a faith-filled Gentile, all the major players—even Peter—were changed, and the story becomes active with the faith of the Gentiles. We witness the shift in Peter’s perspective when he finishes the story for Cornelius. When Peter says in verse 34, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism,” this isn’t an incidental comment. It’s the result of progressional preaching where the preacher and the hearer are both made more aware of the life of God through dialogue with one another [3].

#### PROVIDES A FULLER UNDERSTANDING OF THE STORY

The call to be a people who live in the entire story of God’s work in the world is a call to be engaged with the story in ways that preaching doesn’t allow [21, 22]. When we preach, we provide one view, one understanding, one piece of the story [5, 15, 16, 18]. When we hear from others, we aren’t inviting

competing notions set in opposition to one another, but new insights into the story that implicates us all [11]. Not only does this allow the hearers to find multiple entry points into the story, but it also validates the work God is doing in the lives of those who speak. Suddenly, their experiences do matter.

There are those who assume that if more people are allowed to share their understanding of teaching, theology, and faith, then there's a greater risk of the church losing truth [16, 17]. But the history of heresy shows it's most often the abuse of power—not an openness of power—that creates environments ripe with heresy. The church is at a greater risk of losing its message when we limit those who can tell the story versus when we invite the community to know and refine it [18].

#### SHIFTS CONTROL TO GOD

The activity of God is clearly beyond our comprehension and control. Yet when we create neat, three-point packages to explain away the mysteries of God's work and leave no room for our hearers to ask their questions or express their thoughts, we send a clear message that God can be mastered. Progressional preaching assumes there will always be more to say than one person can say alone [28, 31]. There will always be questions and wonderings and puzzlement over the ways of God. It assumes we cannot work out the questions of faith on our own but need to be in communities of faith in which we journey together toward a deeper understanding of God. It assumes no one person can master all knowledge or understanding, and we gain so much when we interact

with the lives and thoughts of others. Most importantly, it assumes that *God* sets the agenda, not us [15, 19, 23].

#### ALTERS THE COMMUNITY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BIBLE

The contemporary church makes two mistakes regarding the function and relationship of the Bible. One is to think of her as a stagnant telling of all the desires of God. The other is to think of her as something from which we extract truth, whether in the form of moral teaching or propositional statements [32, 33, 34].

Progressional dialogue creates a relationship in which the Bible becomes a living member of the community [34]. I've found that when others are allowed to speak, they often refer to parts of the Bible that are seemingly unrelated to the passage on which the sermon is based. But I am constantly amazed at how their insights or sense of a passage add depth to what I've said or spark ideas from others in our community. When this happens, the Bible becomes part of our conversation, not a dead book from which I extract truth.

#### ALTERS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PASTOR AND CONGREGATION

I find tremendous freedom in knowing I don't carry the weight of all knowledge and application in my preaching [19]. The communal act of dialogue allows me to be fully me and lets my understanding shine with the confidence that others may correct what I miss or misconstrue. It allows

me to be a part of my community because I am no longer in a position of having to be the answer man. I am now a brother—granted, one who talks a lot—who is taking part in the life of a community. I can be vulnerable about my own questions and wonderings, knowing my community doesn't expect me to be the sole purveyor of truth and wisdom [16]. This seems to me to be a much more sustainable relationship with my church than one in which I'm always the expert who can't let my guard down.

Progressional dialogue has also allowed me access into the lives of the people in my community. I can almost predict who will comment after my sermons because I know their issues and concerns [10]. They trust I know the context of their comments and can therefore allow themselves to be more open, more honest, and more vulnerable as they take part in the dialogue. We often leave our gatherings not asking, "How does this apply to me?" but openly working out the implications of the story in which we are playing roles.

The message of Jesus is that the truth of God is within us and not limited to the temple or to any other holy place. Jesus often pointed to the life of God within the outsider, the reviled, the ordinary. The notion that God can only be accessed through the well-trained, special, called-out person sits in contrast to the very gospel of Jesus [21, 22]. The prophetic call of the good news is that God is alive and well in the lives of all God's people.

Progressional preaching has a dangerous quality to it [11, 40]. What kind of faith will we have if the preselected,

educated ones are not setting the agenda? What kind of faith will we have if our content is not prescreened and “genericized” to meet the masses? What kind of faith will we have if regular people are putting their spin on it? What kind of faith will we have if we ask what the story has in mind for us? What kind of faith will we have if we listen to the outsider *and* the insider?

What kind of faith will we have? Maybe a dangerous faith. Maybe a Christian faith. Maybe a faith worth preaching.