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How to Listen in Church

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Ever get sleepy during the sermon? (Not mine, of course.) Truth is, any one of us may find our attention wandering now and then. Long attention spans are difficult under the best of circumstances. The preacher bears a heavy responsibility here, for subject matter, style of presentation, relevance, and many other factors which contribute to a “live” wide-awake audience. But the speaker cannot do it all. Nor is it enough to prove by the Scriptures that we should be vitally interested. We know that — and yet we may need motivation. Perhaps we could even learn how to become better listeners.

Jesus said, “Take heed...how ye hear” (Luke 8:18). Not with dulled hearing and closed eyes, shunning the truth (Matthew 13:15-16); nor with preconceived notions that prevent our receiving truth (Matthew 16:21-23). The people I now have in mind do not belong in these categories. But there are “good” people whose minds wander, or are easily distracted; and this article is bold to make some suggestions for getting more out of the sermon and of worship as a whole.

- 1. Sit toward the front of the auditorium;** close enough to feel the speaker is talking to you. Do this not just to better hear the speaker, but to improve the “oneness” of feeling essential to good communication. It puts fewer distractions between you and the speaker, allows you to better “read” his expressions, gestures, etc. It also makes for better singing and a “closer” feeling for the Lord’s supper and other worship. Yes, there are mothers with babies who need to sit closer to the nursery; sick and elderly who need easier access to the restrooms; and always a certain number who “couldn’t care less” about the worship, but come (now and then) for unknown reasons. Leave the back seats for them.
- 2. Become a participant, not an observer.** In Christianity all saints are priests in a holy, royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5,9). Each is a worshiper; praying and singing with the leader, remembering Christ in the communion, giving freely with the Lord’s work in mind, and learning — repeating in your own mind — that which is being taught. Being a true learner is not a passive process, but requires distinct participation with the teacher.

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3. **Take notes, learn to outline the message.** Some are content to jot down the Scriptures used — and that is good. But this can be done without much thinking with the speaker. If we would make an effort to jot down his main points (in our own brief wording) and note their relation to one another and to the subject, we would find ourselves much more of a participant — and certainly a much better listener.
4. **Question what you hear.** Is that a valid point, proven by the Scripture used? You will not be able to think the matter through during the sermon, but a question mark beside the point will remind you to “check it out” when you are home. This word of caution: one can be a “noble Berean” (Acts 17:11) without becoming an habitual critic of the work of others. Learn constructive criticism, and apply it to your own work.
5. **Listen with the intention of making this your message,** when you have time to think it through. How would you tell this to others? How could you improve on it, to fit some one you need to teach? This point of view can have an amazing effect on your attention span.
6. **Make self-application of the lesson.** How can this improve my life for Christ? How does it fit my personal needs? Listen with a tender conscience, ready to learn and adjust your life accordingly.

You can have the blessings of Jesus Christ if you will learn to be a good listener. The Savior said, “Blessed are your ears, for they hear.” He also said, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matthew 13:16; 5:6). With a little practice on the above, and this kind of incentive, you may not notice the preacher ran overtime.