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# The ADC Disciple

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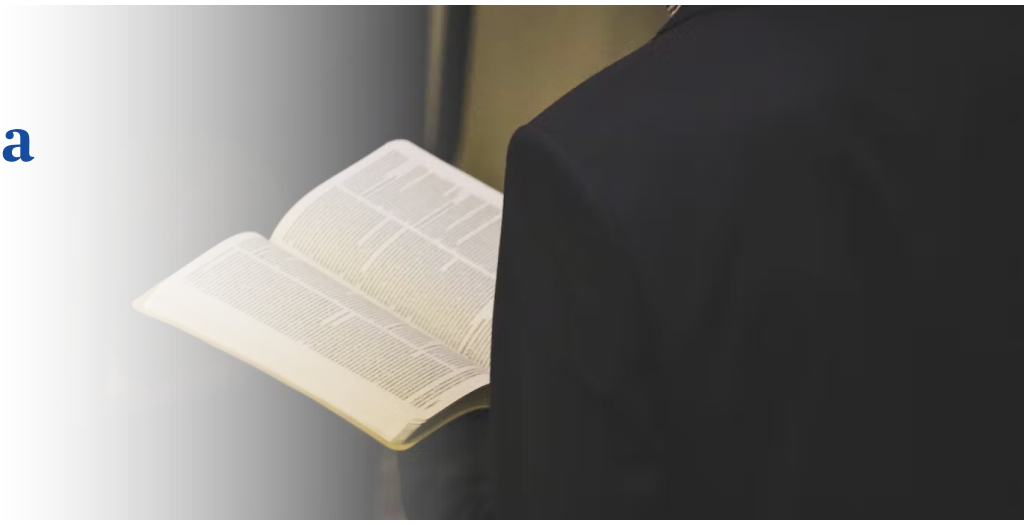

## How to Hear a Sermon Well

by Scott Hubbard

No preacher, upon looking up from his pulpit, hopes to see what I saw mid-sermon one Sunday morning: a man in the last row, head tilted against the back wall, sleeping like Rip Van Winkle.

A humbling moment for a young preacher, to be sure. Yet as I remember that drooping face several years later, a question comes to mind that brings a humbling of a different kind: How many church gatherings have I attended where, as far as spiritual attentiveness goes, I might as well have been sleeping?

Oh, how easily we can drift through corporate worship week by week, hearing but not really hearing. Present in body but absent in spirit. Eyes open but distracted in mind, divided in heart, drowsy in soul.

The matter calls for our attention. For Christians are, first and foremost, a hearing people (Deuteronomy 6:4; Romans 10:17). And how we hear will determine, over time, whether the word we hear is devoured by the devil, scorched by trials, choked by cares, or nourished by God into abundant fruit (Mark 4:1–9).

### Sunday Distractions

I do not write as one unaware of the distractions that confront many on Sundays. More often than not lately, I listen to the sermon from the church lobby, where my 1-year-old — a scorner of nurseries — tries to clang cabinet handles and pick crumbs off the floor.

And the distractions are not restricted to young parents. Nearly every week, whoever we are, *something* storms the gates of our minds, demanding that we focus anywhere but on God and his word. Babies cry. Someone three rows back sings loudly off-key. A task for tomorrow comes to mind. A glare bounces off the window. Your phone vibrates. You wonder whether you shut the garage door. In truth, life rarely offers ideal circumstances for hearing God's word. Every Sunday is imperfect.

> ***"Oh, how easily we can drift through corporate worship week by week, hearing but not really hearing."***

Yet amid all the imperfections, the living God still speaks. And barring exceptional circumstances, we have the opportunity to hear at least some of his words. So, with help from Christians past, consider how we might leverage the before, during, and after of our

gatherings so as to obey Jesus's command, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9).

### Before: Till the Soil

If the word of God is seed, and our hearts are soil, then our aim before the gathering is to till. Break up the dirt. Furrow the ground. Make way for the word.

Why do many of us enter our gatherings Sunday after Sunday with parched hearts, littered with stones? Perhaps some just need practical instruction on how to prepare. But the *how* will mean little unless we regularly remember the *why*. Faithful tilling requires heart work before hand work.

#### HEART WORK

Many Christians of old held Sunday as the greatest day of the week — and corporate worship as the greatest part of Sunday. The Puritans called Sunday the "market-day for the soul," the day when Christians gather a week's worth of spiritual goods. Not that they neglected their daily personal devotions; they just knew that God visits his people in a special way every Lord's Day.

With this background in mind, John Owen offers a stern but needed warning,

> To make a pretense of coming unto God, and not with expectation of receiving good and great things from him, is to despise God himself . . . and deprive our own souls of all benefit thereby. (*Works of John Owen,* 7:437)

The word we hear — not only in the sermon but in the songs, prayers, and Supper — is filled with "good and great things," even with "*all* that our souls do stand in need of," Owen goes on to write. So if you would both honor God and serve your own soul, go to the gathering as a mother might go to a weekly market: eager, prepared, and expecting to bring something good home.

#### HAND WORK

Practically, how might we prepare our hearts for the gathering? To return to the image of tilling, consider both *removing stones* and *breaking up the ground*.

First, remove stones by clearing away unnecessary hindrances — especially tiredness and lateness. How many of us struggle to listen on Sunday morning because we stayed up too late on Saturday night? Or because we shuffled into the gathering partway through the second song, our heads still swirling with the events of the morning? We cannot always control our sleep and our timing, of course, but often we can.

Second, break up the ground by putting your heart in a listening posture. We might consider, for example, reading the sermon passage the morning or evening beforehand, perhaps as part of family devotions. We might also pray specifically for the gathering — or better yet, attend any pre-service prayer meeting our church offers.

How we hear shapes how we live, but the reverse is also true: how we live shapes how we hear. So, before the gathering, resolve to live in a manner that welcomes the word of God.

### During: Bury the Seed

A well-tilled heart, however, is only the first step in faithful hearing. The richest soil will bear no fruit unless a seed finds its way into the furrows. During the gathering, then, we labor to bury the seed of the word deep into our hearts. Which means, at bottom, that we strive to pay *attention* (Hebrews 2:1).

***"How we hear shapes how we live, but the reverse is also true: how we live shapes how we hear."***

#### HEART WORK

As with our preparations beforehand, the task of listening *during* the sermon begins in the heart.

We've already observed that a dozen distractions and more vie for our attention during our gatherings. Like so many mental crows, intrusive thoughts land on our minds in a way that can feel out of our control. Yet even here, I have found help by applying a well-known passage about *preachers* to *hearers*. The apostle Peter writes, "Whoever speaks, [let him so do] as one who speaks oracles of God" (1 Peter 4:11). And therefore, "Whoever *hears*, let him do so as one who *hears* oracles of God."

We do not gather as a church to hear the opinions of man. We go to hear the oracles of the only living God. In our gatherings, the same one who commands the hosts of heaven condescends to speak *to us*. And why? To ease our sorrows, lift our burdens, cast away our lukewarmness, awaken us to temptation, and draw us deeper into his glory.

Could anything be more urgent than to listen?

#### HAND WORK

Along with a mind riveted by God, several practical steps may help us bury the word deeper. We might turn off our phones entirely, rather than allow them

to vibrate. We might follow along with the sermon in a paper Bible. Some might take brief notes of the sermon's most striking points.

The most practical step of all, however, is to embrace the habit of active listening. Just as we can read passively (scanning the lines without critical thought) or actively (underlining, responding, querying), so too can we listen. Genuine, heartfelt hearing calls for hard work. As Richard Baxter writes,

You have work to do as well as the preacher, and should all the time be as busy as he. . . . You must open your mouth, and digest it, for another cannot digest it for you . . . therefore be all the while at work, and abhor an idle heart in hearing, as well as an idle minister. (*A Quest for Godliness*, 254)

If we drift into the worship gathering as we might drift into a movie, we should not be surprised if we leave with as little as we brought. But if we enter ready to wage an attention war, if need be, then we may leave with pockets lined with spiritual gold.

### After: Water the Ground

With the soil tilled and seed buried, the remaining task is to water the ground. Faithful hearing does not end when the sermon does. In some ways, the most decisive moments for our hearing happen in the hours afterward: when we drive home with the family or meet for lunch with friends, when we walk with our spouse in the afternoon or prepare for the week ahead.

### HEART WORK

What we do with the preached word depends on whether we see ourselves not as consumers of the word, nor even as mere hearers of the word, but as *stewards* of the word.

We tend to imagine *preachers* as the stewards of the word — and they are (1 Peter 4:10). But as Jason Meyer writes, "When the truth is preached, the responsibility of stewardship shifts from the preacher to the hearer" (Preaching, 27). If during the sermon we were *observers*, after the sermon we are the *observed*. What will we do with the treasure God has entrusted to us: hide it in the dirt, or multiply it faithfully (Matthew 25:14–30)?

And what does God require of stewards? "That they be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:2). Or, in the apostle James's words, that they become "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22).

### HAND WORK

Stewards make themselves known as soon as they open their mouths to discuss the sermon. Rather than only asking, "What did you think of the sermon?" — a question that allows us to speak from the safe distance of an observer — they might ask, "How did that sermon land on you?" "What word did you need to hear the most?" "How do you think we should respond?" The time may come to graciously criticize some aspect of the sermon, but a steward's first impulse is to speak as one who will give an account for what he's heard.

Embracing our role as stewards clarifies our after-sermon response in another way, one that might free those who feel burdened by a poor memory: our responsibility as stewards of the preached word is not primarily memorization, but transformation.

Puritan pastor George Swinnock (1627–1673) once asked readers to imagine two men gathering fruit from a tree. When they had eaten all they wanted, one man took as much fruit as he could carry. The other man, however, took the tree. Swinnock writes,

Those who hear the word and have large memories and nothing else, may carry most of the word at present, yet, he that possibly can remember little who carries away the tree, plants the word in his heart and obeys it in his life, shall have fruit when the other hath none. (*The Genius of Puritanism*, 59)

By all means, remember as much of the sermon as you can. But if you want the sermon to bear lasting fruit, then take as much as you remember, and plant the word in your heart, and obey it in your life. Or, to return to the broader picture, till the soil by preparing your heart to hear, bury the seed by paying rigorous attention, and water the ground by reflecting humbly and responding obediently to the word that, once planted, can become a tree of life in your soul.

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*Scott Hubbard is an editor for Desiring God, a pastor at All Peoples Church, and a graduate of Bethlehem College & Seminary. He and his wife, Bethany, live with their two sons in Minneapolis*

# Ladies Corner

## Gay Girl Meets Mennonite Pastor

*by Julie Kaufman, Middlefield, Ohio*

There were twenty-four of us. A motley crew of Mennonite high school seniors and their supportive parents and a toddler in a stroller. Thousands of girl scouts everywhere spread out across the National Mall on blankets and underneath umbrellas, sipping slushies and celebrating the Girl Scouts Centennial. It was also the weekend of the LGBT Capital Pride festival held in D.C. every year. In the bumper to bumper traffic, convertibles passed us, their rainbows barely fluttering in the stifling heat. It was definitely not the best weekend to visit the place where our country celebrates its origin to try to inspire our seniors to appreciate the great sacrifices it took our founding fathers to build this country.

Security personnel maneuvered our group into the security lines at the Capitol building and we stood in awe of the Rotunda, walked the Vietnam Wall, and toured the Lincoln Memorial. A few of us women admired the gowns the First Ladies wore at their inaugural balls. We walked for miles, ate hot dogs from street vendors, and watched them make money. We welcomed the restful cool atmosphere at Ford's Theater. We were hushed into silenced at the atrocity of the suffering that many endured during the holocaust at the Holocaust Museum.

Finally, it was time for supper and my pastor husband and I were on the schedule to choose the restaurant. My husband – the pastor – grew up in El Salvador as a missionary kid and he was hungry for pupusas. Thanks to Google, he found a little hole-in-the-wall offering El Salvadorian cuisine, but true to culture and the overloaded city, there was a wait time. But the manager assured us it would be fine, as they would be able to handle all twenty-four of us!

And wait we did. We spread out across the sidewalks, and peered right into the little restaurant with the glass fronts. The gay and lesbian folks inside peered back at us. One couple was making out, right there in front of the window. The senior boys were dramatic. "Dad, we're not eating here!" one on them declared.

Meanwhile, the pastor got in line to reserve our twenty-four seats behind a lesbian couple. A dialogue started, and the sweet little lesbian girl was very open and shared freely with the pastor. "What's it like?" he asked. "What do you feel from the Christian world in general when we relate to you? What do you feel from us?" The girl was kind, but it was not a pretty answer. She spoke of animosity, staring, rudeness, and just plain old hate. Like a project to be dissected and torn apart, they feel the eyes, see the disgust. Never mind that this is who Jesus died for. An actual person with a heart and soul and feelings, and yes, maybe they are confused but who is supposed to care?? Who is to be the body of Christ to them if it's not us??

And Bob,* one of the dads in our group came back to me where I was mingling with the others and there were tears in his eyes. "That's why," his voice broke, "that's why I'm so glad he's my pastor. He really cares about her." And the pastor, though I know his imperfections, really does care. He really wants to know what she's feeling. And I, who was starving by this point, did I really care? Or was I more concerned about what's for supper or what I was going to wear the next day more than I cared about her whom Jesus came for?

Bob, who had lost his way some years earlier, he knew how much he needed God. And His people. The church and the community of believers. He had said that if it weren't for a few of God's fierce warriors, he could not have made it. They fought for him and with him. But did I know how much I need grace, too?? I who have had the privilege of growing up in a Christian two-parent home, a Christian school and church family. I know the pride in my heart that lurks just around the corner, the indifference that steals over my soul, the selfishness I keep seeing in the mirror.

And I had seen the gleam in her eyes when my daughter brought me the book. "You have to read it," she said. I laid aside my other reading and went on a journey with Jackie Hill Perry in *Gay Girl, Good God*. I was convicted. Deeply. How we have missed this community that Jesus came to save! What pain and anguish and hurt brought them to make the decisions that they made? And Jackie had written it in her book, too, how that a same sex attracted person that comes to Jesus needs community. They can't do it alone.

After at least an hour, they finally got all twenty-four of us around a table. As the enchiladas and pupusas started to arrive, I wonder who was under more scrutiny, was it the lesbian and gay community

or the twenty-four Mennonites? One thing for sure, it was probably the first time that that many Mennonites and gays were in one room together! But all of us were sinners (some who were saved by grace!) and messed up and so in need of the only one who can fix us – Jesus!

Betty, a lady in our group, paused to chat with the restaurant owner as we were leaving. By the time the chat was over, she was praying with her...passing God's love on to the next person.

Author's note: To self educate, read the fascinating book, *Gay Girl, Good God*. Not only is it a compelling story, but the author gives sound Biblical helps for those dealing with same-sex attractions.

Please do not assume from this article that non-Menonites are the only ones who struggle with same sex attractions. Some Mennonites do struggle with this. They need guidance and love and care, just like we all do for the sins that so easily beset us.

**not his real name*

*Julie Kaufman is married to Laban Kaufman, pastor of Zion Christian Fellowship, Middlefield, Ohio. They have six children: Micah, married to Jenna Kropf; Elisabeth; Evangeline, married to Caleb Burkholder; Hadassah; Mariah; and Elijah."*

## PASTOR SPOTLIGHT

**Mark and Maureen Miller** serve at Crosspointe Mennonite Church, Baltic, Ohio.

Mark and Maureen have four children: Mariah (21); Mikhail (18); Isaiah (15); and Olivia (8). Mark was ordained as a deacon September 13, 2005 and appointed as Lead Pastor October 25, 2020.

Mark and Maureen operate Miller's Seamless Gutters and are co-owners of East Main Kitchen, a restaurant in Baltic.

Mark's reflections on his pastoral journey – "The call to church leadership awoke in me a recognition of my own lack of resources and preparedness for the task given. I was blessed to serve with a great team and learn from experienced men who mentored me on my journey. I enrolled in a 2-year leadership development course that Faith Builders offers and it was very influential in developing habits, skills, and expanding my knowledge of the scripture.

I see it as my mission in life to bring honor to God by serving those around me in such a way that they can clearly see the big picture of the projects and causes that I care deeply about and be motivated by my vision and enthusiasm to become involved in a meaningful way. My life verse is Philippians 3:8-11 – "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead."

Because I've been blessed to have two very influential mentors in my life - Paul A. Miller and Melvin Lehman - that I turn to when I find myself in over my head, I value the mentoring model of walking alongside others. It has also awoken in me a desire to find and develop ways to equip the next generation of church leaders for the task of leading God's people."

Mark also serves on the boards of Zollikon Institute and SoldOut Ministries and serves ADC as Vice-Chairman of the Planning Committee.

Mark also recommends the BEMA podcast and some of his favorite books are *Disciplines of a Godly Man* by Kent Hughes; *The Way of the Shepherd: Seven Secrets to Managing Productive People* by Dr. Kevin Leman and Bill Pentak; and *Spiritual Leadership* by Oswald Sanders.

Thank you Mark and Maureen for your faithful service to the Church of Christ and to ADC!

# *ADC Church Profile —*

**Shalom Christian Fellowship**, Fredericksburg, Ohio was founded in January 2010.

The current Pastoral team consists of Marlin Miller, Lead Pastor; Ty Troyer, Minister; Mervin Wengerd, Minister; Allen Troyer, Deacon; and Caleb Kensinger, Minister.

Prior to 2010 when Bethel Fellowship was pursuing the opportunity for outreach, a local church that had dwindled to seven families came to Bethel for assistance. The decision was made to have eleven volunteer families from Bethel join forces with this church to form a new congregation. We have had several ordinations - a minister and lead pastor at the earlier part of church life, a deacon ordination a few years ago, and more recently a couple of minister ordinations. The leadership team now consists of five men.

Shalom's church people remain busy with all the activities and ministries that God brings to them. With God's help and leading, SCF has attempted to strike a balance between meeting the needs within the congregation and pursuing opportunities to reach out and evangelize. SCF functions within

a community of diverse denominations where people tend to move around a bit more. SCF tries hard to use these opportunities to show and share the love of Jesus Christ. SCF is involved with taking a meal to a homeless shelter in New Philadelphia bimonthly. The church men have taken numerous trips to do CAM work projects. A lady member has a ladies counseling ministry which has given SCF an opportunity as a church to reach out to them since they frequently attend SCF. Pre-COVID, SCF had been involved with jail ministry and singing at a nursing home but has not resumed that yet. The church is looking at pursuing a widow's ministry for some of the local needy widows in the area. Some of the youth and men are involved with Canton Kids Cross Club, a ministry for children and youth in Canton.

The building was built as an outreach of Bethel in 1962 but has since been used by several other churches as their meeting place. It was the second Beachy church house built in Holmes County and was still owned by the Bethel Corporation when Shalom was founded in 2010. Since the Bethel Corporation was in the process of dissolving, the property was donated to the Shalom congregation, for which they are grateful.

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