

The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences 1590-1640

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‘There is no salvation without preaching’ declared Thomas Cartwright, at the height of the Admonition controversy (p. 32). Nehemiah Wallington agreed – and he couldn’t get enough of it. One week he managed to squeeze in 19 sermons, a remarkable achievement, though his average of 30 a month may not have been so unusual. But even Wallington struggled at times to concentrate, often found himself watching the hour glass intently, and admitted he had ‘many times slept at Church hearing of God’s word’ (p. 71). Wallington and his friends knew that listening to sermons was hard work, but it was central to their religious experience and to that of many early modern Protestants. In *The Art of Hearing*, Arnold Hunt offers a fresh and richly textured account of sermon culture, considering the contributions and attitudes of the audience as well as the preacher.

Hunt begins with a valuable and comprehensive overview of recent work on early modern preaching, a subject which had long languished outside mainstream historical and literary studies, and been tinged with antiquarianism. As he shows, however, the last decade or so has seen a revival of interest, often focused on the sermon as part of the dynamic world of religious and political controversy. Moreover, historians and literary scholars have become aware of the importance of the transmission of ideas and practices within religious culture, especially between the clerical 'producer' and the lay 'consumer'. In this process, preaching was central; and yet little attention has been paid to the ways in which sermons were heard, or to the responses of the audience. In this book, Hunt sets out to explore the experience of hearing sermons, and therefore the interaction between preacher and congregant, cleric and layman. Each chapter offers a different perspective on this relationship.

Chapter one discusses the theory, or rather theories, of preaching, contrasting Puritan views with those of conformists. In the late 16th century, some ministers – including Cartwright – saw preaching as central; it was through hearing the Word explained and interpreted that men and women would be brought to faith. Conformists like Archbishop Whitgift preferred instead to emphasise the value of reading Scripture and homilies, insisting that hearing these was just as valuable as hearing a sermon. 50 years later, however, the sharp distinction between a preaching and a reading ministry had been softened, as written and spoken words came to be seen as part of the same enterprise, not least because so many sermons were themselves printed and then read.

The transformation involved when a sermon was printed is the subject of chapter three. Often this transformation did not involve too many changes to the text, and many printed sermons were designed to be read aloud. Preachers quickly saw the potential to reach a larger audience if they committed their words to the page, from where they could be read by individuals in private, or to groups of like-minded Christians. The barrier between the Word spoken and read was gradually broken down, to the point where, by the late seventeenth century, almost all preachers used a written script for their sermons (which could, of course, be easily printed).

The second and fourth chapters focus on the audience, on how they heard sermons (chapter two) and on who they might have been (chapter four). Here Hunt recognises the difficulties involved, for there is very little direct evidence for either of these subjects. To explore the 'art of hearing', he uses manuals and works of instruction, designed to teach people how to hear – and, crucially, remember – a sermon, and compares these with surviving notes, demonstrating how seriously some people took their duty to listen to sermons. Listening could be a demanding exercise, and few had the mental stamina or powers of concentration to remember all that they heard, but Hunt argues that the effect was to reinforce the value of sermons and preaching more generally. To examine who might have been at any given sermon, he discusses the phenomenon of sermon-gadding, of attending sermons in parishes other than one's own. Using diaries, sermon notes, and printed sermons, he suggests that there was significant variety, especially in a large city like London, and that laymen and women went to those sermons they enjoyed, or found uplifting. There was, he suggests, almost a 'free market' in sermons, and one which may not have been as disruptive as is sometimes suggested.

How effective was all this energetic preaching – and listening? Chapter five sets out to address this issue, responding to Christopher Haigh's claims that preaching was far from popular in most communities because it did not conform to ideals of neighbourliness and sociability. Hunt uses three case studies to suggest that even godly ministers keen to preach to their parishes and to remind them of the judgement to come often acted, or at least tried to act, in ways which re-inforced the values of neighbourliness. Indeed, he suggests that through sermons we can see how ministers combined their strong sense of the gulf between the elect and the reprobate with their commitment to social order and harmony. He acknowledges that these tensions were played out differently in each community, but his chapter provides a model for future studies of the relationship between preacher and parish.

The final chapters continue this theme, examining particular sermons within their religious and political

contexts. First Hunt looks at 'political' sermons, showing how preachers were able to include criticism within their texts, by using standard conventions and metaphors in particular ways. Then he turns to 'theological' sermons, particularly those dealing with predestination, showing that Calvinist ministers did discuss the subject from their pulpits and that many people saw this doctrine as an essential part of Protestantism, even if they did not fully appreciate all its complexities. In both chapters, Hunt insists that we must be aware of the context and the audience for each sermon, that words used by one preacher may have a different meaning in the mouth of another. By attending to these contexts, Hunt provides a vivid and colourful account of a range of sermons, some designed to rebuke and stir up their audiences, others to calm and reassure them.

Sermons were unique performances, and one of the striking features of Hunt's book is his commitment to examining them as such. He never loses sight of the broader culture of which they were a part, but we see this culture through the eyes of an impressive range of individuals, each located within a particular place and time. And the chapters are themselves quite self-contained, taking a different aspect of sermon culture and examining the views of the men and women who participated within that culture. The result is a book which provides insight into numerous features of a world of preaching and listening, adding considerable to our understanding of the religious experience of early modern individuals.

Exactly what the collective significance of these individuals might be is left open, however, for there is no conclusion which ties together the findings of the chapters. Instead, the 'conclusion' discusses changing sermon practices after 1640, placing Hunt's own research within a long history of preaching. In his chapter on the 'art of hearing', Hunt shows that preachers who wanted their words to be remembered tended to set out clearly the use, or practical application, of the sermon. A conclusion which set the findings of the book against our current understanding of religious and political life and, perhaps, speculated further on some of the broader themes contained within it, would have been extremely helpful. The chapters each have their own conclusion sections, but a final conclusion would make clear that the book is more than the sum of its parts.

Scholars have long been aware of the power of charismatic preachers like the Parliamentarian divine Stephen Marshall, whose thunderous sermons on 'Meroz Cursed' put fire in the belly of MPs about to take up arms against their king. But the culture from which such preaching – and such attentive listening – came has not been explored so fully, and Hunt's focus on the half century before the civil wars is extremely valuable. Preaching, as he shows, could at times be dramatic and divisive, but it was more often designed to unite and to edify the audience – as long as they concentrated. In this book, Hunt brings to life the world of the early modern sermon, and students of early modern history will benefit from its riches.

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