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CPO Resource Booklets

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PERSUASIVE PREACHING

[subtitle]

**What Jesus knew about our
brains: a guide to preaching
that prompts action**

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CPO Church Resource Booklets are aimed at training, informing and equipping churches in the communication, outreach and evangelism. Produced in partnership with organisations and individuals with valuable knowledge and experience in these three streams, the Church Resource Booklets are accessible, affordable and applicable.

[] INTRODUCTION

19 generations ago, in 1537, my great uncle Thomas lost his job. For preaching's sake, this turned out to be jolly good news. Uncle Thomas was Prior of Warbleton Priory – and as Henry VIII got busy dissolving religious houses, into that vacuum went Uncle's Holy House. But that vacuum created space for a monumental claim, by one of God's radicals, to take root:

“ *The Pope could be replaced by a sermon communicating Christ's freedom*
- **Martin Luther** ”

It seems a titanic shame then if, 500 years later, sermons trying to communicate Christ's freedom are watered down with an unexpected dilutant: conclusion! Communication to riders on a tandem bike, in a language only the rear rider understands, will have little impact on the direction of the bike as the rear rider can't steer or brake.

Every time we communicate, we speak in *either* a language which communicates with the CentreBrain action region (the front tandem rider) or the OuterBrain conclusion region (the rear rider). So how we frame our message determines whether our words act like a key to unlock action, or like a conclusion, which involves no action at all.

The brain's two regions

The action-region – in the central area of the brain

The conclusion region – in the outer area of the brain



Jesus knew this. Time and neuroscience have sharpened our understanding of Jesus' preaching and tell us he was well aware of these 'keys' to action or conclusion. And his words were framed to speak to the first of the two areas of the brain.

For preaching, the response potential of our words is directly connected to the 'keys' we include in our words. God designed the human brain to be highly responsive. The response of people listening to our sermon will be determined by the prompts our words carry:

ACTION-PROMPT-IN → ACTION-RESPONSE-OUT

CONCLUSION-PROMPT-IN → CONCLUSION-RESPONSE-OUT

We now know what prompts, or unlocks, the conclusion and action regions of the brain. And so did Jesus: his words *always* prompted and spoke to the action-brain.

Elephant in the pulpit?

This booklet introduces the four keys that speak to the brain's action-centre (known as the CentreBrain, due to its position). It highlights how Jesus used them and it applies them to the construction of sermons you might preach.

But let's begin by naming the elephant in the pulpit:

Preaching is a partnership, right? The speaker's portion *and* God's portion? So, isn't using insights into what prompts or unlocks action in the brain trespassing on God's part of the preaching partnership?

Before you decide, consider this: if the persuasiveness of preaching is largely God's domain, and the preacher is just the vocal amplifier, then why did Jesus build his communication around some very specific prompts? Prompts which triggered the action part of his listener's brains?

Christ's approach strongly suggests that how the preacher frames what they say *is* their responsibility. Jesus took time to speak in a way other leaders at the time did not.

This means that in the preaching partnership between us and God, our job is to take what might be a 'bad sermon' and turn it into a 'good sermon' – using all available knowledge to help us do that. Pastor and theologian Tim Keller helpfully explains God's part in this partnership:

While the difference between a bad sermon and a good sermon is mainly the responsibility of the preacher, the difference between good preaching and great preaching lies mainly in the work of the Holy Spirit... We should do the work it takes to make our communication good and leave it up to God how often he makes it great for the listener. – Tim Keller

[] BRAIN ACTION – TRIGGER 1

Pictorialise your point or idea

“ The soul never thinks without a picture. ”
– Aristotle

What makes a novel memorable? Able to move you, stir emotion, generate a visual interpretation in your mind's eye of what you're reading so clear that when you see the film, it feels like the depiction is somehow wrong? It's the pictures your CentreBrain creates.

The CentreBrain's primary language is pictures, and as it is there decisions are made and action triggered, it's critical that the words of a sermon carry pictures.

Think about your mum. Then think about a big red bus. And then about a Christmas tree.

What did you see? Words? No, your action brain generated images – pictures – in your mind's eye.

Jesus always framed and presented the ideas in his teaching as pictures.

- 🔊 Jesus fed 5,000 people to show he was the ultimate sustainer, 'the bread of life'
- 🔊 Jesus used fishing nets as a picture of the kingdom
- 🔊 Jesus told listeners to consider the lilies, the sparrows, and the hairs on their head to teach about trust and confidence in a caring father
- 🔊 Jesus spoke of fig trees, mustard trees, yeast, salt, a vineyard and money, using them to teach about the idea of the kingdom's upside-down values
- 🔊 Jesus described believers as a city on a hill whose lights could not be hidden

These pictures carried power to generate action – because they spoke to the action brain.

Think about a classic evangelistic sermon message: *Christ died on a cross to take our sins to the grave. And he rose to bring new life to us.*

When Jesus communicates this message, he would begin with pictures not details.