

Column

I once heard the late Peter Gomes, minister at the Harvard Memorial Church, say, “We who make our living by the sweat of [pause] OUR JAW.” Just before getting to his last two words, he clutched his chin. Everyone knew he was talking about preachers, and, as you might expect, his dramatic gesture drew chuckles from the audience.

Preachers are a funny lot. Some outside the guild think that bumping their gums is ALL they do. I once had a young man say to me, “I know you preach on Sunday, but what to you do the rest of the week?” Of course, as I told him, those in the ordained ministry do a lot of other things as well.

Even so, preaching remains primary. Jesus came preaching, announcing the Kingdom of God, and this method of proclamation has persisted in the Christian Church ever since.

The renowned Bible commentator William Barclay has identified four types of preaching going back to the early days of Christianity. The first

focuses on “just the facts.” Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-39) was of this sort. Cruel hands had sent Jesus to the cross, but God the Father raised Him, thus vindicating His claim to be Israel’s true King.

A second type of preaching that Barclay identifies involves going beyond the bare facts to where these are pointing, not only in terms of salvation history but in the lives of believers.

A third type of preaching is focused on exhortation, calling believers to match what they do with what they believe. A final type attempts to fit every aspect of life into God’s great story.

As you can see, there is considerable overlap in these four types. Hopefully, those who make their living by the ‘sweat of their jaw’ will be skilled in employing all four, as all are needed.

Preachers have a solemn responsibility. Their God-appointed task is not to entertain, though one fervently hopes their words will not put people to sleep! Even so, their primary task is to pass on the

deposit of truth that has come down to them from the apostles and in so doing equip those in their care.

As paratroopers are briefed before being dropped behind enemy lines, so it is with the faithful on Sunday morning. The preacher is the one who briefs the troops.

If preachers have a responsibility, so do those who hear sermons. Communication, after all, is a two-way street. Here are three suggestions as to how listeners may better do their part:

- Arrive at church in a spirit of expectation, believing God has a word for you;
- Prepare by reading, if known, the scripture lessons that are going to be used in the service and by praying that the preacher's words may be God's words; and
- Look for at least one thing in the sermon to apply to your life in the coming week. Share that thing at Sunday lunch.

May both those who preach and those who listen resolve to be faithful in doing their part in

conjunction with the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit. Finally, may God raise up many who make their living by the ‘sweat of their jaw’.

O GRACIOUS Father, we humbly beseech thee for thy Church; that thou wouldst be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of him who died and rose again, and ever liveth to make intercession for us, Jesus Christ, thy Son, our Lord. Amen.

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