



THE BAYLOR UNIVERSITY MOST EFFECTIVE PREACHERS IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD SURVEY: BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

The impact and recognition of Baylor's prestigious 1996 and 2018 Most Effective Preachers in the English-Speaking World Survey is yet to be measured. This paper seeks to explore both the 1996 and 2018 surveys, the origins of both surveys and the strengths and weaknesses of the study. In addition, the surveys will be evaluated in light of their recognition not only in the field of homiletics, but also on a more popular level. The paper will first examine the 1996 survey and then the 2018 survey. A comparison of the two surveys will follow with analysis.

THE 1996 MOST EFFECTIVE PREACHERS SURVEY

As part of Baylor University's Sesquicentennial that was to take place in 1995, President Herbert H. Reynolds¹ sought to highlight the place of preaching by conducting a survey of the preaching world in order to devise a list of the top twelve preachers in the English-speaking world.² The study was set in motion in 1993.³ "Baylor's desire to examine the nature of effective preaching is drawn from its traditional relationship with Baptist churches, its commitment to preparing ministry students and the opening last year of the George W. Truett Theological Seminary" noted Larry Lyon in a 1996 press announcement from Baylor's Media Communications on the release of the results of the twelve most effective preachers survey.⁴ For Reynolds, he wanted, "the possibility of making a statement to the Christian world about Baylor's commitment to the proclamation of a Christian message."⁵ Reynolds retired from the presidency in 1995. Under the presidency of Robert B. Sloan, the survey continued.⁶ "It seems appropriate for a

Christian institution, especially a Baptist [institution], to recognize great preachers," underscored Sloan.⁷

Various members comprised the initial committee, including Glenn O. Hilburn,⁸ chair of the religion department, Milton Cunningham, director of denominational ministries at the university,⁹ sociology professor, J. Larry Lyon and W. Glenn Jonas, at that time a recent Baylor Ph.D. graduate in church history. Jonas, also a local pastor, had been conducting post-doctoral research through the Oral History Institute at Baylor University. Lyons and Jonas became the directors of the study.¹⁰

Lyon was tasked to develop the survey and engage in statistical analysis. Jonas composed a list of contacts for the survey with professors of preaching, using the internet and information from the Association of Theological Schools.¹¹ As Jonas notes, "we defined it [the English-speaking world—the reach of the survey] as North America, England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland and Australia.¹²

The study set out to answer two questions: 1) what qualities define effective preaching, and 2) who best incorporates those qualities?¹³ From the contact information that Jonas gathered, Jonas and Lyons sent a survey—via United States mail—to 333 homiletics professors from "seminaries, divinity schools and other ministry training centers in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand."¹⁴ The survey included "denominational as well as nondenominational schools...."¹⁵ This first survey was developed to determine the qualities of effective preaching.

Of the 333 surveys sent, there were 151 responses. "Most respondents listed several questions that they considered essential." An average of five questions were provided by the respondents.¹⁶ Jonas and Lyons state with humor, "Some professors simply sent us their course syllabi; one sent a videotaped lecture from his homiletics class."¹⁷

The next task was to compile the responses. Jonas recalls, "We went into a conference room in the Carroll Library [at Baylor University] and spread them out on the tables to find if there were trends."¹⁸ Jonas and Lyons observe, "We compiled all the qualities they suggested and grouped them into ... seven broad categories."¹⁹ As Lyons observes, "In some respects, the definition of what is effective preaching is just as important as the determination of who is the most effective."²⁰

The Categories of Effectiveness

The broad categories of effectiveness Jonas and Lyon discovered as they grouped the responses from the first mailed survey are as follows:

Biblical/exegetical. Effective sermons are based in scripture and exhibit good exegetical preparation. "Effective preaching is based on solid biblical exegesis," one respondent remarked. "The fabric of the sermon is woven from the scripture text," said another.

Relevance. Effective sermons are relevant to listeners. The sermon "is pertinent to [people's] ordinary daily struggles to live the gospel." "The preacher should bridge over from the historical to the contemporary setting in order to address the cultural milieu of the congregation."

Preacher's persona. Effective sermons reflect the preacher's own life experiences and commitment to the Christian faith. They combine passion with integrity. "The preacher should have fully absorbed, or be fully absorbed in, the dominant theme or image of the sermon. Their words are more than woodenly read or recited—they become alive with the preacher's passion."

Theology/orthodoxy. Effective sermons are faithful to Christian tradition. They are doctrinally "within the parameters of the Christian faith." "The sermon must touch on or reflect (if not deal with directly) some of the effective Christian truths; even if the style is folksy or amusing the content must not be trivial."

Sermon structure. Effective sermons are structured around a central focus or theme, with a clear introduction, main body and conclusion. The sermon is organized in a "logical style that progressively builds the main argument or proposition of the sermon." It "should demonstrate clear thinking [and] have a structure...that flows easily and naturally and contain[s] language that can be easily understood."

Effective communication. Effective sermons clearly communicate the central idea through use of simple language and illustrations so as to convince the listeners of the message. Effective preaching is "persuasive" in that it "convinces or convicts the hearer." The effective preacher "effectively communicates a sense of God's presence and authority."

Delivery/style. Effective sermons are delivered skillfully, with appropriate poise, body language, gestures, eye contact and voice quality.

“The preacher always displays proper pronunciation, articulation, phrasing, rate, tone, pitch, and gesture.” “Does the sermon have aural style and appeal? Is it conversational in tone? Is its language directed to the ear rather than to the eye? Is the sermon poetic; is it playful with words and oral images?”²¹

Now that the list of the effective qualities was determined, the second part of the study was next.

The Second Part

Armed with the seven qualities of effectiveness, Lyons and Jonas sent a follow up letter and survey to determine the answer to the second question, who best incorporates those qualities? Jonas remembers, “We sent a follow up letter to those who responded to our first letter. ‘All of your responses noted the qualities of great preaching. Please provide us ten to twelve names.’ And they responded well.”²² Further, Lyons and Jonas note, “We also asked for nominations from the editors of American and Canadian religious periodicals, and added to the list the African-American preachers cited by *Ebony* magazine in its November 1993 issue and names suggested by some of the nominated preachers.”²³ The replies from the follow-up survey produced a list of 1,548 preachers from 341 respondents of homiletics professors and editors of religious periodicals.²⁴ “When all were compiled into one master list, 12 remarkable individuals emerged as those mentioned most often.”²⁵

The list of twelve effective preachers included, as noted in Jonas and Lyons:

Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., senior fellow of the Woodstock Theological Center in Washington, D.C. He was been president of the American Theological Society, managing editor of *Theological Studies* and theologian in residence at Georgetown University, and has written numerous books and articles on preaching.

Fred Craddock, the Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament, Emeritus, in the Candler School of Theology, Emory University. He has held several pastorates in Tennessee and Oklahoma and has lectured and published extensively on preaching.

James Forbes, senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City. Forbes is the first African-American minister to serve as pastor of this church, one of the largest multicultural congregations in the nation. Prior to coming to Riverside in 1989, Forbes pastored churches in Virginia, and Wilmington, North Carolina. He has served as a faculty member at Union Theological Seminary and Auburn Theological Seminary.

Billy Graham, of Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. A Southern Baptist who was ordained in 1940, he has led crusades throughout the world and conducts his ministry through weekly radio programs, television specials, a newspaper column, *Decision* magazine, and World Wide Pictures. Graham is regularly listed in Gallup polls as one of the "ten most admired men in the world" and has appeared on the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Life*.

Thomas Long, the Francis Landey Patton Professor of Preaching and Worship at Princeton Theological Seminary. Long began his professional career as a Presbyterian pastor in Atlanta, Georgia, but has served on the faculty of various seminaries for the past 20 years. He is the editor of *Theology Today* and is the senior homiletics editor of the *New Interpreter's Bible*. He has written many books and articles on preaching, including "Beavis and Butt-Head Get Saved."

Lloyd Ogilvie, is chaplain of the United States Senate and pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, California. He hosts a nationally syndicated radio and television program, "Let God Love You." Ogilvie has authored numerous books and articles on preaching and is general editor of the 32-volume *Communicator's Commentary*.

Haddon Robinson, the Harold John Ockenga Distinguished Professor of Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Previously he has served as president of the Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary and as a professor of homiletics at Dallas Theological Seminary. He was president of the Evangelical Theological Society and has written extensively on the subject of preaching. His book *Biblical Preaching* (1980) is currently used at over 100 seminaries and Bible colleges.

John R.W. Stott, rector emeritus at All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, and president of the London Institute for Contemporary

Christianity. He was chaplain to Queen Elizabeth from 1959-1991. Stott is president of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship and has initiated a strong and continuing Third World ministry.

Charles Swindoll, president of the Dallas Theological Seminary. He has held pastorates in Texas, Massachusetts and California. Swindoll's ministry extends internationally through numerous books and articles as well as a sizable cassette tape distribution system called "Insight for Living." He has been honored as clergyman of the year by the Religious Heritage of America.

Barbara Brown Taylor, rector at Grace-Calvary Episcopal Church in Clarkesville, Georgia. Previously she spent nine years in urban ministry at All Saints' Church in Atlanta, Georgia. She has taught at Chandler School of Theology, the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest, McCormick Seminary and the College of Preachers in Washington, D.C. She has written four books, including *The Preaching Life* and *Gospel Medicine* and serves on the editorial board of the Living Pulpit.

Gardner C. Taylor, pastor emeritus of the Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn, New York. He has lectured on preaching at Colgate, Harvard, Yale and other seminaries across the nation. Taylor has been called "the dean of the nation's black preachers" by *Time*.

William H. Willimon, the dean of the chapel and professor of Christian ministry at Duke University. He preaches each Sunday in the Duke Chapel and directs the campus ministry programs. He was among the first alumni to receive an Award of Distinction from Yale Divinity School and serves on the editorial boards of *The Christian Ministry*, *The Christian Century*, *Pulpit Digest*, *Preaching*, *the Door* and *Leadership*. He has written 37 books, including *What's Right with the Church* and *Worship as Pastoral Care*. His work for *Pulpit Resource* is used by over 8,000 pastors in the U.S. and Canada and Australia.²⁶

The Findings of the List

At least five or six evangelicals are represented with several mainline preachers filling out the remainder of the twelve. Jonas and Lyons observe, "Billy Graham and Charles Swindoll represent the 'electronic church,' while Haddon Robinson

of the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary represents a more scholarly evangelical perspective." They continue, "Fred Craddock, James Forbes, Thomas Long, Lloyd Ogilvie, William Willimon and Barbara Brown Taylor are from mainline churches."²⁷ They observe, "The ratio between evangelical and mainline is somewhat surprising." Their reasoning is,

The high exposure of the electronic church and the statistical declines in mainline Christianity led us to expect that the list would be dominated by television and radio preachers. However, even the mainline representatives make extensive use of modern communication technologies, and these have enhanced their global recognition.²⁸

"Each one has a pretty slick publishing arm—pamphlets, videotapes, articles in journals and popular magazines," observed Larry Lyon.²⁹

Lyon also noted the preponderance of preachers from the East Coast of the United States,³⁰ with John R.W. Stott being the exception from even further east, Great Britain!

The list includes one Catholic preacher, Walter J. Burghardt. Jonas and Lyon state, "Walter J. Burghardt's presence on the list challenges the stereotype that Catholicism places little emphasis on homiletics. Burghardt has written extensively on the subject of preaching, and his influence outside Roman Catholic circles is evident in the fact that so many of our resources nominated him."³¹

The inclusion of Billy Graham on the 1996 list brought a measure of tension. Those on the committee who were to the left did not want Graham included on the list, while those on the right argued, "how can Baylor put out a list of great preachers and not have Billy Graham on the list?"³² The subsequent results of the survey demonstrated Graham's recognized place on the list, despite some opposition.

There are two African-American preachers on the 1996 list, James Forbes and Gardner C. Taylor.³³ Only one woman was featured on the list, Barbara Brown Taylor. "Disappointing, if not surprising, is the fact that only one woman, Barbara Brown Taylor, is on the list," remark Jonas and Lyon. They continue:

There may be two explanations for this. We can read it positively, and see her presence as a reflection of the advances that women have made in the clergy. It is unlikely that any woman would have been considered an effective preacher a generation ago, much less named as one in an international survey. One [sic] the other hand, the presence of only one

woman on our list suggests that women still do not have full acceptance as preachers.³⁴

There may yet be another reason why only two African-American preachers and one female preacher were included on the 1996 list: the constituents of the survey sampling. Of those surveyed—homiletics professors in seminaries and universities—the preponderance of them are white males. This is not an indictment but simply an observation. These professors were polled to determine the qualities that determine effective preaching. Their homiletical expertise would suit them well to determine the criteria. Then, they were asked once again to provide who best incorporates these qualities. They responded as one might expect—they drew from their own experience, which would be, for either mainline or evangelical preaching professors, those whom they considered to be effective preachers, who mostly were white males.

Does this invalidate the findings of the study? Not necessarily. What it does demonstrate is the way in which studies can be tilted by various elements taking place in culture and in the study itself. Certainly, one can appreciate the variety in the findings of the study—the preachers included were from the mainline church, evangelicals, women, people of color. This is a strength. Yet, the study reminds us of the weaknesses that are inherent in any research of this type which any thoughtful observer will want to consider when analyzing the data.

Lyon and Jonas had plans to further the influence of the study, including a coffee table book.³⁵ “The William Morris agency would’ve produced a book that would include a sermon and were even talking about doing CDs,” explained Jonas. “We were going to go ahead with a plan to produce a book.” But the hopes to move ahead with this book project and others that Jonas and Lyon had in mind were halted.³⁶

The preachers were invited to come to Baylor and preach in the chapel the following school year. “Each of the 12 preachers,” notes a Baylor press release about the survey, “will be invited to participate in conferences or to deliver sermons on the Baylor campus during the 1996-97 academic year and to receive the newly created ‘Baylor Great Preachers’ award.”³⁷ Most of the preachers came to preach throughout the year at Baylor’s chapel.³⁸

Perhaps the most recognized media attention the 1996 survey received was a feature article in *Newsweek* magazine written by Pulitzer-prize winning author Kenneth L. Woodward, “Heard Any Good Sermons Lately?” Woodward reported the outcomes of the Baylor study and interviewed several of those found on the most effective preachers list, calling the preachers “Baylor’s round apostolic 12.” Among those quoted are Long, Forbes, Brown Taylor, Craddock, Willimon

and Burghardt, who, as a Jesuit complained that many priests use the eucharist as “an excuse for giving bad sermons—one reason why some Catholics are leaving the church for Pentecostal congregations.”³⁹

Outgrowth of the 1996 Survey

Since the Baylor University, the progenitor Most Effective Preachers in the English-speaking World, did not capitalize on the publication or video possibilities of the study, others stepped in. Perhaps the best recognized promoter of the Baylor Effective Preachers survey is Bill Turpie, at that time associated with Odyssey Network⁴⁰ where he worked as a producer and reporter for Odyssey. He recognized the value of the Baylor survey and developed a series of videos, “Great Preachers,” which aired on the Odyssey Network. Turpie explains,

...when Baylor University released its poll a few years ago of the most effective preachers in the English-speaking world, the Odyssey Network decided a series on preaching made good programming sense. Thus was born the series Great Preachers. The program provides an introduction to the featured preacher, an edited version of a message, and a short interview focusing on his or her approach to preaching and the sermon just preached.⁴¹

The series was popular gaining a solid audience.⁴² Turpie even developed the series beyond the twelve preachers of the Baylor study, involving an ad hoc advisory group to assist him in determining the slate of preachers to be included in the new episodes.⁴³ Not only did Turpie produce a video series, but he turned the Baylor survey results into a book. He enlisted ten of the twelve preachers for the videoing of a sermon and interviews, and then transcribed the sermon and interviews for a book.⁴⁴ Reflecting on the videos, Turpie notes, “*Great Preachers* has also found a place in the curriculum of many theological seminaries and Bible schools.”⁴⁵ What Lyon and Jonas wanted to do with the outcomes of the survey, Bill Turpie accomplished.

Conclusion

What has been made of the 1996 Baylor Most Effective Preachers in the English-Speaking World Survey is remarkable in its reach and impact. Though not without its flaws, the survey placed the importance of preaching at a recognizable level both academically and popularly.

THE 2018 MOST EFFECTIVE PREACHERS SURVEY

In May 2018, Baylor University's Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching made the following announcement on their webpage:

In 1996, Baylor University conducted a survey to identify the 12 most effective preachers in the English-speaking world. Now, two decades after the original survey, the Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary has identified the 12 most effective preachers of 2018.⁴⁶

At the media announcement for the 2018 survey results, W. Hulitt Gloer said:

We wondered how preaching might have changed since 1996. Coming up on the twentieth anniversary we thought that this a good time to repeat the survey and see what the results are and what they might show about the state of preaching in the world today.⁴⁷

The first phase of this second study was from January 2016 to March 2016. In February 2016 the survey criteria of what makes an effective preacher from the 1996 survey was sent to professors of preaching for their recommendation as to what criteria needed to be reworked. Upon receiving feedback, the criteria of effectiveness was then reworked based on the recommendations from the professors polled. Some of the interaction with professors can be seen in Michael Quicke's blogpost from Northern Seminary. As one of the homiletics professors who received the request for help in reworking the 2018 survey of effective preacher's criterion, he reflected, "After reviewing the [1996] list, I went through the *pro forma* online responses that over 300 other preaching professors had worked through. After each criterion, there was a box for additions, deletions, and comments. (I admit that I made a few comments along the way!) But the one that really made me think was Criterion 6." He continues in his blog:

Criterion 6 and its additions are:

Effective communication. Effective sermons clearly communicate the central idea through use of simple language and illustrations so as to convince the listeners of the message. (My addition) *Effective preaching is*

“persuasive” in that it “convinces or convicts the hearer.” The effective preacher “effectively communicates a sense of God’s presence and authority.”

Those who know me will not be surprised that I wanted to tease this out. So I sent a little plea. To my addition I commented:

“I am always concerned to rate effective communication in terms of its impact upon congregations—their thinking, behavior, relationships, mission, etc. I recognize that it is very difficult to evaluate this, but the reality of changed hearers matters. Transformed hearers are even better! This is easier to see when a preacher is in pastoral relationships beyond the itinerant. I see the word ‘effective’ as key, and this is the main criterion for asking the big question: what happens for the kingdom?”

“Yes, what happens, indeed?”⁴⁸

Once the responses from the preaching professors was received, the survey for developing the criteria for effective preachers was then sent to approximately 500 professors of preaching, with 14% response rate.⁴⁹

Categories of Effectiveness

The broad categories of effectiveness in the 2018 study numbered the same as the 1996 survey, with slight modifications regarding the criteria in each category. The 2018 categories of effectiveness are as listed:

Biblical/Exegetical. The effective preacher’s sermons are the result of careful exegetical study of selected Biblical texts, revealing an awareness of their grammatical/syntactical, historical, cultural, literary, and theological dimensions and ever attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Relevance. The effective preacher’s sermons demonstrate a proper hermeneutic which bridges the gap between the meaning of the text in its historical context and its meaning for the contemporary context of the hearer resulting in the application of its meaning to every day life.

Person of the Preacher. The effective preacher’s life and ministry demonstrate such authenticity, integrity and commitment to the

Christian faith that the sermon is never questioned or compromised by the character of the preacher.

Theological/Orthodox. The effective preacher's sermons proclaim the great truths of the Christian faith in keeping with the great Christian theological and ethical tradition.

Sermon Form. The effective preacher's sermons employ a form/structure/shape which allows the meaning of the text to be exposed in an understandable manner so that the hearer is engaged from beginning to end.

Effective Communication. The effective preacher's sermons clearly communicate the central truth(s) of the Biblical text by the use of accessible language and effectives [sic] images and illustration so as to have an affective impact on the lives of the hearers and an awareness of the presence and power of God.

Delivery. The effective preacher's sermons are delivered skillfully employing a style authentic to the preacher and appropriate to the hearers. The style and delivery never supersede or hinder the content of the sermon but enable hearers to better hear and understand it.⁵⁰

With the criteria for effective preaching established, the gathering of survey results and analysis would be next.

The Second and Third Parts

The study's second phase involved the distribution of the survey to an email database of professors from both the Academy of Homiletics, the mainline professors of preaching professional organization and the Evangelical Homiletics Society, the evangelical professors of preaching professional society. The duration for the survey was from March 2016 to December 2017, with the tabulation of the survey results taking place in January 2018. The announcement of the results of the survey was made in May 2018.⁵¹ Of the approximately 500 professors surveyed, the response rate was 35.8%.⁵²

The list of 2018 twelve most effective preachers included:

Dr. Alistair Begg is the Senior Pastor at Parkside Church in Cleveland, Ohio, a position he has held since 1983. He is also the Bible teacher on "Truth For Life," which can be heard on the radio and online around the world. Begg is a council member of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. For "outstanding dedication to preaching, church leadership, and evangelism," Westminster Theological Seminary bestowed Begg as an honorary doctor of divinity. He also received an honorary doctorate from Cedarville University. In addition to Begg's pastorate and preaching, he has written numerous books.

Dr. Tony Evans is the founding pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas. The church began with 10 members meeting in his home in 1976 and now has a membership nearing 10,000. Evans is the first African American to earn a doctorate of theology from Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) and has taught classes in the past at DTS. He is a pastor, speaker, author, radio and television broadcaster, and has been the chaplain for 30 years for the NBA basketball team the Dallas Mavericks.

Dr. Joel C. Gregory holds the George W. Truett Endowed Chair in Preaching and Evangelism at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He was recently recognized by Baylor and his peers for his 50th preaching anniversary. Gregory brought the concluding message at the Baptist World Congress in Durban, South Africa in summer 2017 and also serves on the Baptist World Alliance Commission on Worship and Spirituality. In that connection and with Baylor University Press, he edited and was the lead author of *Baptist Preaching: A Global Anthology*.

Dr. Timothy Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, New York. Keller is also the Chairman of Redeemer City to City, which starts new churches in urban cities worldwide. Christianity Today has said, "Fifty years from now, if evangelical Christians are widely known for their love of cities, their commitment to mercy and justice, and their love of their neighbors, Tim Keller will be remembered as a pioneer of the new urban Christians." Keller has authored several books in the course of his ministry with a few making *The New York Times* bestsellers list.

Dr. Thomas G. Long is the Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching and Director of the Early Career Pastoral Leadership Program at Emory University's Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. His introductory textbook, *The Witness of Preaching*, has been translated into a number of languages and is widely used in theological schools around the world. In 2010, *Preaching* magazine named *The Witness of Preaching* as one of the 25 most influential books in preaching for the last 25 years. Long gave the distinguished Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale, which were published in his 2009 book *Preaching from Memory to Hope*. Long was named one of the [12 most effective preachers in the English speaking world by Baylor University's 1996 survey](#).

Dr. Otis Moss III is the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois. He is a preacher, activist, author, and filmmaker. Moss is an ordained minister in the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the United Church of Christ. He is on the board of *The Christian Century* magazine and chaplain of the Children's Defense Fund's Samuel DeWitt Proctor Child Advocacy Conference. Moss has written numerous poems, articles, and books. His work has also been featured on *Huffington Post*, *Urban Cusp*, and *The Root*.

Dr. John Piper is the chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Piper is a pastor, author, and leader of desiringGod.org. He served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis for 33 years and has authored over 50 books, many of which are best sellers and award winners. Piper has made most of his books freely accessible through his online ministry, desiringGod.org.

Dr. Haddon Robinson was the Harold John Ockenga Distinguished Professor of Preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Robinson wrote more than a dozen books, including his hallmark text, *Biblical Preaching*, which is still used by seminaries and Bible colleges around the world. In 1996, he was named in a Baylor University poll as one of the ["12 Most Effective Preachers in the English Speaking World."](#) In 2006, Robinson was recognized by *Christianity Today* in the top 10 of its "25 Most Influential Preachers of the Past 50 Years." In 2008, he received the E.K. Bailey "Living Legend Award," and in 2010, *Preaching* magazine named him among the "25 Most Influential Preachers of the Past 25 Years." Dr. Haddon W. Robinson, longtime

faculty member, former President of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and one of the world's foremost experts in Biblical preaching, went to be with the Lord on July 22, 2017.

Pastor Andy Stanley is the senior pastor of North Point Community Church, Buckhead Church, Browns Bridge Church, Gwinnett Church, Woodstock City Church, and Decatur City Church. He is also the founder of North Point Ministries, which is a worldwide Christian organization. A survey of U.S. pastors in 2010 through Outreach Magazine identified Stanley as one of the top 10 most influential living pastors in America.

Dr. Charles Swindoll is a pastor, author, educator, and radio preacher. Swindoll is the senior pastor at Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas. He was named Clergyman of the Year by Religious Heritage of America in 1988 and was named one of the [twelve most effective preachers in Baylor University's' 1996 survey](#). Swindoll ranked second in a 2009 survey as the biggest influence in the lives of Protestant pastors. His reach is through preaching, teaching, radio, and his more than 70 publications. Swindoll has been awarded four honorary doctorates for his contributions to ministry.

Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest, professor, author, and theologian. In 1996, she was named one of the [twelve most effective preachers in the English-speaking world by a Baylor University survey](#). She has served on many faculties, including the Certificate in Theological Studies program at Arrendale State Prison for Women in Alto, Georgia. Taylor has been awarded nine honorary doctorates, and in 2014, TIME magazine placed her in its annual TIME 100 list of most influential people in the world.

Dr. Ralph Douglas West serves as founder and senior pastor of The Church Without Walls in Houston, Texas. The church began with 32 members and now embraces more than 24,000 families meeting in three locations and conducting six services each Sunday. West serves as Adjunct Professor of Preaching at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University. Through publications, television, and the internet, his messages are available across the world and are witnessed by thousands beyond his church each week.⁵³

The Findings of the List

W. Hulitt Gloer, then director of the 2018 survey and former director of the Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching, Truett Seminary, Baylor University, noted, "In a world where talk is cheap and there seems to be no end to it, the preacher has to recover the priority and power of the word." Preaching matters and this survey continues to underscore this assumption. Shawn Boyd the Program Coordinator of the Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching, adds, "They preach it, they believe it and they live it."⁵⁴

Perhaps the most notable shift in the 2018 Most Effective Preachers survey is the dominance of evangelicals. Begg, Evans, Gregory, Keller, Piper, Robinson, Stanley, Swindoll and West—nine of the twelve—are recognized evangelicals, with three mainline preachers remaining: Long, Moss and Taylor. What accounts for the tilt toward more evangelicals appearing on the list? One reason may be the continued decline of the mainline church. Several mainline seminaries have closed with mainline churches shuttering their doors. Another factor is the decline in the mainline professional scholarly organization, the Academy of Homiletics, which boasted around 300 members in the 1990s.⁵⁵ The Evangelical Homiletics Society has grown from its founding in 1997 and currently holds around 325 members.⁵⁶ The groups from which the survey results were drawn came from both societies—with the Evangelical Homiletics Society being the stronger of the two. An additional factor of the evangelical dominance in the 2018 survey results may also be the popularity factor. Many of these preachers have media tentacles that stretch across the internet, television, radio and print. They are more noticed in popular culture because of the reach they possess in getting their message to the masses. All of the evangelicals listed are published authors, with Tim Keller leading the way as a *New York Times* best-selling author.⁵⁷ As W. Hulitt Gloer notes, "More preachers can be heard by more people than ever before in history."⁵⁸

There are three African-American preachers—a quarter of the survey—on the list: Tony Evans, Otis Moss III, and Ralph West. The broad range of preachers is a positive feature, indicating that there is no single way to preach.⁵⁹ There are, however, no other ethnic minorities included on the list other than African-American and only one female, Barbara Brown Taylor. One reason for the paucity of females may be that the Academy of Homiletics and the Evangelical Homiletics Society are dominated by white men. This is not a criticism, but a statement of the reality of the pool from which the poll was taken. In addition, in terms of women preachers, some members of the Evangelical Homiletics Society, due to theological convictions, would not be supportive of women in a preaching

role and therefore would most likely have not nominated a female preacher for the survey.

There may yet be another reason for the absence of women in the study, which may have particular bearing on the nominations arising from the members of the Academy of Homiletics. Members of both societies were provided multiple opportunities to suggest names for consideration.⁶⁰ Even among the female members of the Academy of Homiletics the response might have been different had members responded with different—or even multiple—suggestions. Yet, comparing the surveys with the population, the proportions may be representative of the wider population of English-speaking preachers.⁶¹

A final possibility for the lack of women preachers on the list could be apathy toward the survey. “What does it matter?” may be an underlying consideration.⁶²

The 2018 survey was not without praise or critique. The Episcopal Church boasted that one of their own [Barbara Brown Taylor] had made the list, with the headline reading, “Episcopalian included in Baylor survey naming a dozen who can really preach.”⁶³ Likewise, the National Religious Broadcasters celebrated the inclusion of “NRB members Alistair Begg, Tony Evans, and Charles Swindoll.”⁶⁴

But others reviled the survey, calling it “bizarre” for “the 12 very best all happen to be American (Alistair Begg, who no doubt rejoices in being named to the topmost slot—best of the best—is a Scot by birth, though he’s now a US citizen).”⁶⁵ A humorous lampooning critique of the survey came from *Flaming Dove News*, which provided its own list of preachers from “Bluett Seminary,” a play on words of Truett Seminary, Baylor’s seminary which conducted the survey. The list included, among others, Benny Hinn and Joel Osteen.⁶⁶

Relevant Magazine questioned in a headline, “Why Did Only 1 Woman Make This List of America’s 12 Most ‘Effective’ Preachers?” The article quotes Thomas Long, one of the preachers recognized in both the 1996 and 2018 survey, saying about female preachers, “They are powerfully innovative and affecting. By and [sic], there ought to be more women on the list.”⁶⁷ It is not surprising that a critique and alternative list was issued by *Nevertheless She Preached*, an LGBTQ advocacy group.⁶⁸ The headline from Faithfully Magazine stated, “Women of Color Absent From Baylor University’s ‘Most Effective Preachers’ List.” The author continues, “Notably, no women of color nor preachers in English-speaking countries outside the United States made the cut.”⁶⁹ There is no denial that there was only one woman—and no women of color—appearing in the survey, which highlights the limitation of the study itself.

As for the reaction of the recipients in being included on the most effective preachers list, Tony Evans succinctly stated, "I was stupefied."⁷⁰ The same reporter observed that Andy Stanley "seemed genuinely shocked to be on the list."⁷¹

COMPARING THE SURVEYS—DIFFERENCES

The survey should not be viewed as a list of winners. Instead, they are potential examples of preachers to whom others can look up as they develop their own skills in preaching. Gloer observes, "The most effective preachers we will never know about." This preacher may be in a rural church, a small suburban congregation, or in a storefront in a major metropolitan area.⁷²

In this section an analysis will be made of the differences between the 1996 survey and the 2018 survey. The differences explored will be in terms of constituencies, criteria and outcomes.

Different Constituencies Surveyed

The 1996 survey was international in scope, polling preaching professors from "seminaries, divinity schools and other ministry training centers in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand."⁷³ However, the 2018 survey only polled the two North American professional homiletics organizations: The mainline Academy of Homiletics and the evangelical group, The Evangelical Homiletics Society, although the Evangelical Homiletics Society boasts of members from South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Philippines, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, United Kingdom and the Aaland Islands.

The second survey may raise questions about the definition of the "English-speaking World," for, in comparison, the 1996 survey was, indeed, multinational, whereas the 2018 survey seems to be more limited.

The Difference in Criteria

The categories for both surveys remain virtually the same: Biblical/exegetical, Relevance, the 1996 category was Preacher's persona, while the 2018 survey tweaked the title to Person of the Preacher, Theology/Orthodoxy in 1996 changed to Theological/Orthodox, Sermon structure in 1996 morphed into Sermon Form, and the final category, Effective Communication, remained the same.

There are edits in the 2018 characteristics of effective preachers that are noticeable. The 1996 and 2018 Biblical/exegetical category emphasized the

importance of biblical exegesis, yet the 2018 rendition stressed “an awareness of their grammatical/syntactical, historical, cultural, literary, and theological dimensions....” Not only is exegesis underscored, but the exegete is to be “ever attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit,” an added dimension to the criteria.

In the Relevance category, the 1996 definition addresses sermons that understand the history of the biblical text and speak to daily struggles of the listener. The 2018 version puts the connection of the ancient text—with hermeneutical appropriateness—to meaningful application in everyday life.

The Theological/Orthodox statement is more smoothly identified in the 2018 adaptation, stating that the effective preacher’s sermons “proclaim the great truths of the Christian faith in keeping with the great Christian theological and ethical tradition.”

The Sermon Structure/Sermon Form rendering in 1996 emphasized the “clear introduction, main body and conclusion” that has a central focus and is contrasted with the 2018 statement that leans more towards the preacher’s freedom to structure the sermon however he or she sees fit for that text and that occasion: the “preacher’s sermons employ a form/structure/shape which allows the meaning of the text to be exposed in an understandable manner so that the hearer is engaged from beginning to end.”

As for Effective Communication, the 1996 qualities addresses the need to express “the central idea through use of simple language and illustrations so as to convince the listeners of the message,” with “simple language and illustrations.” In addition, the 1996 version underscored the importance of persuasion not so in 2018. Yet, both the 1996 and 2018 characteristics speak to a sense of recognizing God’s presence and power in the preacher.

When it comes to Delivery, the 1996 criteria are specific, almost microscopic or instructive when listing effectiveness in preaching: appropriate poise, body language, gestures, eye contact, voice quality, proper pronunciation, articulation, phrasing, rate, tone, pitch, and gesture.” The 2018 criteria focus more on the preacher’s authentic delivery: “sermons are delivered skillfully employing a style authentic to the preacher and appropriate to the hearers. The style and delivery never supersedes or hinders the content of the sermon but enable hearers to better hear and understand it.”

Side by side, both lists are similar, with the 2018 version being a more clearly and smoothly written wording. Each of the 1996 criteria are not written in the same form, quoting regularly from some of the responses received, whereas the 2018 criteria appear to be cast with more precise definition. Additionally, each sentence in the 2018 criteria list begins with “The effective preacher’s....” The emphasis here is on the effective preacher, whereas in the 1996 list each sentence

begins with “Effective sermons....” The shift is subtle, but since the survey is addressing the most effective preacher, the criteria was recast to reflect the intention of the survey.

Different Outcomes

Comparing the list of preachers from 1996 to that of 2018 demonstrates an overwhelmingly evangelical emphasis with fewer mainline preachers represented. As discussed earlier in this article, there are numerous reasons for this shift, including the decline of the mainline church and the rise of evangelicalism.

Another difference in the 2018 survey to that of the 1996 poll is the absence of a Catholic preacher in the top 12. With the cultural shift that has taken place in the intervening years since the first survey in 1996, the Catholic church has seen the impact of the sexual abuse crisis and the resultant loss of favor inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church. Further study would be needed to assess the real impact of the sexual abuse crisis on preaching.

When examining the surveys, the difference in the ages of the preachers in both studies comes to light—the average age of the preachers for the 1996 study was 58.5. The average age of those in the 2018 survey is ten years older, 68.3. The higher age average might suggest the staying power of the preachers listed in the 2018 survey. The youngest preacher in the 1996 survey was Barbara Brown Taylor who was 45 at the time. For the 2018 survey, Otis Moss III is the youngest at 48.

The results of the 2018 Effective Preachers poll demonstrated an increase in the number of persons of color—making up a fourth of the total list. Reasons for this phenomenon are discussed elsewhere in this paper. One can wonder what the results of this survey will be in another ten years when it comes to men and women of color.

Still another difference between the 1996 and 2018 Most Effective Preachers surveys concerns response rate. The response of preaching professors regarding establishing the criteria of effective preaching shows a 45% response rate in 1996 and a 14% response rate for 2018, a sharp difference from the first survey in 1996. The response rate for garnering a list of preachers, 1996 reveals a 53% response rate, while the 2018 yielded a 35.8% response rate. The responses from the 1996 survey were more robust than the 2018 results, although the 2018 rates are respectable, the difference in response does not go unnoticed.

COMPARING THE SURVEYS—SIMILARITIES

In comparing the 1996 and 2018 Most Effective Preachers in the English-speaking world, the list includes mostly white men. This similarity is not surprising due to the limitations discussed elsewhere in this article.

Another similarity is the presence of one woman among those recognized as an effective preacher. An additional similarity is that there are African-American preachers included on the lists from 1996 and 2018.

One also observes that a third of the preachers listed in the 2018 survey results also appeared on the 1996 Most Effective Preachers list: Long, Robinson, Swindoll and Taylor. This repeat of preachers may suggest the quality of longevity and an on-going appreciation for their preaching.

An additional similarity is that both surveys had their critics. The 1996 survey did not appear to ignite as much criticism as the 2018 results. The difference in eras may account for the shift in popular culture with the increase of emphasis on various kinds of diversity. In addition, the growth of the internet, social media and other opportunities for comment are more present and accessible in 2018 than they were in 1996.

LESSONS LEARNED

What might be the lessons learned from these studies of the Baylor University Most Effective Preachers in the English-speaking World? One lesson is that preaching still matters. The place of preaching continues to have academic and popular appeal. A second lesson is the place of personality in popular culture. While this is not a new phenomenon, further studies might want to account for this measure. “Saul has slain his thousands,” writes the historian, “but David has his tens of thousands.”⁷⁴ The cult of personality is real.

A third lesson learned might be the composition of the study—insuring that the professors surveyed are truly international in scope. Additionally, might a concurrent survey be conducted among laypersons as to whom they perceive to be an effective preacher according to the criteria?

A fourth lesson concerns response rates. The 1996 survey responses were demonstrably more robust than the 2018 survey. More will need to be done to engender engagement with any future survey of effective preachers.

A fifth and final lesson may be what can we learn from one’s critics? Exploring the criticisms of the surveys may yield insights that would make the next survey even more effective.

CONCLUSION

The Baylor University survey of the Most Effective Preachers in the English-speaking World is regarded by many “as one of the most prestigious in the preaching profession since Baylor released the last such list in 1996.”⁷⁵

“In a world where talk is cheap and there seems to be no end to it, the preacher has to recover the priority and power of the word,” says W. Hulitt Gloer, director of the 2018 survey. “Words are the tools of the preacher and that gives them incredible power.”⁷⁶

This paper set to explore the origins of the Baylor University Most Effective Preachers in the English-speaking World survey, to analyze the results and to compare the 1996 survey with the 2018 survey.

NOTES

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