Sermon Responses and Preferences in Pentecostal and Mainline Churches

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Summary
While research over the last 30 years has shown that sermons have a minimal influence on listeners, denominational differences in sermon effectiveness have been unexplored. We surveyed Anglican and Elim members (representing Mainline and Pentecostal Christians respectively) to compare their responses to sermons, and the sermon features and themes they prefer. The results revealed higher sermon effectiveness responses from Elim participants. The data also showed that Anglicans desired significant intellectual content and discussion of social issues compared with Elim members who gave higher ratings on almost all other features and themes. However, participants from both churches responded to sermons in a predominantly emotional (rather than cognitive or behavioural) way, and most wanted to hear sermons on grace and forgiveness. We conclude by noting the need for evaluations of sermon effectiveness that reflect preachers’ and listeners’ motivations.

Keywords
sermon effectiveness, sermon themes, preaching, Pentecostal, Anglican

1. Introduction

Sermons are usually goal orientated: they are intended to induce and reinforce the experience of being a Christian. Yet researchers continue to question the effectiveness of the sermon as a communication tool, and several studies have shown that sermons have a minimal influence on listeners (e.g., Greene, 1998; Price, Terry & Johnston, 1980).

To determine the factors that may impact on sermon effectiveness, some researchers have concentrated on characteristics of the sermon and the preacher (Maybury & Chickering, 2001; Joseph & Thompson, 2004), but most have emphasised the characteristics of the receiver (e.g., Howden, 1989; Newman...
& Wright, 1980; Pargament & Silverman, 1982). To date, no study has examined denomination as a factor, even though there are strong variations in theology and preaching styles across denominations. Given that tailoring messages to listeners is essential to good communication, it is important to know if people from different church affiliations, (especially fundamentalist and liberal ones) vary in their responses to sermons, and the types of sermons they prefer.

This study examines the extent to which affiliation to a Mainline or Pentecostal denomination affects reports of sermon effectiveness, and preferred features and themes.¹ By Mainline we refer to large historic denominations, such as Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist, which were brought to the United States by the early European settlers. By Pentecostal, we mean churches that arose from the revivals of glossolalia at the turn of the 20th century in the United States and Wales, which encourage converts to seek the baptism of the Spirit and speak in tongues.

Specifically, we compare the responses to sermons of two Anglican and two Elim churches. The Anglican church is the third largest Christian community worldwide and represents a middle ground between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Elim is a Pentecostal denomination which has almost 9,000 churches worldwide. We look at how the two churches differ in: (1) sermon effectiveness, measured by reported responses to sermons, (2) members’ desire for features commonly used in sermons, e.g. gestures, stories, anecdotes, intellectual content, and (3) members’ desire for sermon themes, e.g. the grace and forgiveness of God, social justice and peace issues, the believer in the work place.

The paper takes the following format: First we discuss the research on sermon impact. Then we present the reasons why we expect higher sermon ratings from Pentecostals than Mainline members, and the types of themes and features that members of each religious affiliation may favour. Next, we outline the New Zealand context of our research, followed by our method in which we present our sermon inventories. In our results section we examine both the mean rank differences and median scores of sermon responses and preferred features and themes in the respective denominations. We close by discussing the need for evaluations of sermon effectiveness that reflect preachers’ and listeners’ motivations.

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