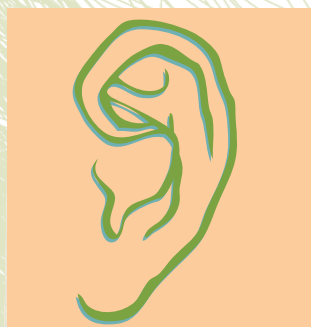
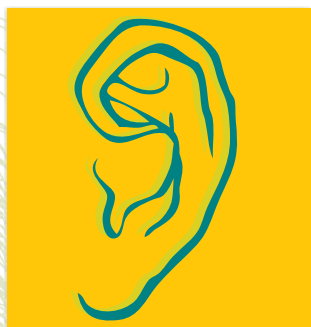


# LISTEN UP!

A practical guide to listening to sermons



CHRISTOPHER ASH

## Why on earth do we need a book like this?

'What a silly subject!' you may say. After all, it would be pointless to write a booklet called *How to watch TV*. And listening to a sermon is even easier than watching TV, because I don't have to master the remote control. All I have to do is sit, try to stay awake to the end, and then – hey, presto! – I've listened to the sermon. It's something that is done to me (or even inflicted on me), not something that I take part in. I don't need a booklet to tell me how. It's no different from watching the news on TV!

Ah, but it's not the same at all! After the parable of the sower, Jesus says: 'Consider carefully how you listen' (Luke 8 v 18). He goes on to say that if we listen in one way, we will be 'given more'; but if we listen in another way, even what we think we have will be taken away from us. The way we listen is a life-or-death business. It is possible to have ears that fail to hear (Mark 8 v 18), to be 'ever hearing but never understanding' (Mark 4 v 12). Listening to sermons is a risky business: it can damage your health or take you closer to final rescue. What it won't do is leave you unchanged.

There are books and courses to help people preach sermons (I run one!) but I've not read anything written in the last 200 years on how to listen to sermons<sup>1</sup>. So we're going to do what Jesus says and consider carefully how to listen. First we'll consider seven positive ways to listen; then we'll think about how to listen to bad sermons. And, finally, what we can do to get better sermons.

---

<sup>1</sup> The most recent guide I have come across is: '*Directions: How to hear sermons*' (in *Let Wisdom Judge*, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1959, pp188-190), by Charles Simeon, the Cambridge minister in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

## Seven ingredients for healthy sermon listening

### 1. Expect God to speak

**Adam** couldn't really be doing with sermons. There were a number of things he liked about church, especially the friends he had made and the music (when the new music group were leading). But not the sermons.

He felt he had to put up with those because it would look a bit off if he walked out when the preacher started. They just seemed dull. Faced with the entertainment choice between *24* and *The Sermon*, it was a no-brainer: *24* won, any day.

**Beth** was really looking forward to the sermon. Last Sunday she had gone up to the preacher and said: 'I'm so looking forward to next Sunday – can't wait'. He looked pleased, if a bit surprised. But Beth wasn't being a creep; she really did look forward to the sermon, with a sense of eager anticipation. She wondered what God was going to say to her. She felt as if someone had told her to expect a telephone call from the US President: all week she was, as it were, waiting by the phone. So when the sermon started she was paying close and eager attention.

**Beth was right.** And **Adam was a fool.** We are to listen to sermons expectantly because Jesus gives the authority of God Himself to the preacher who teaches the Bible accurately and prayerfully. Jesus governs His church by the written word of Scripture (which has been called His sceptre). The main way He does this is not by the written word being read, but by the written word being preached and taught. Of course, it is good when people who can read, do read and study the Bible; but it is vital that all people, without exception, hear the Bible preached.



When Peter tells Christians they have been born again 'through the living and enduring word of God', he explains that: 'this is the word that was **preached** to you' (1 Peter 1 v 23-25).

Paul thanked God that when the first Christians in Thessalonica heard the good news of Jesus (Acts 17 v 1-4), they 'accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God' (1 Thessalonians 2 v 13). Of course, the words they heard were spoken by human preachers; but they

recognised that these words were at the same time **the actual words of God**. And it is not just apostles like Paul who can speak like this; Peter says that: 'If anyone speaks' (and the context is Bible teaching in church), 'he should do it as one speaking the very words of God' (1 Peter 4 v 11).

**A word of warning**, however: it is not always true that when we hear the voice of a preacher, we hear the voice of God. The preacher's authority is a borrowed authority; it's not because they are gifted or eloquent that preachers have authority, nor because they may be ordained, or have titles, degrees or qualifications, or are recognised by churches or denominations.

However, **when the Bible is faithfully opened up**, we are to listen to the preacher's voice as the voice of God Himself. The preacher stands in the great tradition of prophets and apostles who spoke the **word of God**. Unlike them, the Christian preacher cannot offer new or fresh ideas to add to the Bible. But like them, there is a borrowed authority to speak what God wants spoken. We ought to listen to this kind of sermon with the utmost seriousness.

There should be **nothing casual about our listening**, as if this were 'just another sermon' or simply 'what always happens at this point in our meetings'. When Ezra the preacher opened the written word to read and preach it, all the people stood up as a mark of respect and attentiveness (Nehemiah 8 v 5). In the same way, there ought to be a reverent hush as the Bible is read and preached in our meetings. Sometimes in sermons we will smile at ourselves and our foolishness (preachers do well from time to time to invite us to laugh at such things) but we will **never be light or flippant** about the voice of God.

Remember, we will not instinctively hear preaching as the voice of God. Our natural reaction is to take it simply as the voice of people. One of the wonderful things the **Spirit of God** does is to open our ears so that we receive it not just as the voice of people, but as the voice of God. We need to pray for Him to do this in us.

### **PRACTICAL STEPS TO TAKE**

- 1.** Look up next Sunday's Bible passage and read it at home during the week.
- 2.** Pray for next Sunday's preacher in the middle of the week.
- 3.** Pray often for yourself, that, by His Spirit, God will grow in you a heartfelt expectation that God Himself will speak to you as His word is preached.
- 4.** If you can, try not to come to the sermon exhausted, but to come rested and ready to pay close attention.
- 5.** Deliberately quieten your mind and heart before the sermon and say to yourself: 'This is when God speaks to me'. Pray again: 'Lord, speak to me. I am listening'.