

# Preaching as agent of change

June Alliman Yoder  
Associate Professor of Communication and Preaching  
Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary

**B**ecause I teach preaching and regularly attend worship, I have heard all kinds of sermons, thousands of them, by preachers from many countries and cultures. In the preaching arena, nothing irritates me more than a sermon that just sits there. What is the point of a sermon that doesn't try to do anything, a sermon that is a speech about a religious topic rather than a powerful proclamation of God's desire to make us new people?

Often when I talk with preachers about a sermon they are preparing, they tell me, "I am going to talk *about...*," and then name a general theme or topic. I try to guide the conversation by asking, "What is your sermon going to do? What is it trying to accomplish?" I firmly believe that a sermon that is not clear about what it wants to do will usually do nothing. It will not move the hearts and minds of listeners.

## Why is some preaching anemic?

Why do preachers preach sermons that lack purpose? I'll suggest several possible reasons. One is that some preachers think that deciding what they will accomplish in preaching is God's business, not theirs. They fear they will overstep the boundary between human and divine responsibility. They forget that they are collaborators and partners with the Spirit of God in the preaching process.

A second reason that preaching lacks purpose is that some preachers have lost their faith that preaching accomplishes anything. How sad this is. If people who preach see their task as giving a talk in a worship service, as a ritual that lingers because of tradition, their sermons are unlikely to nourish and motivate. Perhaps all the jokes about dull sermons and bad preaching have convinced these preachers that their task is a benign pastime.

A third reason some preaching lacks purpose is that even preachers who believe sermons can change lives may be vague about what they want to accomplish with a particular sermon. So they may speak about a topic, hoping to say something someone in the congregation will connect with and find interesting and valuable. But if the preacher is fuzzy about the sermon's purpose, listeners are unlikely to discern it. As someone said, "If it's misty in the pulpit, it will be foggy in the pews."

A fourth reason why some preachers do not articulate what they hope to accomplish with the sermon is that they are

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reluctant to own a desire to influence listeners. Perhaps Mennonite teaching on humility inhibits their ability to embrace the task of swaying others. For these preachers the sermon does not pour out over the congregation in rousing proclamation but barely dribbles over the edge of the pulpit.

A fifth reason why some preachers lack clarity of purpose in their preaching is that in relatively recent times, in parts of the church, persuasion has been understood to be synonymous with manipulation or coercion. Certain branches of the revivalist movement were given to scaring people into the kingdom with hellfire and damnation sermons

that left new believers quaking with fear rather than with the Spirit. These preachers had a purpose for their preaching, and all who heard understood what they expected to accomplish. But their evangelistic practice left a bad taste in the mouths of some preachers of future generations. Because these revival preachers abused their position of influence in the pulpit, some who followed are unwilling to serve as agents of change. Shying away from acting as catalysts of transformation, they became teachers who merely try to inform their congregations about the content of the Scriptures.

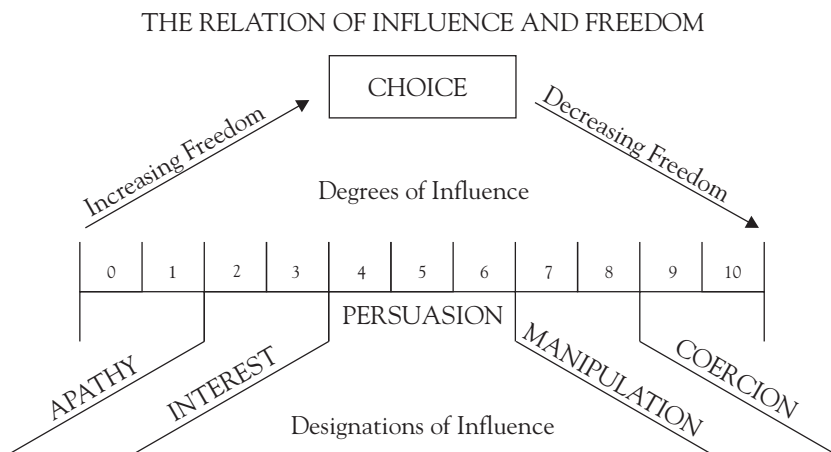
### **Restoring persuasion to preaching**

It is time for us to redeem the word *persuasion* in the arena of preaching. It is time for us to understand the full meaning of the

term, to give it its rightful place on the influence spectrum, and to bring it back into the heart of preaching.

A key element in classical oratory is persuasion, and it ought to be one of the chief elements of preaching as well. Rhetoric is defined broadly as the art of speaking well, or more narrowly as the art of persuasion. The goal of rhetorical training was eloquence, but in part eloquence is achieved by balancing one's style of speaking with one's aims. The ends of rhetoric were to teach, to delight, and to persuade.

Paul Wennes Egertson, in his dissertation, *Sacramental Rhetoric: The Relation of Preaching to Persuasion in American Lutheran Homiletics*, diagrams the relationship between persuasion and other designations of influence.<sup>1</sup> This diagram focuses on the connection between influence and freedom to choose.



Freedom to choose is an important factor in the distinction between Egertson's levels of influence. We observe that freedom of choice is as absent at the *apathy* end of the spectrum as at the *coercion* end. At the *apathy* position the speaker makes little or no attempt to influence; the listener has nothing to accept or reject. As one moves along the spectrum, one has increased opportunity to choose how one will respond to the material presented. Opportunity increases through *interest* and into *persuasion*, where choice is at a maximum. Here the listener is free to accept or reject the presented material. After *persuasion* listeners again

begin to lose the freedom to choose, but now because of diminishing liberty to reject the material. Manipulation entails decreased freedom of choice, and by the time listeners reach the extreme of coercion they have no freedom left.

In the Mennonite Church, a church that holds believers baptism dear, the idea of choosing faith, deciding what one will

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believe, is precious. Oddly enough, in the arena of preaching North American Mennonites seem to fear loss of choice because of the excesses of manipulation and coercion much more than we fear loss of choice because of apathy and mere interest.

To summarize Egertson's diagram:

Persuasion represents influence that achieves the speaker's purpose in ways that maximize listeners' knowledge and consent. Hearers remain free to choose how they will respond.

Our ideas about persuasion have become confused because we associate persuasion

with hard-sell marketing. I want to outline some characteristics of persuasion that will lead to a working definition of the concept.

- Persuasion involves at least two people whose joint actions determine the outcome: Persuasion is something you do *with* another person, not *to* another person.
- Persuasion is always a conscious activity; it is intentional. We can unintentionally influence others, but we cannot unintentionally persuade them.
- For persuasion to happen, one party must perceive another party as needing to change, and must help the other understand the needed change. A need can be described as inconsistent, inappropriate, or ineffective thought or behavior. The perceived need must be based on a standard that both parties agree on. The Bible and the life of Christ could be the standard to which we all aspire.

In defining persuasion as a two-party activity, involving conscious intent, that seeks to reconcile thought or behavior with an agreed-on set of standards, I hope I have persuaded you that preaching should entail persuasion.

## **The persuasion process**

Many theorists have sketched a sequence for persuasion, outlining how they think persuasion works. Of these, the Monroe Motivated Sequence embodies most of the stages identified by other theorists, and is particularly useful for preaching. The sequence includes five steps.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Attention*. The task of the attention phase is to create interest or desire in the mind of the listener. The speaker attempts to upset listeners' tranquility and begin to produce a desire for something. The primary task is to capture listeners' attention to the topic at hand.
2. *Need*. In this step (commonly referred to as the motivation step) the speaker outlines the problem in a way designed to create a sense of need in listeners. Somehow the speaker must help hearers see the gap between things as they are and things as they should be. This step creates tension that listeners will want to relieve if they care deeply about the matter.
3. *Satisfaction*. In this relatively brief step the speaker presents a proposal to alleviate the inconsistency or address the need defined in the previous step. A speaker who proposes several solutions at this stage will conclude with the preferred one.
4. *Visualization*. At this stage the speaker paints a picture of the tension relieved: If one applies the proposal of step three to the need of step two, this is how things will look. Listeners begin to picture the difference between what is and what could be.
5. *Action*. The persuasion sequence has ended with the visualization step. Now listeners seek appropriate responses. This step calls for action or commitment or change in response to the persuasion.

These five steps are the basic elements or the substructure of influence, whether the persuasion in question is auto sales or political debate or biblical preaching.

## **Persuasion and transformation**

James Loder's *The Transforming Moment* follows a pattern similar to that of the Monroe Motivated Sequence, but Loder attempts to describe theologically what he calls convictional knowing.<sup>3</sup> This

knowing is influential and creates change, and its impact is deep and lasting as it centers on the very heart of what we believe. The result of conviction is transformation, which is any change in commitment or new understanding. Preaching is a persuasion mode that focuses on change in commitment and new faith understanding.

These are Loder's steps for transformation. Keep Monroe's sequence in mind as you read them.

1. *Conflict*. In this step we experience a rupture in the knowing context, and the more we care about the conflict the more powerful the eventual transformation will be. The initial conflict must be adequate to activate our attention and our concern. Often the deepest learnings begin in conflicted, scrambled disequilibrium. Knowing comes out of the chaos or disorder.

2. *Interlude for scanning*. In this phase we scan through the problem, trying to understand it and all its components. This step also draws us into the process of seeking out possible solutions. We search for answers outside the problem, but also scan the problem and differentiate its terms, and play possible solutions against various interpretations of the ruptured situation. In this phase the conflicted one holds together the problem, partial solutions, and the whole state of non-resolution.

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3. *Bisociation*. Here two familiar but separate ideas merge to create a new entity.

Bisociation brings two notions together into a relationship that creates a new construct. The

ruptured situation is transformed and we receive a new perception. Knowing occurs, and the knower will never be the same. This is the turning point of the transforming event.

4. *Release of energy*, our involuntary response to the fact that the conflict is over, is the first facet of the fourth step. This unconscious response indicates that we have reached a resolution. *Opening of the knower to the context* is the second facet. It is our conscious response to being freed from the

conflict; in it we become aware of the expanded relationship with the context.

5. *Interpretation*. Here the knower is called on to interpret the imaginative solution in the context. Somehow the effects of the transforming event must be assimilated into the patterns of the past and into what will happen in the future.

These two theories differ in significant ways: Monroe deals in influence, while Loder explains the patterned dynamic of transformation as a creative process. Monroe tries to create change while Loder looks to another source for change. In fact, he has sought to demonstrate how the Holy Spirit collaborates with the human spirit for the sake of redemptive transformation. Thus Loder's contribution is especially foundational for preaching.

Eugene Lowry's *Homiletical Plot* builds on what we have learned from Monroe and Loder.<sup>4</sup> His constructive model of narrative preaching is a motivational design to precipitate transformation. The following five steps describe the homiletical plot. Read them keeping Monroe and Loder in mind.

1. *Upsetting the equilibrium*. Here Lowry brings together getting listeners' attention and creating ambiguity. Within us lives the deep need to resolve ambiguity, so in this step the preacher plants an itch to grab hearers' attention and get them to scratch until it is satisfied.
2. *Analyzing the discrepancy*. This step incorporates analysis and diagnosis. If we are to fully appreciate the resolution, we must know the complexity of the dilemma.
3. *Clue to resolution*. Pivotal to the sequence, the clue to resolution points and suggests. The full revelation comes later. This clue prepares the way for proclamation of the Word of God. Up to this point the sermon focused on ambiguities and needs. The preacher helped dig a deeper hole and thickened life's messy plot. Now, in the murkiness, light begins to dawn.
4. *Experiencing the gospel*. Now listeners discover how the gospel of Jesus Christ makes right the human predicament. The energy—experienced as gospel—intersects with the human dilemma. Listeners are free to open themselves to new understanding.

5. *Anticipating the consequences.* This final step takes listeners into the future. The climax of any sermon is step four, experiencing the gospel. Step five focuses on the human response as those who appropriate the sermon experience grace and freedom. Traditionally we call this step the application.

## Conclusion

The Acts of the Apostles is sprinkled with references to persuasion. Some involve people who are not yet believers and others involve people who are. King Agrippa asks Paul, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?” (Acts 26:28). And the Jews and devout converts followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and persuaded them to continue in the grace of God (Acts 13:43).

No preacher stands in front of a congregation hoping that everyone will go home exactly as they were before the sermon. Every minister is dedicated to bringing the life-changing love of God into the lives of those who gather for worship. If the goal of preaching is transformation, if it is change-oriented communication, then using the structures of rhetorical persuasion is both appropriate and necessary.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Wennis Egertson, *Sacramental Rhetoric: The Relation of Preaching to Persuasion in American Lutheran Homiletics* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1976), 273, fig. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Ehninger, Bruce E. Gronbeck, Alan H. Monroe, *Principles of Speech Communication*, 9th ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, Pubs., Inc., 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon As Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta: John Knox Pr., 1980).