IS ANYBODY LISTENING? A STUDY ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ATTENTION SPAN AND PRACTICAL STEPS PASTORS CAN TAKE TO CAPTURE AND KEEP THEIR LISTENERS' ATTENTION DURING A SERMON

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ABSTRACT

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Rom 10:17). Every pastor has the privilege of preaching God's Word which has the power to create and strengthen faith. But a problem pastors can face is losing their congregation's attention during the sermon. The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions: "What is the psychology behind attention span?" and "What practical steps can a pastor take to capture and keep their listeners' attention during a sermon?" The first section of the study will review the literature that informed this study. The literature in the psychological realm of attention span will be reviewed first, and then the literature in the realm of homiletics will be reviewed. The second section of the study focuses on the psychology of attention span. This section will examine studies that define attention span, how long it lasts, and psychological factors that affect it. The third portion of the study will examine why this information is important for a pastor to consider, and also offer a variety of homiletic styles and techniques a pastor can utilize to engage his audience. This section will examine the work of Lutheran dogmaticians, Adolf Hoenecke and Francis Pieper, who explain the supernatural and psychological working of God's Word. This section will also examine the literature on homiletic and professional speech which offer advice on how to capture and keep attention during a sermon.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."[1] In this passage from Romans, Paul explains just how powerful God's Word is. When people hear the gospel message, the Holy Spirit is there working in the hearts of those who hear it. All that has to happen is for someone to proclaim this message.

What a comforting passage for pastors to ponder as they prepare and preach their sermons every Sunday. They can be assured that when they stand before God's people their preaching has the power of the Holy Spirit working through it.

With Paul's word from (Romans 10:17) in mind, can it be said that everyone who is sitting in the pews on a given Sunday was edified by the sermon and that their faith was strengthened? The reason I ask this question is because I have often found myself losing attention throughout the presentation of a sermon. Whenever this happens, I can recall the parts of the sermon I listened to, but have little to no recollection of anything else.

What was it that led my attention to wander? Why did I start to think about things that had happened the previous week, or about things that would happen in the upcoming week? Why did I struggle to stay focused throughout the duration of a sermon on a given Sunday?

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1. All Bible Citations will be from NIV 2011.

These questions led me to pursue the topic that this paper will address. I will examine the psychology of attention span to determine if there are practical steps pastors can take to capture and keep their listeners' attention as they prepare and preach their sermons. With respect to this question I will first present the literature on the topics of attention span and homiletics, showing their conclusions. Then the paper will examine several studies on the psychology of attention, showing pertinent factors that affect attention span. Finally, the paper will examine why the psychology of attention span is important for a pastor to consider and offer ways for them to capture and keep their listeners' attention.

PART 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section of the paper will examine the literature on attention span in the areas of anatomy, qualitative studies, studies showing a change in attention span, and psychological factors. Then this section will also examine the literature in the field of homiletics and professional speech. Once the literature has been examined the conclusions will be synthesized.

Research on the Anatomy of the Brain

The first thing that will be examined are studies in the field of anatomy which explain the neurological processes that take place in regard to attention span. Sandra Ackerman, in her paper *Discovering the Brain*, looked at different studies that examined the neurological processes of attention span. One of the studies she examined was by Michael Posner and Marcus Raichle. In their study they used Positron Emission Tomography.[2] To conduct their experiment, "subjects were shown groups of letters that conformed to English rules of construction but did not form a word in English…as well as authentic English words."[3] Posner and Raichle examined the PET scans and found that when the subjects looked at these words, the action of looking activated a

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2. The Mayo clinic website: https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/pet-scan/about/pac-20385078 defines a PET as "A positron emission tomography (PET) scan is an imaging test that can help reveal the metabolic or biochemical function of your tissues and organs."

3. Ackerman, Sandra, "Discovering the Brain.". 116.

portion of the left occipital lobe, which is associated with the brain's system for attention.[4] While this study did shed light on the study of attention, Ackerman notes that PET imaging is not ideal for studies in changeable states such as attention because PET scans are not time dynamic. In other words, it takes a long time for the PET scan to gather information. Therefore, fluctuations of activity within that period will not register. This study concluded that "a shift of visual attention entails two steps: first disengaging the attention from one spot and then bringing it to bear on another location. It appears that the parietal lobe is important in the first step and the midbrain is more active in the second."[5]

This conclusion led researchers to examine if one region of the brain was responsible for disengaging attention and another for refocusing it. To investigate this, researchers used electroencephalographic[6] recordings. The researchers used EEG recordings from the scalp while the subjects had their attention drawn to a location. They found that the EEG readings showed increases in activity when the subject's attention reached the target location, and slow wave activity preceding the stage, which they presumed to show disengagement.[7] Ackerman notes that this method is more precise in looking at time and levels of activity, and when combined with PET scans, researchers can trace the circuitry which is thought to be involved with visual attention tasks.

Ackerman also looked at a study by Mark Johnson that examined the change of attention span from infancy to childhood. Johnson "postulates that at about 1 month of age the human brain develops a pathway that allows an infant to fix his or her eyes on one stimulus and not be

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4. Ackerman, Sandra. 116.

5. Ackerman, Sandra. 117.

6. This term is commonly abbreviated EEG.

7. Ackerman, Sandra, "Discovering the Brain." 117.

distracted by other events at the periphery…known as "obligatory looking"…After about 4 months, they acquire the ability to disengage their attention and are freer to shift their eyes from one object of interest to another."[8] Ackerman notes that this study has helped researchers to determine the development of attention span.

Qualitative Research on Attention Span

Many qualitative studies have been conducted to determine how long attention span lasts. In the paper, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 seconds, 10 minutes or more?", Neil Bradbury examined many of these qualitative studies to determine if the claims are valid.

The first study Bradbury examined was conducted by Microsoft. The study identified how long a person will look at a webpage before moving on to the next one to determine how long attention span lasts. They found that the average person spent eight seconds on a webpage leading to their conclusion that the length of attention span is eight seconds.[9] Bradbury did not see this conclusion as an accurate reflection in determining the length of attention span during a lecture because the study "reflects the average time a person will spend on a web page before looking somewhere else."[10] Since this study drew its conclusion by looking at a specific situation, the conclusion should not be applied to every situation.[11]

Bradbury then looked into various resources which claimed there is a ten-to-fifteen-minute attention span. He looked at *Tools for Teaching* by Barbara Davis, *The Effective Efficient Professor* by Phillip Wankat, "The Teaching of Psychology: Essays in Honor of Wilbert J.

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8. Ackerman, Sandra. 119.

9. Bradbury, Neil, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?". 509.

10. Bradbury, Neil. 509.

11. Bradbruy, Neil. 509.

McKeachie and Charles L. Brewer" by Ludy Benjamin, *Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research and Theory for College and University Teachers* by Wilbert McKeachie, and *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies Research and Theory for College and University Teachers* by Marilla Svinicki. He made three key notes on these sources. "First, all of them agree on a quantitatively precise 10–15-min time course for a variable (attention) that is nebulous and never quantitatively defined. Second, evidentiary discussion for such a precise time span is negligible. Third, all of the above reports do not provide any primary data on attention but are content to all cite the same initial report as the basis for the 10- to 15- min attention span assertion."[12]

The initial report cited by the resources was an article produced in 1978 by James Hartley and Ivor Davies. The purpose of the paper was to evaluate note-taking. Hartley and Davies noticed a decline in note-taking around the ten-to-fifteen-minute mark, but even the authors of the article made the comment that "note-taking was not an indicator of attention."[13] Bradbury concludes that this claim is therefore, "unreliable and not even supported by the authors who were studying note-taking."[14]

The next study Bradbury analyzed was conducted by John Stuart and R.J. Rutherford, in which they attempted to discern the duration of attention span of second year and fifth year medical students. They found that "attention span did decline after 20 min, but the decline was slow and never went below the initial attention level observed in the first few minutes of the lecture."[15] While this was an interesting observation, Bradbury mentions that something

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12. Bradbury, Neil. 509.

13. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

14. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

15. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

interesting was discovered. "The attention level observed at the end of the lecture was significantly greater for fifth-year students compared with second-year students."[16] "This led researchers to examine why this was the case, and it was discovered that it was "related to individual lecturer's teaching styles and not related to the student's individual abilities to remain attentive."[17]

This observation led Bradbury to conclude that "…if we insist on dogmatically applying a 10- to 15- min limit on lectures, we are implying that we really don't care about the evidence. Beyond that, it still behooves teachers in physiology classes to do as much as possible to increase student motivation by showing the relevance of material and providing a context for what is taught as well as eagerly displaying a passion for the subject."[18]

Bradbury's conclusion is similar to what Karen Wilson and James Korn found in their article, "Attention During Lectures: Beyond Ten Minutes". Wilson and Korn examined the ten-to-fifteen-minute claim for attention span by evaluating previous research and also by looking at other qualitative studies. They came to a similar conclusion as Bradbury. "It is clear that students' attention does vary during lectures, but the literature does not support the perpetuation of the 10- 15 min attention estimate. Perhaps the only valid use of this parameter is as a rhetorical device to encourage teachers to develop ways to maintain student interest in the classroom…teachers must do as much as possible to increase students' motivation to pay attention."[19]

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16. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

17. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

18. Bradbury, Neil. 513.

19. Wilson and Korn, "Topical Articles." 88–89.

Changing Attention Span

Let us now look at the literature which examines how attention span is changing. Dimitri

Christakis, along with Frederick Zimmerman, David DiGiuseppe, and Carolyn McCarty, in their

article, "Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children," sought to

determine if young children who watched television would develop attention problems later in

life. For the study they used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth[20] and asked parents

whether their child had difficulty concentrating, were easily confused, were impulsive, had

trouble with obsessions, or were restless. The researchers then asked the parents to identify if this

was often true, sometimes true, or not true about their child. They found that, "early exposure to

television was associated with subsequent attentional problems."[21] The researchers indicated,

however, that there are limitations in doing a study such as this, and that additional research

needs to be done to confirm their conclusion. Nevertheless, the researchers say efforts should be

taken to limit television viewing in younger children to decrease the likelihood of attention

problems later in life.

Psychological Factors Affecting Attention Span

The field of attention has had important discoveries on psychological factors that affect attention

span. In his article, "Receiver Apprehension as a Function of Cognitive Backlog", Michael

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20. This government organization administers surveys designed to gather information at multiples points in time.

21. Christakis et al., "Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children." 710.

Beatty examines "cognitive backlog", a term coined by Paul McReynolds. Cognitive backlog is a "function of continued and persistent inputs of information which is either difficult to assimilate into existing attitude structures or is input at an unmanageable rate."[22] Studies discovered a correlation between cognitive backlog and receiver apprehension. Cognitive backlog occurred led to lower rates of apprehension in the listener.[23] This concept is important because it reveals that someone can be attentive to a presentation, but unable to process what is being presented.

Another important term to consider is "learning style". Learning style theory looks at the way an individual prefers to learn, whether it be in an auditory, visual, or interactive way.[24] Aji Rinekso, in his article, "Pros and Cons of Learning Style: an Implication for English Language Teachers", examines the usefulness of utilizing different learning styles in a learning environment. Rinekso presented both the pros and cons of this approach. In regard to research that supports utilizing the learning style method, he concluded, "When students learn through the way that they really like, it makes their learning performance optimal and it results in higher achievement. Moreover, clear definitions, frameworks, and instruments make learning style to be looked as a strong and valid theory amidst educational research."[25] With respect to research that speaks against the concept of learning styles, he found numerous studies which demonstrate a lack of strong scientific evidence to back up the claim that the theory is useful to put into practice.[26]

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22. Beatty, Michael, "Receiver Apprehension as a Function of Cognitive Backlog." 277.

23. Beatty. Michael. 281.

24. The categories are sometimes defined with different vocabulary depending on the author, but the concepts are always the same with an auditory, visual, and kinesthetic (or active) idea behind them.

25. Rinekso, "Pros and Cons of Learning Style." 18.

26. Rinekso. 18–9.

Aji Rinekso's overall conclusion in looking at both sides of the argument was that "it does not matter whether your students are auditory, visual, kinesthetic or any other styles, the more important thing that should be done is providing them with more engaged teaching media and materials. Once they are interested and engaged with your teaching, an effective learning process and higher achievement will be obtained no matter what learning styles they belong to."[27] Rinekso's conclusion echoes the conclusions of Bradbury, Wilson, and Korn.

The final key term to consider is "mind wandering". This term was examined by Evan Risko, along with Nicola Anderson, Amara Sarwal, Megan Engelhardt, and Alan Kingstone in their article "Everyday Attention: Variation in Mind Wandering and Memory in a Lecture." They defined mind wandering as "…a decoupling of attention from an external stimulus to internal thoughts."[28] In a study they examined by Smallwood, they found that mind wandering impaired one's ability to identify critical moments in a story. They suggested that this gives evidence "that mind wandering during a lecture would impair comprehension of the presented material."[29]

Homiletic and Professional Speech Literature

Let us now turn to researchers in the field of homiletics and synthesize their conclusions with the conclusions from the literature in the field of attention span.

In his book, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*, Rick Blackwood states that "effective communication demands that the communicator be captivating, understandable, and memorable. Stated another way, effective communicators are able to impact the cognitive

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27. Rinekso. 21.

28. Risko et al., "Everyday Attention." 235.

29. Risko et al. 235.

domains of attention, comprehension, and retention."[30] Blackwood's conclusion echoes Bradbury's conclusion, which mention the importance for a presenter to do as much as possible to increase student motivation.[31]

In their book, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres*, Jeffrey Arthurs and Haddon Robinson make the point that the world seemingly has shorter attention spans because of the overload of information brought on by modern technology.[32] While this seems to be the case, Arthurs and Robinson claim that people are still capable of sustained attention.[33] They claim a preacher can capture attention "by employing variety, for it helps maintain and focus attention."[34]

In his book, *TED Talks: The Official Guide to Public Speaking*, Chris Anderson states that a speaker's number-one mission is to take something that matters to them and rebuild it inside the minds of the listeners, so that they can walk away with something of value.[35] This supports Bradbury's conclusion that teachers should be passionate about what they teach.[36]

In their book, *Made to Stick: Why some Ideas Survive and others Die*, Chip and Dan Heath echo the conclusions of Neil Bradbury, Rick Blackwood, Jeffrey Arthurs, and Haddon

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30. Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*. 19.

31. Bradbury, Neil, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?" 513.

32. Arthurs and Robinson, *Preaching with Variety*. 32.

33. Arthurs and Robinson. 32.

34. Arthurs and Robinson. 34.

35. Anderson, *TED Talks*. 12.

36. Bradbury, Neil, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?" 513.

Robinson. They say any presenter can capture and keep their listeners' attention by making their messages simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, and emotional. [37]

The literature in the field of homiletics and professional speaking harmonizes with the conclusions in the field of attention span by emphasizing the need for the preacher/speaker to make a concerted effort to engage the audience.

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37. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 36.

PART II: WHAT IS ATTENTION SPAN?

This part of the paper will explain what attention span is and how long it lasts. This part of the paper will also examine psychological factors that affect attention span.

Neuroscience of Attention Span

Neuroscience studies have sought to get a deeper understanding of what parts of the brain are active when a person is attentive. In her article, "Discovering the Brain", Sandra Ackerman looked at an experiment done by Michael Posner and Marcus Raichle in which they showed subjects groups of letters that conformed to English rules of construction but did not form a real word in English.[38] When subjects looked at these words, Posner and Raichle used both PET and EEG recordings to identify which parts of the brain were active.[39]

The results showed that when the subjects' attention was fixed to the nonword it "tended to activate a portion of the left occipital lobe, which is known to be associated with the brain's system for attention."[40] This finding agreed with the article, "The Essentials of Brain Anatomy

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38. Ackerman, Sandra, "Discovering the Brain." 116.

39. Ackerman, Sandra. 117. The article mentioned that PET recordings are not ideal on their own because they are not time dynamic, but when used with EEG recordings they give more accurate results.

40. Ackerman, Sandra. 116.

for Physiatrist: Magnetic Resonance Image Findings," by Yoo Choo, which found that the occipital lobe controls visual processing.[41]

Ackerman also referred to a study done by Posner and Peterson which concluded that the parietal lobe is involved in disengaging attention from one location, and the midbrain is involved in fixing attention on another location.[42] The role of the parietal lobe in attention is described in greater detail by Choo, who notes that the parietal lobe is involved in integrating and processing pain, visual, and auditory signals, and it plays an important role in sensory perception and cognitive function.[43]

A different study sought to identify which parts of the brain are involved in the attention system by "recording the scalp during a task in which subjects had their attention drawn to a particular location."[44] The results showed "a distinct pattern of activity, outside the primary visual cortex, associated with each kind of cue. When the target was uncertain, the scans revealed activity in the middle area of the frontal lobe."[45] According to Choo, "the frontal lobe is in charge of various functions, including emotional control, motivation, judgment, planning, inhibition, memory, and thought, and it regulates inputs from other association areas."[46] This research demonstrates the frontal lobe also plays a role in the attention system.

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41. Choo, Boudier-Revéret, and Chang, "The Essentials of Brain Anatomy for Physiatrists." 184.

42. Ackerman, Sandra, "Discovering the Brain." 117.

43. Choo, Boudier-Revéret, and Chang, "The Essentials of Brain Anatomy for Physiatrists.". 182-83.

44. Ackerman, Sandra, "Discovering the Brain." 117. The article does not mention the names of the researchers who performed this study or the methodology behind the experiment.

45. Ackerman, Sandra. 118.

46. Choo, Boudier-Revéret, and Chang, "The Essentials of Brain Anatomy for Physiatrists." 182.

The final study Ackerman referred to was a study that presented subjects with written words and were asked to not only recognize them but also to make an active response, such as saying the words aloud.[47] This experiment identified the cingulate gyrus as the most active part of the subjects' brain during this task.[48] This finding coincides with Choo's research, which notes that while the exact function of the cingulate gyrus has not been identified, it is known to mediate movement processing by focusing attention.[49]

Choo discovered that the temporal lobe "controls auditory processing" and is "crucial for understanding spoken language and is involved in complex object recognition."[50] Choo also discovered that Wernicke's area "is critical to language comprehension."[51] Damage to this area can result in receptive aphasia, the difficulty to form and speak words.[52]

In this section the studies in the field of neuroscience were examined showing that attention span is a complex system involving multiple parts of the brain. The following section will move on to consider how long attention span lasts.

How Long does Attention Span Last?

Various studies claim different lengths of attention span. To determine an accurate length for attention span during a sermon, these studies and their claims will be evaluated in this section.

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47. Ackerman, Sandra, "Discovering the Brain." 120.

48. Ackerman, Sandra. 120.

49. Choo, Boudier-Revéret, and Chang, "The Essentials of Brain Anatomy for Physiatrists." 185.

50. Choo, Boudier-Revéret, and Chang. 184.

51. Choo, Boudier-Revéret, and Chang. 186. "Although the exact boundary of Wernicke's area has not been identified, it is usually defined as the region in the temporal lobe of the dominant hemisphere adjacent to the posterior superior temporal and supramarginal gyrus." 185-186.

52. Choo, Boudier-Revéret, and Chang.

Eight Second Attention Span

The first study was conducted by Microsoft, claiming that people only have an eight second attention span. The study examined two thousand participants to see how long they would stay on a webpage.[53] The researchers found that, on average, a person would only view a webpage for eight seconds.[54] The results led Microsoft to theorize "that the changes were a result of the brain's ability to adapt and change itself over time and a weaker attention span may be a side effect of evolving to a mobile Internet."[55]

While the Microsoft study claimed attention span lasts eight seconds, the results don't translate into how long attention span lasts during a sermon or a lecture. Neil Bradbury mentions in his article, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 seconds, 10 minutes, or more?" Bradbury mentions that the eight second attention span only "reflects the average time a person will spend on a webpage before looking somewhere else."[56] Therefore, the popular claim of an eight second attention span does not apply in a lecture setting.[57]

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53. McSpadden, "You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span Than a Goldfish." 1.

54. McSpadden. 1.

55. McSpadden. 1.

56. Bradbury, Neil, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?" 509.

57. Bradbury, Neil. 509.

Ten Minute Attention Span

Another popular claim is that attention span lasts for ten minutes, an idea which has been propagated by various articles and books.[58] While many resources claim this length for attention span, various points need to be considered. The resources claiming a ten-minute length for attention span agree on a precise quantitative length even though attention span is a variable that is nebulous.[59] "Second, evidentiary discussion for such a precise time span is negligible."[60] Third, none of the reports have primary data on length of attention span, but all of them cite the same report for the basis of this claim, "Note-Taking: A Critical Review" by Hartley J. Davies.[61]

Since various sources cite the report by Hartley for the basis of a ten-minute attention span, this claim will be examined. The first point to consider is that the purpose of the article was to "(1) determine why students take notes, (2) to survey the research findings available in the current literature, (3) to identify inadequacies and omissions in this literature in order to suggest more profitable lines of research for future study, and (4) to suggest guide lines for both teachers and students which will exploit more effectively the potential of note-taking."[62] In view of the stated purpose it is interesting to note that the article did not set out to determine a length of time for attention span. Rather it was to review literature regarding note-taking.[63]

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58. Bradbury, Neil. 509. Resources claiming the ten- minute length are: *Tools For Teaching* by Barbara Davis; *The Effective Efficient Professor: Scholarship and Service* by Phillip Wankat; "The Teaching of Psychology: Essays in Honor of Wilbert J. McKeachie and Charles L. Brewer" by Ludy Benjamin; *Teachings Tips and Strategies, Research and Theory for College and University Teachers* by Wilbert McKeachie, and *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research and Theory for College and University Teachers* by Marilla Svincki.

59. Bradbury, Neil. 509.

60. Bradbury, Neil. 509.

61. Bradbury, Neil. 509.

62. Hartley and Davies, "Note-Taking." 207.

63. Bradbury, Neil, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?" 510.

It is also important to ask if note-taking is a reasonable indicator for length of attention span. Hartley concluded that attention span lasts ten minutes because of a study conducted by Maddox and Hoole, who found the amount of note-taking declined after ten minutes.[64] The problem with this study by Maddox and Hoole is that this decline was only observed in the final ten minutes of class and not in the first ten minutes.[65] "Moreover, the decline in note-taking at the end of the lecture was not caused by a lack of attention or mental exhaustion on the part of the student, but rather reflected a drop in lecture content during the waning few minutes of the presentation."[66] These points show that there are numerous variables in a classroom setting that affect the amount of note-taking. Because of this, it can be concluded that note-taking is not a valid indicator to determine how long attention span lasts. Not only does Bradbury come to this conclusion, but Hartley also mentions in his article that "note-taking is not necessarily indicative of attention at all."[67] While this does not disprove that attention span lasts ten minutes, the support for this claim should not be taken from Hartley's article.

<center>Claims from other Qualitative Studies</center>

A study by Stuart and Rutherford sought to determine the length of attention span by asking students what their attention level was during a lecture.[68] In the experiment, a buzzer went off every five minutes which prompted the students to record their attention level on a scale of one

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64. Hartley and Davies, "Note-Taking." 213.

65. Bradbury, Neil, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?" 510.

66. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

67. Hartley and Davies, "Note-Taking." 213.

68. Bradbury, Neil, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?" 510.

to nine.[69] "The results showed that attention rose rapidly during the first 10–20 min and then slowly and steadily declined until the end of the 50-min lecture. Attention span did decline after 20 min, but the decline was slow and never went below the initial attention level observed in the first few minutes of the lecture."[70] An interesting discovery was that fifth-year students had higher levels of attention than second-year students, but only because the fifth-year students were taught by an experienced lecturer.[71]

The findings of this article support the claim that attention span cannot be identified as an exact time because it ebbs and flows during a presentation. Stuart and Rutherford point out that this claim "should be axiomatic. We have all experienced lectures where the lecture has been so awful and jejune that 10 min of lecture has been 10 min too long, yet for other lecturers 1 h seems wholly inadequate."[72]

A qualitative study done by A. Johnstone and F. Percival attempted to evaluate attention span by having two outside observers watch the class and record times of perceived attention drift.[73] The observers sat in on ninety lectures and "reported that attention dropped during the first 5 min of class, with another attention lapse 10–18 min into the class."[74]

While Johnstone and Percival's claim supports the idea of attention span lasting anywhere from ten to eighteen minutes, Bradbury mentions that the methodology of this

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69. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

70. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

71. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

72. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

73. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

74. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

experiment contained several problems which raise concerns over the validity of the findings.[75]

Bradbury's primary concern was that "a person looking away from the teacher may be reflecting on the material and integrating it with prior work. A student fixedly staring at the teacher may be thinking about last night's dinner."[76] Since a study based on direct observation cannot pinpoint when someone is or is not attentive, the results should be examined critically.

The final study by D. Bunce, E. Flens, and K. Neiles, attempted to address the length of student attention by using clickers.[77] In the study, students were asked to self-report their attention with three possibilities: button number one signaled an attention lapse less than or equal to one minute, button number two signaled an attention lapse between two to three minutes, and button number three signaled an attention lapse greater than five minutes.[78] "The authors noted that students did not engage in consistent levels of attention but rather went between phases of attention and inattention throughout the entire lecture."[79] The study also found that students often pressed button number one when they were looking at the clock, students pressed button number two when they were looking at or responding to messages, and students pressed button number three when they were paying attention to homework from another class.[80]

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75. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

76. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

77. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

78. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

79. Bradbury, Neil. 510.

80. Bradbury, Neil. 511.

The results of this study support the claim that attention span ebbs and flows during a presentation, rather than being a set limit of time. This study also shows that students rarely lack attention span, but instead redirect their attention to other tasks throughout a lecture.[81]

Claims that Attention Span is Changing

So far this section of the paper has focused on various claims and studies about the length of attention span, The following section will look at evidence that claims attention span is changing. Dimitri Christakis, along with Zimmerman, DiGiuseppe, and McCarty in their article, "Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children", conducted a study to see if children who watched television would develop attention problems later in life. In the study the researchers gave parents a survey to indicate if their child had problems concentrating, if they were easily confused, impulsive, had trouble with obsessions, or was restless. They used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to record their results.[82] They found that, "early exposure to television was associated with subsequent attentional problems."[83]

A possible reason for the digital age bringing about shorter attention spans was noted by Arthurs, in his book, *Preaching With Variety*. "An unfortunate side effect of the electronic revolution is information overload, for we can now transmit so much information so quickly, as well as store information, that no one can observe even 1 percent of what is available."[84] An

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81. Bradbury, Neil. 511.

82. Christakis et al., "Early Television Exposure and Subsequent Attentional Problems in Children." 710.

83. Christakis et al. 710.

84. Arthurs and Robinson, *Preaching with Variety*. 33.

unfortunate side effect is that the overload of information has led people to be more selective in what they focus their attention on.[85]

This section of the paper examined research on the length of attention span. While many studies claim attention span lasts around ten to eighteen minutes, the evidence shows that attention span is not a defined limit. Rather, attention span ebbs and flows throughout a lecture depending on various factors.

Psychological Factors Affecting Attention Span

The next section of this paper will focus on various psychological factors that influence the length of attention span: cognitive backlog, learning styles, mind wandering, and motivation.

Cognitive Backlog

Cognitive backlog is defined as "a function of continued and persistent inputs of information which is either difficult to assimilate into existing attitude structures or is input at an unmanageable rate."[86] Cognitive backlog occurs when someone receives information that goes beyond their ability to understand it, or when someone receives too much information without having time to process it.

A study by Paul King and Ralph Behnke sought to determine the effect of cognitive backlog on individuals. They performed a listening test to identify cognitive backlog by having individuals listen to the same presentation at varying rates of speed.[87] Immediately following the

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85. Arthurs and Robinson. 32.

86. Beatty, "Receiver Apprehension as a Function of Cognitive Backlog." 277.

87. King and Behnke, "Effects of Communication Load, Affect, and Anxiety on the Performance of Information Processing Tasks." 77. The different rates they used were normal rate, thirty percent compression, forty five percent compression, and sixty percent compression.

presentation, the subjects completed the Kentucky Comprehensive Learning Test, which is a test that shows processing function in a listening task.[88] The results showed significant variation between the four time-compression levels, with the highest compression rate having the greatest impact on an individual.[89]

King and Behnke concluded that "increased levels of communication load significantly attenuate listener affect."[90] This means that when the rate of information exceeds the individual's ability to process the information, it leads to cognitive backlog. Beatty states "It is possible that cognitively complex individuals have expanded information processing abilities and therefore, accumulate less unassimilated information, and consequently report lower levels of receiver apprehension."[91]

Pastors need to take cognitive backlog into account when preparing and preaching sermons because an individual experiencing cognitive backlog is "likely to associate anxiety with the process of receiving information…Further, it follows that once a backlog accumulates a strong drive to avoid new information would emerge as a dominant response tendency. Accordingly, this perspective suggests that individuals in the process of assimilating substantial backlogs demonstrate a tendency to avoid receiving information if possible or suffer a variety of anxiety type reactions when forced to listen."[92] Since cognitive backlog can leave people

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88. King and Behnke. 78.

89. King and Behnke. 79.

90. King and Behnke. 80.

91. Beatty, "Receiver Apprehension as a Function of Cognitive Backlog." 280-81.

92. Beatty. 279.

focusing their attention on processing information rather than intaking new information, this is a factor that can greatly impact the attention span of a congregation.

Learning Styles

Aji Rinekso, in his article, "Pros and Cons of Learning Style," defines learning style theory as "a particular way of learning that the learners prefer to use to maximize their learning performance including obtaining, processing, and retaining information/knowledge."[93] The VARK model put forward by N. Fleming, identifies the different categories of learning as visual, auditory, reading, and kinesthetic.[94]

Various studies have been conducted to determine the validity of learning style theory. In the realm of psychology, "research clearly demonstrates that individuals have a dominant sense."[95] A left-brain dominant learner can easily learn through a lecture, while a right-brain dominant learner is attracted to the visual side of learning and typically needs to see information to retain it.[96]

Rinekso cites a qualitative study by S. Damronpanit and A. Reungtragul which sought to determine the effect of matching learning styles and teaching styles with a student's academic achievement.[97] They found that matching learning style and teaching style made a positive

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93. Rinekso, "Pros and Cons of Learning Style." 14.

94. Rinekso. 17. Rinekso mentions other models in the article. I chose to identify Fleming's model because it relates best to the field of homiletics. This model is also used by Rick Blackwood in his book, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching.*

95. Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*. 67.

96. Blackwood. 68.

97. Rinekso, "Pros and Cons of Learning Style." 17.

impact on the student's learning progress.[98] A study done by M. Peacock tested J. Reid's hypothesis that a mismatch between learning style and teaching style could result in the failure of learning, frustration, and demotivation.[99] The results of his study supported Reid's hypothesis that a mismatch between learning style and teaching style had negative impacts on learning.[100]

While there are many studies that support learning style theory, there are also some that criticize it. Rinekso identifies a study done by E. Coffield, D. Moseley, E. Hall, and K. Ecclestone which assessed various studies supporting the learning style theory.[101] Their study concluded that the concept of learning style was vulnerable since there were doubts about the validity of the results, and also because the studies supporting the theory contained too many theoretical perspectives leading to low construct validity.[102]

While learning style theory is not fully accepted, it is something a pastor will want to keep in mind as he prepares his sermons. This is because "the church is a multi-layered, richly-textured community. It is comprised of extroverts and introverts, thinkers and feelers, sensors and intuitors."[103] If a pastor wants to ensure that the visual and kinesthetic learners in his congregation do not struggle to focus on and retain the message of the sermon, it is wise to take the learning style theory into account.[104] Doing this will engage more of the congregation

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98. Rinekso. 17.

99. Rinekso. 17.

100. Rinekso. 17.

101. Rinekso. 18.

102. Rinekso. 18.

103. Tornfelt, "Preaching and Learning Styles." 60–1.

104. Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*. 66.

because the pastor will craft his message to engage more than just the auditory sense, making the message more captivating, more understandable, and more memorable.[105]

Mind Wandering

Mind wandering is "a decoupling of attention from an external stimulus to internal thoughts."[106] James Farley, in his article, "Everyday Attention and Lecture Retention: the Effects of Time, Fidgeting, and Mind Wandering," mentions that external evidence such as someone fidgeting with their hands, gazing at various locations, leaning in different directions, and even blinking at a faster rate, are evidence that one's mind is wandering.[107]A study done by J. Smallwood examined the effect of mind wandering on the retention of information. Smallwood had participants read a detective story, and he identified when the individuals showed evidence of mind wandering during critical moments in the story.[108] The experiment found that individuals whose minds wandered during the critical moments were unable to identify the villain of the story, showing that mind wandering impairs attention and comprehension of presented material.[109]

Since "mind wandering increases as a function of time" during a lecture, it is important for pastors to think about the length of their sermons.[110] The longer the sermon lasts, the more

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105. Blackwood. 79.

106. Risko et al., "Everyday Attention." 235.

107. Farley, James, Evan F. Risko, and Alan Kingstone, "Everyday Attention and Lecture Retention: The Effects of Time, Fidgeting, and Mind Wandering." 2.

108. Risko et al., "Everyday Attention." 235.

109. Risko et al. 235.

110. Risko et al. 240.

likely the members of the congregation will be affected by mind wandering, leading them to not comprehend the content of the sermon.

<div align="center">Motivation</div>

The last psychological factor that will be examined is the motivation of the congregation and the motivation of the pastor. The motivation of the congregation is their desire to receive the information from the sermon. The motivation of the pastor is his desire to convey the truth of God's Word in an engaging way.

For the members of a congregation, motivation is crucial since "the learner must attend with interest to the material to be learned," Otherwise they won't pay attention.[111] While no studies have supported this claim, it is an implicit conclusion that many researchers have reached.[112] A pastor will want to gauge the motivation of his audience so that he can identify what he can do to present his sermon in a way that will engage the congregation.

Therefore, the motivation of the pastor plays a role in the attention span of the members in the congregation. Pastors need do as much as possible to increase their members' motivation by showing the relevance of the material and eagerly displaying a passion for what they are preaching.[113] Doing this will help the members of the congregation to be active listeners and pay attention.

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111. Arthurs and Robinson, *Preaching with Variety*. 36.

112. Neil Bradbury, Jeffrey Arthurs, John Tornfelt, Paul King, Evan Risko, and David Buttrick have come to this conclusion.

113. Bradbury, Neil, "Attention Span During Lectures: 8 Seconds, 10 Minutes, or More?" 513.

PART III: HOW CAN A PASTOR ENGAGE HIS AUDIENCE DURING A SERMON?

So far, this paper has focused on the psychology of attention span and how long it lasts. The following section will discuss the supernatural and psychological working of the word in connection with the research on attention span. It will also look at different homiletic styles and different techniques pastors can use to capture and keep their listeners' attention.

Psychological and Supernatural Working of God's Word

"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you–they are full of Spirit and life."[114] Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, and he made it clear that his word is powerful and effective. In fact, the power of God's Word is a theme that is emphasized in both the Old and New Testaments.[115]

The power God's Word has is described as the supernatural working of the word. The supernatural working of the word is the inherent power to work faith through the gospel message, giving a person the assurance that their sins are forgiven.[116]

Since God's Word works supernaturally, one might conclude that studies on attention span have little relevance in the field of homiletics. As long as pastors preach God's Word

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114. John 6:63.

115. Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23; Isaiah 55:11; and Romans 10:17

116. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 1*. 316.

faithfully everyone who hears their message will be edified by it. But this conclusion ignores the parallel truth that God's Word also works psychologically.

The psychological working of God's Word means that "the working of Scripture proceeds in a manner appropriate to the intellectual nature of man."[117] In other words, the psychological working of God's Word "presupposes that the hearer can fully understand its basis and proofs, pass judgment on their validity, appropriate the presentation, and go along with its suggestions."[118] One might conclude that someone with cognitive backlog, for example, whose mind has wandered, or who is inattentive is not being affected by God's Word because they are not in a position to process the word that is spoken.

Therefore, the study of attention span is important for pastors to consider as they prepare and preach their sermons because "faith comes from hearing the message."[119] Since faith comes from hearing the message pastors will make every effort to ensure that their message will be heard.[120]

To have their message heard pastors first need to understand the proper relationship between the supernatural and psychological working of God's Word. If pastors neglect the supernatural working of God's Word, they could fall into the thinking that changing hearts is dependent on their preaching. This could either burden pastors with guilt or make them prideful, depending on the situation. In either case, pastors are in danger of downplaying the power of God's Word. In contrast, when pastors neglect the psychological working of God's Word, they

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117. Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Vol 4*. 13-4.

118. Hoenecke. 16.

119. Romans 10:17

120. Buttrick, *Homiletic*. 211.

could neglect preparation when it comes to crafting their sermons. In doing this, pastors would be expecting their sermons to work magically. But God's Word is not an incantation that automatically works faith in someone's heart. God's Word works both supernaturally and psychologically.

Maintaining this distinction will lead pastors to craft their sermons in an understandable way and be comforted in knowing that God's Word alone changes hearts. The Word will not return to God empty, but will accomplish what He desires, and achieve the purpose which he sends it.[121]

Homiletic Styles

Since pastors preach many times throughout the course of their ministry, they can feel like a worker on an assembly line, cranking out one sermon out after the other, with each one sounding just like the others.[122] Sameness can become a serious issue since humans adapt quickly to consistent patterns, which can lead to inattentiveness.[123]

Pastors can address this problem by utilizing a variety of homiletic styles. If a pastor breaks the usual pattern of his sermons this can capture the listener because something new is happening. In fact, breaking a pattern is the most basic way to get someone's attention.[124] The human brain is designed to be aware of changes, and the surprise of a new style has the potential get and keep attention.[125]

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121. Paraphrase of Isaiah 55:11.

122. Arthurs and Robinson, *Preaching with Variety*. 18.

123. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 64.

124. Heath and Heath. 64.

125. Heath and Heath. 65.

Even with styles that lend themselves to capturing and keeping a congregation's attention, using the same style week after week could lead listeners to get used to the pattern and be inclined to inattentiveness.

<div align="center">Narrative Preaching</div>

The first style that will be examined is narrative preaching. "The key features of narrative literature are plot, character, setting, and point of view."[126] One benefit to narrative style preaching is that it lends itself to keeping the audience's attention.

In his book, *TED Talks: The Official Guide to Public Speaking*, Chris Anderson states "A natural part of listening to stories is that you empathize with the experience of the characters. You find yourself immersed in their thoughts and emotions. In fact, you physically feel what they feel; if they're stressed or excited or exhilarated, so are you. And that makes you care about the outcome. Your attention is held."[127] Another benefit of narrative preaching is that the plot naturally presents a problem for the main character of the story, thus creating curiosity in the minds of the audience as to how the problem gets resolved.[128] Since the audience craves closure to the story, they pay attention to the flow of the plot and "find that movement as satisfying as the movement from an unresolved chord to a resolved one."[129]

Another benefit of the narrative style is that it limits cognitive backlog. In connection with their article, "Listening to Narratives: An Experimental Examination of Storytelling in the

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126. Arthurs and Robinson, *Preaching with Variety*. 68.

127. Anderson, *TED Talks*. 64.

128. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 84.

129. Arthurs and Robinson, *Preaching with Variety*. 72.

Classroom", Katie Glonek and Paul King conducted an experiment to see if a subject would

retain more information from a narrative or an expository presentation of material. The

experiment included five groups of subjects, with each group receiving an audio file to listen to.

The audio files were presented in five ways: low rate narrative, high rate narrative, low rate

expository, high rate expository, and the control recording.[130] After the subjects listened to their

recording, they were given a questionnaire to measure their cognitive learning.[131] The results

showed "that information presented in narrative form will recalled at a higher rate", and that

"information presented at a low presentation rate will be recalled at a higher rate than

information presented at a high presentation rate."[132]

> The findings from this study yield practical implications for educators across all
> disciplines. Though the present findings may not warrant an immediate rewrite of all
> instructional material, the study does make the point that communicators should be
> mindful of the manner in which they are presenting material to their audiences. It is
> important to present material in a compelling fashion in order to gain audience attention
> and increase retention. If instructors and public speakers can, when practical, be
> adequately flexible to present information in narrative rather than expository style, their
> presentations will be more memorable.[133]

> In their book, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, Chip and Dan

Heath mention an exercise the former performs at the end of his "Making Ideas Stick" class. The

exercise demonstrates the effectiveness of a narrative presentation.

> Students are given some data from a government source on crime patterns in the United
> States. Half of them are asked to make a one-minute persuasive speech to convince their
> peers that nonviolent crime is a serious problem in this country. The other half are asked
> to take the position that it's not particularly serious…The students divide into small
> groups and each one gives a one-minute speech while the others listen. After each speech,
> the listeners rate the speaker: How impressive was the delivery? How persuasive? What

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130. Glonek and King. 37. The term low/high rate refers to the speed of the recording. Low rate means the presentation was played at a slower speed, and high rate means the presentation was played at a faster speed.

131. Glonek and King. 38.

132. Glonek and King. 38–9.

133. Glonek and King. 40.

happens, invariably, is that the most polished speakers get the highest ratings. Students who are poised, smooth, and charismatic are rated at the top of the class.[134]

The professor then allows time to pass, distracting the students with video clips, then abruptly asks the students to pull out a sheet of paper and write down the ideas they remembered from each speaker.[135] The students who used stories had sixty three percent of their statistics recalled, while, students who did not use stories only had five percent of their statistics recalled.[136] The study shows that "almost no correlation emerged between 'speaking talent' and the ability to make ideas stick. The people who were captivating speakers typically do no better than others in making their ideas stick…The stars of stickiness are the students who made their case by telling stories."[137]

While the narrative style engages the audience, it is important to keep in mind that the story needs to be simple and reflect the core of the message being presented.[138] A story that is too complex can induce cognitive backlog. Similarly, if the audience senses that the story has nothing to do with the point being made, they could lose interest in the message.[139]

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134. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 242.

135. Heath and Heath. 242.

136. Heath and Heath. 243.

137. Heath and Heath. 243. The author mentions that foreign students, whose less-polished English puts them at the bottom of the speaking skills ranking, were on par with native speakers in the exercise.

138. Heath and Heath. 237.

139. Glonek and King, "Listening to Narratives." 37.

Inductive Preaching

Another homiletic style is inductive preaching. In inductive preaching the thesis is reserved until later in the sermon where the thesis functions as the result of the homiletic exploration.[140] In other words, the sermon will create gaps in the audience's knowledge and then fill those gaps in.[141] The goal of inductive preaching is to lead people to see that they need the message/information that will be presented, and to do that the presenter highlights knowledge that the audience is missing.[142]

In his book *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Eugene Lowry puts forward one inductive way to preach a sermon. "The stages are: 1) upsetting the equilibrium, 2) analyzing the discrepancy, 3) disclosing the clue to resolution, 4) experiencing the gospel, and 5) anticipating the consequences."[143] In Lowry's inductive way of preaching, stages one and two lead the audience to feel a need for something, which could be described as having a gap in knowledge.[144] "The not knowing what or why or how is the key to the attention of the audience."[145] Stage three reveals the knowledge "which allows the whole puzzle to come into sharp focus. Such a revelatory clue is experienced by the congregation rather than simply known."[146] Stage four moves on to highlight God's grace by experiencing the gospel in light of

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140. Gore, "DEDUCTIVE, INDUCTIVE . . . AND A THIRD WAY." 3.

141. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 84.

142. Heath and Heath. 85.

143. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot, Expanded Edition*. 26.

144. Lowry. 53.

145. Lowry. 24.

146. Lowry. 54.

the problem that was resolved.[147] The final stage brings about closure by telling the audience

what this knowledge means for the future.[148]

Not only does the inductive style of preaching lend itself to keeping the audience's

attention, "there is evidence from numerous diverse sources, from neuroscience to psychology to

educational theory, that this is how understanding must happen. It's built as a hierarchy, with

each layer supplying the elements that construct the next layer."[149] Since this style encourages

the members of a congregation to both stay attentive and learn, it would be wise for a pastor to

preach inductive sermons. One caution is to make sure that there is a precise sequencing of

concepts so that the understanding builds naturally and does not confuse the congregation.[150]

Deductive Preaching

Another homiletic style is deductive preaching. "Deductive sermons are those which begin with

a thesis or proposition and then proceed to elaborate that thesis by a series of supporting

propositions."[151] In other words, the preacher tells the congregation what he is going to tell them,

he tells them the information, then he tells the congregation what he told them.[152]The benefit of

deductive preaching is that theme of the sermon is clearly presented. For sections of Scripture

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147. Lowry. 74.

148. Lowry. 80.

149. Anderson, *TED Talks*. 77.

150. Anderson. 81.

151. Gore, "DEDUCTIVE, INDUCTIVE . . . AND A THIRD WAY." 3.

152. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 9.

that are structured and logical, it could be argued that deductive preaching is well-suited to the text.[153]

Expository preaching is the most common form of deductive preaching, that consists of consecutive interpretation and practical enforcement of the text.[154] The benefit is that it draws out the meaning of Scripture and places that meaning out in a logical order.[155] It also ensures that the focus of the text will be the focus of the sermon.

While the deductive style makes the focus of the sermon clear, it does not necessarily make things memorable.[156] Another problem with this style of preaching is that it limits audience participation. Since modern listeners have been socialized to participate in their education, "something more is required than a mere presentation; the pupil must think."[157] "Ideas can be communicated only by inducing in the receiving mind processes corresponding to those by which the ideas were first conceived. Ideas must be rethought, experience must be re-experienced."[158]

The pastor will want to consider deductive preaching as he prepares his sermons. While this style of preaching does not lend itself to keeping the audience's attention, a pastor could use it to add variety.

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153. Gore, "DEDUCTIVE, INDUCTIVE . . . AND A THIRD WAY." 4.

154. Blackwood, "Factors in Expository Preaching That Influence Attention, Comprehension and Retention Levels." 25.

155. Blackwood. 26.

156. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 9.

157. Arthurs and Robinson, *Preaching with Variety*. 36.

158. Arthurs and Robinson. 36.

Techniques

While there are varying styles a pastor can use to aid his congregation to pay attention, there are

also a variety of techniques a pastor can use to capture and keep his congregation's attention.

The techniques a pastor can use that will be examined are multi-sensory communication, speech

techniques, writing style, and sermon length.

Multi-Sensory Communication

The first technique that will be examined is multi-sensory communication. "Unlike conventional

preaching, which stimulates only the sense of hearing, multi-sensory communication stimulates

multiple senses- that is, the senses of hearing, seeing, touching, and sometimes even smell and

taste."[159] A multi-sensory message can utilize things such as "props, object lessons, interactive

tools, video clips, drama, art, music, thematic backdrops, food, water, smells, and other creative

elements that stimulate sensory perception."[160]

In his dissertation, "Utilizing Visual Objects in Preaching to Adults in Order to Increase

Memory Retention of Sermon Content", Barry Simon conducted an experiment to see if visual

objects would increase the retention of sermon content in adults.[161] Simon preached on three

consecutive Sundays, and each Sunday had two services.[162] One service served as the test group

and the other served as the control group.[163] Subjects were asked to identify the focus of the

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159. Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*. 13.

160. Blackwood. 14. Before incorporating a multi-sensory message pastors should evaluate their congregation to know if they will find it awkward or weird..

161. Simon, "Utilizing Visual Objects in Preaching to Adults in Order to Increase Memory Retention of Sermon Content." 1.

162. Simon. 112.

163. Simon. 112.

sermon and any key points they picked up during the sermon.[164] The results showed "that the visual aids cause the sermon content to lodge more deeply in the memory of listeners. Their ability to more accurately relate the information on the recall questionnaire and the drastic difference on the follow-up questionnaire showed the visuals had a profound effect on their remembrance."[165] "An additional conclusion is that adults are open to the use of visuals in the Sunday message. No respondent related that he or she felt the message was too childish or that the visual was too much of a gimmick. People often expect visual objects in children or youth sermons. However, this research presents a strong case for using visuals in the adults service."[166]

In his book, *The Power of MultiSensory Preaching and Teaching*, Rick Blackwood details an experiment he performed to "see if multi-sensory communication could help pastors and Christian teachers be more effective communicators."[167] The experiment consisted of "Three Quasi-Experimental Post-Test Only Control Group Designs. The independent variable was the teaching methodologies and the dependent variable was the effect on audience attention, comprehension, and retention."[168] "To measure audience comprehension and retention levels, a fill-in-the-blank-test was given at the conclusion of the final week of treatment. Questions (about not well-known facts) were designed to determine the congregation's understanding and memory of material taught during the three types of delivery. Those delivery types were: Verbal, Verbal +

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164. Simon. 114.

165. Simon. 134.

166. Simon. 136.

167. Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*. 45.

168. Blackwood. 45.

Visual, Verbal + Visual + Interactive."[169] To measure attention level, researchers observed the audience's eye-contact with the preacher.[170]

The results showed "attention levels were 142 percent higher when the audience was treated with verbal and visual communication as opposed to just verbal communication"[171], and "the average comprehension levels for three weeks of testing demonstrated that multisensory communication consistently outperformed lecture delivery."[172] Another interesting discovery in the experiment was that a subject "exposed to multisensory communication on week 1 and lecture communication on week 3 had better recall of the information from week 1 than week 3. In other words, the subject remembered more about the multisensory message even though they were three weeks removed from it (73 percent accuracy) than about the lecture message they just heard (68 percent accuracy)."[173] The results led Blackwood to conclude "that multisensory teaching can make us more effective communicators."[174]

Both Blackwood and Simon have examined why multisensory communication led to the results they found, and both attribute it to the learning style theory. Blackwood states, "Preachers need to know that everyone in their audience has a sensory preference"[175], and "the fact that people have different sensory preferences for learning is the reason for multi-sensory

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169. Blackwood. 45.

170. Blackwood. 46.

171. Blackwood. 51.

172. Blackwood. 54.

173. Blackwood. 57–8.

174. Blackwood. 18.

175. Blackwood. 64.

communication."[176] Simon mentions that learning preference is an important factor to consider

for pastors as they preach, but more important is the cognitive process in the individual.[177]

Both Blackwood and Simon also attribute the results of multi-sensory communication to

the impact of technology on cognitive processes. Blackwood states, "Recent conclusions from

the research indicate that television may overstimulate and permanently rewire the brain to be

visually dependent when it comes to attention span."[178] Similarly Simon states, "Many of the 30-

to 50-year-olds, the first generation to grow up with television were greatly affected by the visual

sermons. This is significant because part of the reasoning behind the project was that Americans

in recent decades have become a multi-media saturated society."[179]

While multi-sensory communication can be a useful technique for a pastor, there are

objections brought against it. One is that multi-sensory communication is a form of

entertainment.[180] This argument comes from those who "want to defend against making it a

spectacle just to make it a spectacle."[181] Blackwood sympathizes with this concern, "Multi-

sensory preaching by nature does not seek to change the message, only the method of delivery. It

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176. Blackwood. 67.

177. Simon, "Utilizing Visual Objects in Preaching to Adults in Order to Increase Memory Retention of Sermon Content." 90.

178. Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*. 36.

179. Simon, "Utilizing Visual Objects in Preaching to Adults in Order to Increase Memory Retention of Sermon Content." 133.

180. Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*. 80.

181. Blackwood. 80.

is designed to make the message more captivating, more understandable, and more memorable."[182] "Style is not the issue, content is."[183]

Another objection is that adults are not open to the idea of multi-sensory communication.[184] This might be true for a congregation that has never heard a multi-sensory message and suddenly gets bombarded with things such as object lessons. Therefore, it is wise for a pastor to slowly introduce multi-sensory communication to his congregation so that the message does not come off as a gimmick or as childish.[185]

The research of Blackwood and Simon shows the effectiveness of multi-sensory communication. Utilizing this technique can allow a pastor to capture people's attention and communicate the truth of God's Word in a way that is understandable and memorable.[186]

Speech Techniques

Another way a pastor can aid his congregation to pay attention during a sermon is by incorporating a variety of speech techniques. In his book, *Ted Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking,* Chris Anderson mentions that eye contact is a beneficial speech technique. "Scientists have shown that just the act of two people staring at each other will trigger mirror neuron activity that literally adopts the emotional state of the other person…We look at each

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182. Blackwood. 79.

183. Blackwood. 78.

184. Simon, "Utilizing Visual Objects in Preaching to Adults in Order to Increase Memory Retention of Sermon Content." 136.

185. Simon. 136.

186. Blackwood, *The Power of Multisensory Preaching and Teaching*. 18.

other and our minds sync."[187] A pastor will want to memorize his sermon well so that he can make solid eye contact to engage the audience.

Another speech technique Anderson mentions is humor. Humor is an effective speech technique because it "hacks away the main resistance to listening to a talk...Audiences who laugh with you quickly come to like you. And if people like you, they're much readier to take seriously what you have to say. Laughter blows open someone's defenses, and suddenly you have a chance to truly communicate with them."[188] While humor is an effective tool, not everyone can do it.[189] A pastor who wants to incorporate humor into his sermons needs to know if he has a gift for it or not because ineffective humor is worse than no humor at all.[190]

Another speech technique Anderson mentions is dynamic speaking. Dynamic speaking utilizes the six tools of the voice: volume, pitch, pace, timbre, tone, and prosody.[191] The key is to inject variety into the way one speaks based on the meaning that is trying to be conveyed. "The point is to start thinking of your tone of voice as giving you a whole new set of tools to get inside your listeners' heads. You want them to understand you, yes, but you also want them to feel your passion. And the way to do that is not by telling them to be passionate about this topic, it's by showing your own passion. It spreads automatically, as will every other emotion you authentically feel."[192] In other words, a pastor shows his motivation and passion for the topic by

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187. Anderson, *TED Talks*. 49.

188. Anderson. 53.

189. Anderson. 55.

190. Anderson. 55.

191. Anderson. 201. The author defines prosody as the "singsong rise and fall that distinguishes something like a statement from a question."

192. Anderson. 202.

speaking dynamically, and this will motivate the congregation to listen. If pastors fail to add variety to their vocal pattern, this communicates that no single part of the sermon matters more than any other part, and "the biological effect of this is hypnotic. That is, it simply puts your audience to sleep."[193]

The final speech technique Anderson mentions is rate of speech. One way to lose an audience is to speak too fast, and another way is to speak too slow.[194] Speaking too fast loses an audience because information comes too quickly leading to cognitive backlog.[195] Speaking too slowly loses an audience because their minds can begin to wander.[196] Since either extreme can lead to a disengaged audience, Anderson recommends speaking conversationally, and speeding up or slowing down one's rate of speech when the point calls for it.[197]

<center>Writing Techniques</center>

Another way a pastor can aid his congregation to pay attention during the sermon is by incorporating writing techniques. One writing technique a pastor can use is to write with a clear focus. Writing with a clear focus is "stripping an idea down to its most critical essence."[198] This limits the amount of information the congregation receives so that they will not be affected by

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193. Anderson. 201.

194. Anderson. 204.

195. Anderson. 204.

196. Anderson. 204.

197. Anderson. 204.

198. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 27.

cognitive backlog.[199] While many pastors attach themes to their sermons, the encouragement here is to make sure that departures from the theme are few and far between.

Another writing technique which can prevent cognitive backlog is limiting the use of jargon. While terms such as justification, sanctification, atonement, redemption, and others convey key biblical truths, these terms either need to be explained or eliminated from the sermon.[200] Members will struggle to comprehend or recall what these terms mean, and many guests will be unfamiliar with them. Limiting the use of jargon can be difficult for a pastor since once something is known it is hard to imagine what it was like to never know it.[201] Therefore, if a pastor incorporates technical terms into his sermons, it is necessary to explain the terms in understandable ways.[202] This will keep the congregation from being affected by cognitive backlog.

Similar to limiting the use of technical terms, a pastor will also want to write with a simplified vocabulary. Graduates from a theological school have an educated vocabulary of around twelve-thousand words, while the average member's vocabulary is around seven-thousand-five-hundred words.[203] If a pastor uses words that go beyond his congregation's understanding, they could easily experience cognitive backlog. Therefore, a pastor will want to learn the vocabulary of his congregation, because the language of preaching is given to the pastor by his congregation.[204]

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199. Anderson, *TED Talks*. 36.

200. Anderson. 81.

201. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 20.

202. Anderson, *TED Talks*. 81.

203. Buttrick, *Homiletic*. 187.

204. Buttrick. 189.

In his book, *Homiletic Moves and Structures*, David Buttrick identifies common writing problems a pastor can fix to help his congregation be attentive to the sermon. One writing problem is the use of the word "this." "This" is an issue "because we cannot look back and retrieve an idea."[205] A pastor might assume that the congregation knows what he is referring to when using "this," but if the members do not have a copy of the sermon to read, there is no way for them to identify what "this" refers to. If the congregation does not know what the pastor is referring to it can lead a member's mind to wander.[206]

Another writing problem is using doublets in sentences. A doublet is "trying to talk of two different things at the same time."[207] An example is: "God wants peace and justice." Doublets in sentences effect cognitive backlog because it is a minor inventory overload that instantly erases in the minds of the congregation.[208] If a pastor wants to speak about two different things, he should speak about each thing separately so the congregation can follow his flow of thought.

The final writing problem Buttrick mentions is failing to vary the length of sentences. If every sentence is short, then the ideas presented will seem disconnected.[209] On the other hand, too many long sentences can be hard to follow.[210] A pastor should "aim at syntactical variety and sentence-length in speaking, for both characterize ordinary conversational style."[211]

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205. Buttrick. 211.

206. Buttrick. 211.

207. Buttrick. 213.

208. Buttrick. 213.

209. Buttrick. 220.

210. Buttrick. 220.

211. Buttrick. 220.

Sermon Length

The final technique that will be examined is sermon length. While the length of a sermon is commonly thought to be around twenty-minutes long, there are a variety of considerations a pastor should consider.[212]

First, a pastor will want to remember that the goal of the sermon is to faithfully communicate God's Word to his congregation.[213] Since some texts are more complex than others, the length of a sermon should be dependent on the text being preached on. On one hand, if a pastor has a text with a simple focus and one key point to make, forcing the sermon to reach the twenty-minute mark can lead to a repetition of thoughts and effect mind wandering in the congregation. On the other hand, if a pastor has a complex text with multiple key points to make, condensing the sermon into twenty-minutes can lead to an overload of information and effect cognitive backlog in the congregation.

A pastor will also want to vary the length of his sermons to keep his congregation from adapting to a consistent pattern.[214] If a congregation expects every sermon to be a similar length, they could become more concerned about the clock rather than the sermon itself.

Therefore, it seems unwise to rigidly adhere to a twenty-minute time limit for every sermon. This is because each pastor has a variety of gifts that will give him the ability to vary his sermon length in a way helps his congregation to pay attention.

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212. This idea is common in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).

213. Arthurs and Robinson, *Preaching with Variety*. 14.

214. Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*. 64.

CONCLUSION

"Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Rom 10:17). Pastors have the privilege of preaching the gospel message to their congregation every Sunday as they step into the pulpit. But in performing this task a pastor will want to do everything he can to ensure that the gospel message is heard. And in order for the message to be heard, it needs to effect the intellect of the listener, so they understand and comprehend the message.[215] For this reason, a pastor will want to be aware of the latest research on attention span. Studies have identified various factors such as cognitive backlog, mind wandering, and motivation which impact whether people will pay attention to a pastor's sermon.

While there are various factors that can lead a congregation to become inattentive, there are also a variety of ways a pastor can capture and keep his listeners' attention. A pastor can utilize a variety of homiletic styles and techniques to engage his audience throughout the sermon. These homiletic styles and techniques combat the negative effect which cognitive backlog, mind wandering, and motivation have on a congregation. Simply varying homiletic styles and techniques can greatly assist the pastor to engage his audience. And when the audience is engaged and attentive, they are hearing the gospel message.

Preaching so the message gets heard is an attainable goal for every pastor, no matter how great or small their homiletic skill is. The key takeaway is that the pastor realizes the importance of the message that they are preaching, because everyone who is listening to their

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215. This is referring to the psychological working of God's Word.

sermon is someone who needs to hear the gospel message.

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