

HEARING FOR FORMATION

Listening and Reading as A Discipleship
Practice in the Life of the Church



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Introduction: The Crisis of Hearing Without Formation

Contemporary Christian communities inhabit a paradox.¹ Scripture is more accessible than at any point in the history of the Church. Sermons are ubiquitous, delivered weekly in gathered worship and amplified endlessly through digital platforms. Bible reading plans, podcasts, commentaries, and devotional resources proliferate. And yet, across ecclesial contexts, there is a growing sense that exposure to Scripture has not yielded proportional transformation. Knowledge has increased, but formation has lagged. Familiarity abounds, while depth of change often remains elusive.

This paradox suggests that the problem is not primarily one of access, frequency, or the orthodoxy of content.² Rather, it is a problem of posture. The ways in which Scripture is read and sermons are heard have increasingly been shaped by instrumental assumptions. Reading and listening are commonly undertaken in order to extract information, confirm existing beliefs, solve problems, generate inspiration, or support immediate application. Scripture becomes a resource to be used, sermons a product to be evaluated, and hearing an act of consumption rather than participation.

Such an instrumental posture subtly but decisively reshapes the relationship between the disciple and the Word.³ When Scripture is approached with a prior agenda, it is rendered manageable. The listener remains in control, determining in advance what the text must yield. In this posture, Scripture may inform or reassure, but it rarely unsettles, reorients, or transforms. The Word is received only insofar as it serves the purposes of the hearer.

This study argues that Christian formation depends not merely on what is heard or read, but on how hearing and reading are undertaken.⁴ Drawing on biblical theology, practical theology, spiritual formation, and empirical studies of

¹ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 15–35.

² James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 23–58; James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 1–25.

³ Jan-Martijn Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 17–44.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1–24, 88–113.

sermon reception, it contends that the formative power of Scripture is inseparable from a posture of receptive availability. Formation occurs not through mastery of the text, but through consent to be addressed by it.

Central to this argument is the recovery of stillness as a theological and spiritual posture.⁵ In the Christian contemplative tradition, stillness is not passivity, nor is it a technique for producing spiritual outcomes. Rather, it is a relinquishment of control and a willingness to remain present before God without grasping, seeking, or forcing resolution. As Martin Laird has argued, contemplation does not search for something in particular, but consents to what truly is.⁶ This posture of non-instrumental attention offers a critical corrective to contemporary habits of reading and listening that are dominated by utility and immediacy.

When applied to Scripture reading and sermon hearing, stillness reframes these practices as encounters rather than tasks. The disciple does not approach the Word in order to extract meaning, but to dwell before it. The listener does not seek immediate clarity or application, but remains open to being questioned, unsettled, or slowly reshaped over time. In this way, hearing becomes a space in which the Word works upon the listener, rather than an activity over which the listener presides.

The purpose of this white paper is to articulate a theology and practice of formational hearing. It seeks to demonstrate that reading Scripture and hearing sermons function as formative acts only when undertaken within a posture of receptive stillness. By integrating insights from Scripture, contemplative theology, empirical homiletics, and spiritual formation, this study proposes that transformation emerges not from increased effort or improved technique, but from the disciplined willingness to listen without control. In recovering this posture, the Church may rediscover hearing as a primary means by which God forms disciples over time.

⁵ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 19–34.

⁶ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 1–22, 55–79.

II. Hearing as a Primary Christian Practice: Biblical and Theological Foundations

II.1. Faith as Response to Address, Not Possession of Content

Within the biblical witness, faith is consistently framed not as the possession of religious content but as a response to divine address. Scripture presents God as one who speaks, calls, commands, and summons, and human faithfulness emerges as an answering movement rather than an accumulation of knowledge. From the call of Abraham to the prophetic summons to Israel, the fundamental posture of faith is hearing and responding rather than mastering or possessing information.⁷

This orientation is made explicit in the Apostle Paul's treatment of faith in Romans 10. Paul insists that faith does not originate in autonomous reasoning or interior reflection, but in hearing: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." Faith, in this account, is constituted by exposure to proclamation rather than by private cognitive achievement. The emphasis falls not on the hearer's capacity to comprehend exhaustively, but on their availability to be addressed. Faith is not secured by understanding in advance, but by remaining open to the Word as it comes.⁸

Such a framework resists the modern tendency to equate faith with the possession of correct beliefs or theological mastery. While doctrine and teaching remain indispensable, they are secondary to the more fundamental act of hearing. The Word precedes the hearer and retains its freedom to speak in ways that exceed expectation or preference. Faithful response, therefore, involves a relinquishment of control. To hear in faith is to consent to being addressed rather than to manage what is heard.⁹

Theologically, this understanding aligns with accounts of the Word as event rather than static object. The Word of God is not merely a deposit of meaning awaiting retrieval, but a living address that confronts the hearer in the present. It interrupts settled assumptions, exposes false securities, and calls forth new forms

⁷ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 23–35.

⁸ Romans 10:17; see also James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 604–608.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 111–123.

of obedience. When faith is understood as response to such address, formation becomes possible at levels deeper than cognition alone.⁹¹⁰ The hearer is not simply informed but reoriented.

This posture of receptive response establishes the foundation for formational hearing. If faith itself is constituted through hearing, then the manner in which Scripture is read and sermons are heard becomes decisive for formation. Hearing that is governed by control, evaluation, or prior agendas constrains the Word's capacity to act. Hearing that is marked by availability and trust, by contrast, allows the Word to perform its formative work over time. In this sense, faith itself may be understood as a sustained willingness to remain under the address of the Word.¹¹

II.2. Public Reading, Proclamation, and Formation in Israel and the Early Church

The formative power of hearing Scripture is inseparable from its fundamentally communal character in the biblical tradition. Both Israel and the early Church were shaped primarily through the public reading and proclamation of God's Word, not through private study or individual interpretation. In largely oral cultures, Scripture was encountered first and foremost as something heard together, within a gathered people, rather than as a text possessed by individuals.¹²

This communal hearing is already evident in Israel's covenantal life. Deuteronomy envisions Scripture not merely as law to be consulted, but as a word to be periodically read aloud to the assembled community. In Deuteronomy 31, the public reading of the law is commanded so that "they may hear and learn to fear the Lord," binding hearing directly to formation, obedience, and covenantal identity. The act of hearing together situates the people under the same address, reminding them that they are constituted not by shared possession of texts, but by shared submission to the Word that confronts them.¹³

¹⁰ Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 36–52.

¹¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 88–102.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1982), 17–31.

¹³ Deuteronomy 31:9–13; see also Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 447–450.

Nehemiah 8 offers a paradigmatic account of this dynamic. The people gather, the law is read aloud, interpretation is offered, and the community responds with repentance, worship, and renewed obedience. Crucially, the narrative emphasizes attentiveness, duration, and posture. The people stand for the reading, listen for extended periods, and are instructed not to rush prematurely into emotional resolution. Formation unfolds through sustained exposure to the Word rather than through immediate application. Hearing, explanation, and response are held together as a single communal process.¹⁴

These patterns carry forward into the life of the early Church. The public reading of Scripture and apostolic proclamation remain central practices, functioning not merely as instruction but as formative encounters. The earliest Christian communities are shaped by the hearing of the gospel proclaimed in their midst, often before texts were widely available for private use. Faith is nurtured as believers repeatedly gather under the spoken Word, allowing it to interpret their lives and reconfigure their communal identity.¹⁵

This communal orientation resists the modern tendency to locate formation primarily in private consumption of religious material. In Scripture, hearing is not an individual act detached from community, but a shared submission that binds the people together under a common address. The Word does not belong to the hearers; it claims them together. Public reading and proclamation thus function as formative practices precisely because they place individuals within a larger interpretive and relational field, where meaning is received rather than controlled.¹⁶

Recovering this communal dimension of hearing has significant implications for contemporary practice. It reframes Scripture reading and sermon listening as ecclesial acts that shape identity over time. Formation occurs not only through what is said, but through the shared posture of attentiveness, patience, and receptivity cultivated when the community gathers to hear the Word together.¹⁷

¹⁴ Nehemiah 8:1–12; see also James W. Watts, *Ritual and Rhetoric in Leviticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 211–218.

¹⁵ Acts 2:42–47; see also Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 69–75.

¹⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 132–148.

¹⁷ Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 25–44.

II.3. Theological Accounts of the Word as Living and Active

The scriptural insistence that the Word of God is living and active provides a crucial theological lens for understanding hearing as a formational act. Scripture does not present the Word primarily as static information to be preserved or transmitted, but as dynamic speech that acts upon those who hear it.¹⁸ The Word confronts, summons, judges, consoles, and reorients. It does not merely describe reality; it participates in shaping it.

Biblical theology consistently portrays God's speech as performative. From creation itself, where God speaks and reality comes into being, to the prophetic word that disrupts settled assumptions and calls Israel back to covenantal faithfulness, divine speech accomplishes what it declares. The Word does not await human activation in order to function. It acts precisely as it is spoken and received. To hear the Word, therefore, is to be placed within the field of its activity.¹⁹

This performative character resists any reduction of Scripture to inert content. When the Word is treated as information to be mastered, its agency is effectively neutralized. The hearer remains untouched at the level of identity and orientation. By contrast, when Scripture is received as living address, it assumes an active role in the encounter. The Word interrogates the hearer, exposing disordered desires, naming truth, and opening new possibilities of faithfulness. Hearing becomes a site of encounter rather than analysis.²⁰

Theologically, this dynamic introduces an asymmetry into the act of hearing. The Word stands over against the listener, retaining its freedom to speak in ways that exceed expectation or preference. This asymmetry is essential for formation. If the hearer remains the final arbiter of meaning, the Word can only confirm what is already known. When the Word is allowed to remain living and active, it retains the capacity to interrupt, destabilize, and reconstitute the self.²¹

Such an understanding has direct implications for how Scripture is read and sermons are heard. Listening cannot be reduced to evaluation or critique without distorting the nature of the Word itself. To evaluate the Word as one might assess

¹⁸ Hebrews 4:12; see also Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 64–72.

¹⁹ Isaiah 55:10–11; see also Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 103–110.

²⁰ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 108–125.

²¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 150–168.

a product or argument is to reverse the theological relationship. Faithful hearing instead requires submission, patience, and a willingness to remain exposed to the Word's ongoing work.²²

Within this theological frame, stillness becomes intelligible as a necessary condition for formational hearing. If the Word is living and active, the hearer need not force meaning, manufacture response, or hasten resolution. The Word acts in its own time. Stillness allows the hearer to remain present to that action without interference. In this way, hearing becomes an act of trust, in which the formative agency of the Word is honored rather than managed.²³

²² Jan-Martijn Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 201–230.

²³ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 55–79.

III. The Instrumentalization of Scripture and Sermons

The theological vision of hearing articulated in the preceding section stands in sharp contrast to many dominant practices within contemporary Christian life. Scripture names hearing as responsive, communal, and formative, yet modern habits of reading and listening often operate according to a different logic altogether. This section turns from constructive theological grounding to critical diagnosis, examining how Scripture and sermons have increasingly been approached through instrumental frameworks that prioritize control, efficiency, and utility.²⁴

The concern here is not with overt rejection of Scripture's authority, but with subtle shifts in posture that reshape how the Word is received. When reading and hearing are governed by preexisting agendas, Scripture is no longer encountered primarily as living address but as a means to other ends. What follows explores how this instrumentalization emerged, how it manifests in common listening practices, and why it ultimately undermines the formational capacity of Scripture and preaching.²⁵

III.1. From Reception to Consumption

The shift from formational hearing to instrumental engagement did not occur suddenly, nor did it arise from explicit theological rejection of Scripture's authority. Rather, it emerged gradually through broader cultural, technological, and ecclesial changes that reshaped how texts are encountered and how meaning is expected to function. Over time, Scripture and sermons increasingly came to be approached not as formative encounters to be received, but as resources to be consumed.²⁶

One significant factor in this shift is the rise of individualization in modern religious life. As literacy expanded and texts became widely accessible, Scripture moved from a primarily communal and oral setting into private and individualized forms of engagement. While this development brought undeniable benefits, it also subtly relocated authority from the communal act of hearing under the Word to the autonomous reader or listener. Meaning became something generated or

²⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 43–65; James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 1–18.

²⁵ Jan-Martijn Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 1–28.

²⁶ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 66–88.

selected by the individual rather than something received through shared submission to divine address.²⁷

Alongside this individualization came a growing emphasis on utility. In increasingly pragmatic cultural contexts, value is often measured by immediacy, relevance, and tangible outcomes. These assumptions have shaped expectations placed upon Scripture and preaching. Sermons are frequently evaluated according to their clarity, applicability, or perceived effectiveness. Scripture is read with an eye toward problem-solving, moral reinforcement, or emotional regulation. In such contexts, the operative question quietly shifts from what the Word is doing to what it is producing.²⁸

This utilitarian orientation encourages a consumer posture toward hearing. Sermons become products to be assessed, compared, and either retained or discarded. Scripture functions as a repository of insights, principles, or encouragements that can be selectively accessed as needed. The hearer remains firmly in control, determining in advance the criteria by which the Word will be judged successful. Reception gives way to consumption, and availability yields to management.²⁹

The dominance of efficiency further reinforces this posture. Time is scarce, attention fragmented, and patience increasingly rare. As a result, Scripture engagement is often compressed, accelerated, and streamlined. Extended dwelling, silence, or unresolved tension can feel inefficient or even irresponsible. Yet it is precisely these conditions that historically have allowed Scripture to work formationally over time. When efficiency governs hearing, depth is frequently sacrificed for immediacy.³⁰

Taken together, these developments help explain why Scripture may remain central in name while its formative power diminishes in practice. The issue is not that Scripture is absent, but that it is encountered within a framework that limits its agency. When hearing is structured around consumption rather than reception, the Word is constrained to serve preexisting purposes. The task of the following

²⁷ Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement*, 52–74.

²⁸ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 27–41; Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 13–31.

²⁹ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 17–35.

³⁰ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 19–34.

sections is to identify how this instrumental posture manifests in concrete practices and why, despite its apparent effectiveness, it ultimately inhibits genuine transformation.

III.2. Instrumental Listening and the Management of Meaning

If the shift from reception to consumption marks a broad cultural and ecclesial trajectory, its concrete effects are most clearly seen in the everyday habits by which Scripture and sermons are heard. Instrumentalization does not remain an abstract posture. It takes shape in patterned ways of listening that prioritize control, efficiency, and personal utility. These habits subtly train the hearer to manage meaning rather than to receive address, reshaping the encounter with the Word at a structural level.³¹

One common manifestation of instrumental listening is the expectation of immediate relevance. Hearers are often conditioned to ask, implicitly or explicitly, how a text or sermon applies to their current circumstances, emotional state, or practical concerns. While relevance is not inherently problematic, when it becomes the governing criterion of hearing it narrows the range of what the Word is permitted to say. Scripture is filtered through the hearer's present needs, and elements that do not appear immediately useful are quietly disregarded. The Word is reduced to what can be assimilated quickly, reinforcing existing frames of meaning rather than exposing their limits.³²

A related habit is the tendency to evaluate sermons as products. In this posture, listening is accompanied by continuous assessment of clarity, structure, theological precision, and rhetorical effectiveness. Such evaluation often occurs in real time, fragmenting attention and positioning the hearer as an external critic rather than an engaged participant. Although discernment is necessary within the life of the Church, evaluative listening easily becomes a means of self-protection. By standing over the sermon as judge, the hearer maintains control over the encounter and limits the possibility of being addressed at depth.³³

Instrumental listening also expresses itself through the drive toward premature application. Sermons are frequently expected to culminate in clear

³¹ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 25–44.

³² M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 36–52.

³³ Jan-Martijn Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 57–88.

directives or actionable takeaways. Scripture is approached with the question of what must be done rather than what is being revealed or questioned. This impulse reflects an underlying discomfort with unresolved meaning. Application offers closure and a sense of agency, yet when pursued too quickly it can foreclose the deeper formational work that occurs through dwelling, waiting, and allowing the Word to interrogate the hearer before directing their action.³⁴

These habits are reinforced by broader cultural pressures that privilege speed, productivity, and measurable outcomes. In such contexts, lingering with ambiguity or tension can feel inefficient or irresponsible. Silence is experienced as wasted time, and unresolved questions are perceived as failures of communication. Instrumental listening thus aligns seamlessly with cultural patterns that value immediacy and control, making it difficult for hearers to recognize how deeply these assumptions have shaped their engagement with Scripture and preaching.³⁵

The cumulative effect of these listening habits is a subtle reconfiguration of authority. Meaning is no longer received as something that confronts and claims the hearer, but as something the hearer curates and manages. The Word's agency is constrained by the hearer's expectations, preferences, and interpretive frameworks. Over time, this posture stabilizes the self rather than exposing it, fostering coherence without conversion and familiarity without transformation.³⁶

Recognizing these patterns is essential for any attempt to recover formational hearing. Instrumental listening does not arise from overt resistance to God, but from well-formed habits that feel responsible, active, and faithful. Yet precisely because these habits operate beneath conscious awareness, they require intentional interruption. The recovery of stillness and receptive presence, explored in the following section, is therefore not an optional enrichment but a necessary corrective to the management of meaning that characterizes instrumental hearing.³⁷

³⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 88–113.

³⁵ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 23–58.

³⁶ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 160–181.

³⁷ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 1–22.

III.3. Formational Consequences of Instrumental Postures

Instrumental postures of reading and listening do not merely shape how Scripture and sermons are received in the moment; over time, they exert a cumulative formative effect upon the hearer. Practices habituate posture, and posture, in turn, conditions what kinds of transformation are possible. When hearing is consistently governed by control, efficiency, and utility, the self is stabilized rather than exposed, and formation is quietly constrained.³⁸

One primary consequence of instrumental hearing is the foreclosure of vulnerability. Because the hearer retains authority over how the Word will be received and what it will be allowed to do, Scripture rarely penetrates beyond the level of affirmation or guidance. The Word may inform belief or support moral action, but it seldom disrupts the deeper structures of meaning, desire, and identity by which the hearer lives. Over time, faith becomes increasingly coherent yet increasingly resistant to reconfiguration.³⁹

A second consequence is the erosion of patience with developmental time. Instrumental postures implicitly assume that transformation should be visible, measurable, and relatively immediate. When change does not occur quickly, the solution is often to intensify effort, seek new techniques, or consume additional content. This orientation obscures the slow, recursive nature of formation, in which growth often emerges through sustained exposure, unresolved tension, and repeated encounter rather than through decisive moments of clarity.⁴⁰

Instrumental hearing also tends to reinforce existing subject-object boundaries rather than inviting their transformation. Because the hearer remains the agent who evaluates, applies, and manages meaning, the structures by which the self makes sense of the world remain largely unexamined. Scripture is brought into service of the self rather than allowed to interrogate the self. In developmental terms, this stabilizes prior ways of meaning-making and limits the possibility of genuine structural change.⁴¹

³⁸ Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 53-72.

³⁹ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 9-33; James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 274-303.

⁴⁰ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 37-62; Chris A. Kiesling and David P. Setran, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 89-112.

⁴¹ Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 43-67.

At the communal level, these postures subtly reshape ecclesial culture. When sermons and Scripture are primarily valued for their usefulness or effectiveness, communities learn to prioritize productivity over presence and clarity over depth. Silence becomes awkward, ambiguity unwelcome, and resistance suspect. The shared capacity to dwell together under the Word diminishes, replaced by cycles of consumption and evaluation that mirror broader cultural patterns rather than resisting them.⁴²

Perhaps most significantly, instrumental postures diminish the agency of the Word itself. When Scripture is encountered chiefly as a means to an end, its capacity to act as living and active address is curtailed. The Word is permitted to function only within preapproved limits. Over time, this constriction is normalized, and the absence of deep transformation is misinterpreted as a failure of technique rather than as a consequence of posture.⁴³

These consequences are not the result of intentional resistance to God, but of well-formed habits that quietly insulate the self from encounter. Recognizing them is therefore not a call to abandon Scripture or preaching, but to reexamine the conditions under which they are engaged. If formation is to occur, hearing must be reoriented away from instrumental control and toward receptive availability. The next sections will argue that such reorientation requires the recovery of stillness as a formational posture and the cultivation of practices that allow the Word to work upon the hearer over time.

⁴² Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 45–68.

⁴³ Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 73–92; Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement*, 185–210.

IV. Stillness and Receptive Presence: Contemplative Correctives

The preceding analysis has shown how instrumental habits of reading and listening constrain the formative power of Scripture and preaching by preserving control, accelerating resolution, and insulating the self from genuine address. What is required, therefore, is not merely the abandonment of certain practices, but the recovery of a different posture altogether. This section turns toward the Christian contemplative tradition to articulate stillness and receptive presence as essential correctives to instrumental hearing.⁴⁴

Stillness is introduced here not as a specialized spiritual technique reserved for advanced practitioners, but as a fundamental orientation of availability before God. Within the contemplative tradition, stillness names a posture in which the hearer relinquishes the need to manage meaning, produce outcomes, or secure immediate clarity. It is a disciplined refusal to grasp, manipulate, or hasten the work of God. Such stillness creates space for the Word to act upon the hearer rather than being acted upon by them.⁴⁵

By retrieving stillness as a theological posture rather than a private devotional exercise, this section reframes contemplation as directly relevant to Scripture reading and sermon hearing. Receptive presence allows the hearer to remain with what is spoken, even when it unsettles or resists resolution. In doing so, it interrupts the patterns of consumption diagnosed in the previous section and reopens the conditions under which formation becomes possible. The following subsections will explore how stillness functions theologically, how it has been articulated within the Christian tradition, and how it can be cultivated in the context of communal and personal engagement with the Word.

IV.1. Stillness in the Christian Contemplative Tradition

Within the Christian contemplative tradition, stillness has consistently been understood not as inactivity, withdrawal, or interior technique, but as a disciplined orientation of the self before God. From the early monastic witnesses through medieval mysticism and into contemporary contemplative theology, stillness names a posture of receptive attentiveness in which the believer consents to God's

⁴⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 89-112.

⁴⁵ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 23-39.

presence without attempting to control, interpret, or instrumentalize the encounter.⁴⁶

Early Christian monastic writers repeatedly emphasize stillness as a condition for truthful perception. Practices of silence, solitude, and watchfulness were not pursued in order to generate spiritual experiences, but to quiet the compulsions of the ego that distort attention. In this sense, stillness functions as an act of humility. It acknowledges that God is not an object to be grasped or mastered, and that spiritual growth does not proceed from exertion alone, but from availability to what God is already doing.⁴⁷

This orientation persists across the contemplative tradition. Whether articulated through the language of *hesychia*, recollection, or contemplative prayer, stillness consistently resists instrumental logic. It is not ordered toward productivity, insight, or emotional consolation, but toward fidelity of presence. The contemplative does not seek to make something happen, but to remain present to what is given. In doing so, stillness disrupts the habitual tendency to evaluate experience according to usefulness or outcome.⁴⁸

Martin Laird's contemporary articulation of contemplation draws this tradition into sharp relief. Laird insists that contemplation is not a search for particular states or meanings, but a consent to reality as it is before God. Stillness, in this account, exposes the strategies by which the self seeks control, security, and resolution. Rather than resolving tension, contemplation allows it to be borne. Rather than clarifying ambiguity, it permits ambiguity to remain. This refusal to grasp becomes precisely the space in which transformation occurs.⁴⁹

When brought into conversation with Scripture reading and sermon hearing, this contemplative understanding of stillness offers a critical corrective. It reframes hearing as an act of presence rather than acquisition. The listener does not approach the Word in order to secure insight, application, or reassurance, but to remain open before it. Stillness allows the Word to speak on its own terms, over time, without being prematurely resolved or domesticated.

⁴⁶ Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1974), 15–28; John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 9–22.

⁴⁷ John Cassian, *Conferences*, 23–41.

⁴⁸ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 1–27.

⁴⁹ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 3–19.

Importantly, this tradition does not oppose stillness to engagement, obedience, or action. Rather, it situates action downstream from presence. Stillness precedes discernment, and discernment precedes response. In this way, the contemplative tradition offers not an alternative spirituality, but a deep grammar for formational hearing itself. By recovering stillness as a shared ecclesial posture, the Church may learn again how to hear Scripture and preaching in ways that allow the Word to work patiently and transformatively upon those who listen.

IV.2. Martin Laird and Non-Instrumental Attention

Martin Laird's contribution to contemporary contemplative theology is particularly significant for the question of formational hearing because of his sustained critique of instrumental approaches to prayer, attention, and spiritual practice. Laird consistently resists the tendency to treat contemplation as a means of producing particular experiences, insights, or outcomes. Instead, he frames contemplative practice as a schooling in non-instrumental attention, a way of learning to remain present to reality without grasping, manipulating, or resolving it prematurely.⁵⁰

Central to Laird's account is the claim that the primary obstacle to contemplation is not distraction itself, but the self's habitual demand for control. The mind seeks to manage experience by narrating, evaluating, and resolving what arises. In contrast, contemplative attention does not attempt to silence thoughts through force or technique. Rather, it notices them without identification and allows them to pass without being recruited into meaning-making projects. This posture of consent exposes the subtle ways in which the self seeks to secure itself through interpretation and mastery.⁵¹

For Laird, non-instrumental attention is not a withdrawal from reality, but a deeper inhabitation of it. By relinquishing the impulse to use experience for spiritual gain, the practitioner becomes available to what is actually present. This availability is itself transformative, not because it produces insight, but because it loosens the grip of habitual patterns of control. Over time, the self becomes less reactive, less defended, and more capable of remaining present in the face of ambiguity, discomfort, or unknowing.⁵²

When this framework is applied to Scripture reading and sermon hearing, its implications are substantial. Instrumental listening mirrors precisely the habits

⁵⁰ Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 20-44.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 45-67.

⁵² *Ibid*, 68-92.

Laird identifies as obstacles to contemplation. The hearer seeks clarity, application, reassurance, or resolution as a way of managing the encounter. Non-instrumental attention, by contrast, allows the Word to remain other, to resist immediate assimilation, and to continue addressing the hearer beyond the moment of reception. The listener does not ask first what the Word can provide, but consents to be present to what is spoken.

This form of attention creates the conditions under which formational hearing becomes possible. By suspending the demand for usefulness or outcome, the hearer allows Scripture and preaching to work over time, reshaping perception and desire at levels that cannot be accessed through direct effort. In this sense, non-instrumental attention is not opposed to formation, but is its necessary precondition.

Laird's account also clarifies why stillness must be understood as posture rather than technique. Non-instrumental attention cannot be engineered or compelled without immediately collapsing back into instrumentality. It must be practiced indirectly, through consent, patience, and repeated return to presence. Applied to hearing, this means cultivating spaces where silence is permitted, unresolved tension is tolerated, and the Word is allowed to echo beyond immediate comprehension.

By integrating Laird's insights into a theology of formational hearing, stillness emerges not as an optional spiritual enrichment, but as a corrective to deeply ingrained habits of control. Non-instrumental attention interrupts the cycles of consumption diagnosed in Section III and reorients hearing toward receptive availability. In doing so, it restores the possibility that Scripture and preaching might once again function as living addresses capable of forming the Church over time.

IV.3. Stillness as Formational Posture Rather Than Practice

If stillness is to function as a genuine corrective to instrumental hearing, it must be understood first as a posture rather than as a discrete spiritual practice. When stillness is treated as one practice among others, it is easily absorbed into the same instrumental logic it is meant to resist. It becomes something to perform, schedule, or evaluate, measured by its perceived effectiveness or experiential payoff. In such cases, stillness ceases to be still.⁵³

⁵³ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 15–22.

A postural understanding of stillness reframes it as an orientation that shapes how all other practices are engaged. Rather than standing alongside Scripture reading, sermon listening, prayer, or worship as an additional discipline, stillness names the manner in which these practices are inhabited. It is the difference between approaching the Word as an object to be used and remaining present before it as a subject who listens. Stillness does not replace engagement; it qualifies it.

This distinction is critical for formation. Practices alone do not transform. They habituate. Without attention to posture, even the most formative practices can reinforce defensive patterns of control. Scripture may be read attentively and sermons heard regularly, yet if the underlying orientation remains one of mastery, evaluation, or outcome management, formation will be constrained. Stillness addresses this deeper level by loosening the compulsions that govern how meaning is sought and secured.⁵⁴

Understood in this way, stillness functions developmentally as a reorientation of the self's relationship to authority and meaning. It invites the hearer to suspend premature closure, to tolerate ambiguity, and to remain present without resolving tension. Such capacities are not ancillary to formation but are constitutive of it. Growth occurs not only through clarity and instruction, but through sustained exposure to that which exceeds the hearer's current frames of understanding.⁵⁵

When cultivated as posture, stillness also reshapes communal practice. Congregations learn to value silence, patience, and waiting as faithful responses rather than as failures of communication. Sermons are not required to resolve every tension, and Scripture readings are not immediately translated into application. The community learns to remain under the Word together, trusting its ongoing work rather than demanding immediate results.

Stillness, therefore, is not an escape from formation but its necessary condition. By resisting the urge to control, produce, or conclude, the hearer creates space for the Word to act over time. In this space, transformation is not forced but received. Stillness becomes the soil in which formational hearing takes root, allowing Scripture and preaching to address the Church at depths that technique alone cannot reach.

⁵⁴ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 33-57.

⁵⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 274-303.

V. Scripture and Sermons as Holding Environments for Transformation

The recovery of stillness as a formational posture raises an important practical and theological question: how does this posture take shape within the ordinary life of the Church, particularly in relation to Scripture and preaching? Stillness, if it is to be more than a private disposition, must be sustained within concrete ecclesial practices. This section argues that Scripture reading and sermon hearing function most faithfully when they operate as holding environments that can support transformation over time rather than demanding immediate resolution or visible outcomes.⁵⁶

Drawing on insights from developmental theory, practical theology, and empirical homiletics, a holding environment refers to a relational and interpretive space that offers sufficient support to remain engaged while also allowing the strain necessary for growth. Transformation does not occur through pressure or persuasion alone, nor through unstructured openness, but through contexts that can bear tension without collapsing it. When Scripture and sermons are framed as holding environments, they are no longer required to produce immediate clarity or application. Instead, they provide a stable space in which the Word can address the hearer gradually, exposing limits of existing meaning-making structures while sustaining the hearer within community.⁵⁷

This reframing has significant implications for how preaching is conceived and evaluated, and for how Scripture is encountered in both communal and personal contexts. Rather than functioning as mechanisms for instruction or motivation alone, sermons and Scripture readings become sites of ongoing formation. They hold the hearer in the presence of the Word, allowing resistance, confusion, and insight to coexist over time. The subsections that follow will explore how this holding function operates, how it aligns with developmental understandings of transformation, and how it reshapes expectations placed upon preaching and Scripture in the life of the Church.

⁵⁶ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 42-67; Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 1-18.

⁵⁷ Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 67-92; Chris A. Kiesling and David P. Setran, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 35-58.

V.1. Formation, Tension, and the Limits of Immediate Resolution

Christian formation does not ordinarily occur in spaces of ease, clarity, or immediate resolution. It unfolds at the edge of discomfort, where existing ways of understanding, desiring, and relating are strained by an encounter that cannot be quickly assimilated. Scripture and sermons function formationally not by removing this strain, but by sustaining it long enough for deeper reorientation to take place.⁵⁸

Growth at the edge of discomfort is a consistent feature of both theological and developmental accounts of transformation. From a developmental perspective, growth occurs when individuals are exposed to demands that exceed their current meaning-making capacities while remaining sufficiently supported to stay engaged. When engagement with Scripture or preaching merely confirms existing assumptions or provides tidy resolution, it reinforces established structures without inviting their transformation. Conversely, when the Word presses beyond what the hearer can easily integrate, it generates tension that signals the possibility of growth.⁵⁹

This tension is not incidental to formation but essential to it. The Word of God does not simply affirm who the hearer already understands themselves to be; it calls the hearer beyond settled identities, habits, and loyalties. Such calling inevitably produces dissonance. The hearer experiences friction between familiar patterns of meaning and the claims of the Word. Formation takes place not by eliminating this friction, but by remaining present to it over time.⁶⁰

Within this dynamic, resistance and ambiguity carry significant spiritual meaning. Resistance is often interpreted as obstinacy, lack of faith, or misunderstanding. Yet resistance frequently marks the point at which the Word encounters deeply embedded assumptions that structure the self's understanding of reality. Rather than signaling failure, resistance may indicate that the Word has reached a threshold where transformation is being invited. To bypass resistance too quickly is to bypass the very site where growth is most likely to occur.⁶¹

Ambiguity plays a similar role. Scripture regularly presents tensions, paradoxes, and unresolved questions that resist immediate coherence. These ambiguities are not defects to be corrected but invitations to deeper engagement.

⁵⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 89-112.

⁵⁹ Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 93-120.

⁶⁰ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 53-72.

⁶¹ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 274-303.

When preaching or teaching rushes to resolve ambiguity, it risks foreclosing the formative work that ambiguity makes possible. The hearer is given answers before they have learned how to dwell within the question.⁶²

The danger of premature closure in preaching and teaching lies precisely here. In an effort to be clear, helpful, or pastorally reassuring, sermons are often structured to move quickly from tension to resolution, from disruption to application. While such movement can offer relief, it can also stabilize the hearer too soon. Premature closure protects the hearer from the discomfort necessary for transformation, rendering the Word manageable rather than transformative.⁶³

When immediate resolution becomes the dominant expectation, communities are quietly trained to equate faithfulness with clarity and formation with certainty. Over time, patience with developmental processes erodes. Discomfort is treated as a problem to be solved rather than a condition to be inhabited. Scripture is valued for its capacity to explain rather than its capacity to reorient.⁶⁴

Allowing Scripture and sermons to function as holding environments requires a different set of commitments. It demands restraint on the part of preachers, who must resist the urge to resolve every tension they introduce. It also demands courage on the part of hearers, who must remain present to what unsettles them without demanding immediate relief. In such environments, tension is not weaponized or prolonged for its own sake, but held with care, trust, and attentiveness.

In this way, the limits of immediate resolution become the conditions of genuine formation. By permitting discomfort, honoring resistance, and allowing ambiguity to remain, Scripture and sermons create space for the slow work of transformation. Formation emerges not through coercion or explanation alone, but through sustained exposure to a Word that continues to address, question, and reshape the hearer over time.

V.2. Empirical Insights into Sermon Listening

Empirical research in homiletics and practical theology offers important confirmation of the theological claims advanced thus far. Studies of sermon reception consistently indicate that listening is not a passive or instantaneous act,

⁶² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 11–35.

⁶³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 63–82.

⁶⁴ Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 45–68.

but a complex, staged, and participatory process that unfolds over time. Hearers do not simply receive meaning fully formed at the moment of proclamation. Rather, they engage sermons through layers of attention, resistance, reflection, and appropriation that extend well beyond the sermon event itself.⁶⁵

Research into sermon listening has shown that hearers move through discernible phases as they engage preaching. Initial exposure often involves affective and intuitive responses, shaped by prior experience, expectations, and trust in the preacher. This is followed by periods of dwelling, in which the content of the sermon lingers, provokes reflection, or generates questions that are not immediately resolved. Only later, and sometimes much later, does actualization occur, as elements of what was heard begin to inform perception, decision-making, or behavior. Formation, in this sense, is cumulative and recursive rather than immediate.⁶⁶

These findings challenge assumptions that equate effective preaching with immediate comprehension or application. When sermons are evaluated primarily by what hearers can recall or implement directly after hearing them, the deeper processes of dwelling and integration are easily overlooked. Empirical evidence suggests that sermons often do their most significant formative work indirectly, as hearers return to them in memory, conversation, prayer, or lived experience. Meaning unfolds slowly, and its effects are not always immediately visible.⁶⁷

Receptivity emerges as a critical variable within this process. Hearers who remain open to unresolved questions, lingering images, or persistent discomfort are more likely to experience long-term formation than those who seek rapid closure. Dwelling allows the sermon to continue addressing the hearer beyond the moment of delivery, interacting with subsequent experiences and insights. In this way, the sermon becomes less a discrete instructional event and more a formative presence that accompanies the hearer through time.⁶⁸

Empirical studies also underscore the relational and contextual nature of sermon listening. Trust in the preacher, identification with the community, and perceived safety to wrestle with uncertainty all shape how sermons are received. Where communities value patience, attentiveness, and ongoing discernment, sermons are more likely to function as holding environments that support growth.

⁶⁵ Jan-Martijn Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 29–56.

⁶⁶ Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement*, 57–88.

⁶⁷ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 175–201.

⁶⁸ Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement*, 141–167.

Where clarity and immediacy are overemphasized, hearers may disengage once resolution is offered, short-circuiting the formative process.⁶⁹

Taken together, these insights reinforce the claim that sermons are spaces in which faith is slowly formed rather than instantaneously produced. They confirm that tension, ambiguity, and delayed understanding are not signs of ineffective preaching but conditions under which formation is most likely to occur. Empirical evidence thus aligns closely with both theological and developmental accounts of transformation, suggesting that preaching which allows space for receptivity and dwelling is better suited to support lasting spiritual growth than preaching oriented toward immediate results.

V.3. Preaching That Supports Formation Without Coercion

If Scripture and sermons are to function as holding environments rather than instruments of control, preaching itself must be reconceived. Preaching that supports formation without coercion is marked not by the intensity of its exhortation or the efficiency of its application, but by its capacity to create space in which the Word may continue to work beyond the moment of proclamation. This requires a posture of restraint, a sensitivity to pacing, and a willingness to employ silence as a meaningful element of communication rather than as a failure of it.⁷⁰

Restraint in preaching involves resisting the impulse to resolve every tension that the text introduces. Rather than closing interpretive space too quickly, the preacher allows the text to retain its complexity and its capacity to unsettle. Such restraint does not signal uncertainty or lack of conviction, but trust in the Word's agency. By pacing sermons in a way that allows hearers to remain with difficulty, paradox, or unanswered questions, preachers support the slow work of formation rather than demanding immediate compliance or understanding.⁷¹

Silence plays a crucial role within this framework. Silence is not merely the absence of speech, but a space in which what has been spoken can be received, lingered over, and interiorly engaged. When silence is intentionally incorporated before, within, or after proclamation, it signals that the work of hearing does not end when the sermon does. Silence creates room for dwelling and for the Spirit's

⁶⁹ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 202-225.

⁷⁰ Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 25-47.

⁷¹ Barth, *Homiletics*, 48-72.

ongoing activity, resisting the pressure to fill every moment with explanation or exhortation.⁷²

Preaching oriented toward formation is therefore best understood as invitation rather than persuasion. Persuasive preaching seeks to move hearers toward predetermined conclusions or actions within a limited timeframe. While persuasion has a legitimate place, when it becomes the dominant homiletical mode it risks bypassing the deeper processes of discernment and transformation. Invitational preaching, by contrast, calls hearers into sustained engagement with the Word, inviting them to remain under its address rather than directing them toward immediate outcomes.⁷³

Such preaching requires a significant act of trust on the part of the preacher. To preach without coercion is to relinquish control over how and when the Word will bear fruit. It is to acknowledge that formation unfolds unevenly and often invisibly, shaped by factors beyond the preacher's reach. Trusting the Spirit rather than managing outcomes allows preaching to participate in God's work without attempting to replace it.⁷⁴

When restraint, pacing, and silence are embraced as integral to preaching, sermons can function as genuine holding environments. Hearers are neither abandoned to confusion nor driven toward premature resolution. Instead, they are supported in remaining present to what has been spoken, allowing the Word to continue addressing them across time. In this way, preaching becomes a faithful accompaniment to the Spirit's formative work, cultivating patience, receptivity, and openness to transformation rather than compliance or consumption.

⁷² Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 93–112.

⁷³ Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 13–34.

⁷⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 119–143.

VI. Practicing Formational Hearing

The preceding sections have argued that formation depends not only on theological content or homiletical skill, but on the cultivation of a receptive posture sustained over time. Stillness, tension, and restraint create the conditions under which Scripture and sermons may function formationally, but these conditions do not emerge automatically. They must be practiced, embodied, and learned within the ordinary rhythms of Christian life.⁷⁵

This section turns from conceptual and theological analysis to disciplined enactment. Practicing formational hearing does not mean adopting a new set of techniques designed to guarantee outcomes. Rather, it involves learning to inhabit existing practices such as Scripture reading, sermon listening, prayer, and communal worship with a different orientation. The focus shifts from maximizing effectiveness to cultivating availability, from securing results to remaining present under the Word.⁷⁶

Formational hearing is therefore less about doing something additional and more about doing familiar practices differently. It requires attentiveness to posture rather than performance, patience rather than immediacy, and consent rather than control. These practices are shaped not only by individual intention, but by communal norms that either reinforce instrumental habits or support receptive presence.⁷⁷

The subsections that follow will explore concrete ways in which formational hearing can be practiced in both personal and communal contexts. They will attend to Scripture reading, sermon listening, and shared ecclesial rhythms, asking how each might be inhabited so as to support the slow, uneven, and often hidden work of transformation. In doing so, this section seeks to demonstrate that formational hearing is not an abstract ideal, but a learnable way of attending to the Word within the life of the Church.

VI.1. Reading Scripture Under the Word

Formational reading of Scripture differs fundamentally from informational reading. Informational reading approaches the biblical text primarily as an object

⁷⁵ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 15–35.

⁷⁶ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 19–34.

⁷⁷ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 25–44.

of study, seeking comprehension, coherence, and mastery. While such reading has an essential place within the life of the Church, on its own it tends to position the reader as the controlling subject who determines what the text means and how it will be used. Formational reading, by contrast, is ordered toward exposure rather than control. Its aim is not primarily to know the text, but to be known by it.⁷⁸

Reading Scripture under the Word entails a reversal of posture. Rather than standing over the text as interpreter and manager of meaning, the reader consents to stand beneath it, allowing Scripture to address, question, and unsettle. This does not suspend interpretation or critical engagement, but it relativizes them. Understanding is sought, yet it is held provisionally, with the recognition that the Word exceeds the reader's current frameworks and intentions.⁷⁹

In formational reading, Scripture is encountered not as material to be mastered but as a living address that exposes the reader to God's ongoing action. The text is allowed to interrupt habitual patterns of thought and desire rather than being immediately assimilated into them. Such reading is often marked by slowness, repetition, and attentiveness to what resists easy understanding. The reader lingers where the text provokes discomfort, confusion, or resistance, trusting that these moments may signal formative work rather than interpretive failure.⁸⁰

This posture requires relinquishing the demand for immediate clarity or application. Informational reading tends to move quickly toward synthesis and utility, asking what the text means and how it can be applied. Formational reading delays these moves, allowing Scripture to interrogate the reader before the reader interrogates the text. The question shifts from "What does this passage say?" to "What is this passage doing to me?" and, more deeply, "Who am I being invited to become in light of this Word?"⁸¹

Allowing Scripture to interrogate the reader also involves attentiveness to resistance. Passages that provoke defensiveness, boredom, or dismissal are not bypassed but noticed. Such reactions often reveal deeply held assumptions or attachments that shape the reader's identity. By remaining present to these responses rather than neutralizing them through explanation or avoidance, the

⁷⁸ Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 36–52.

⁷⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 1–24.

⁸⁰ Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 88–113.

⁸¹ Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 53–72.

reader opens themselves to transformation at a structural level rather than merely at the level of belief or behavior.⁸²

Practiced over time, reading Scripture under the Word forms habits of humility, patience, and receptivity. The reader learns to dwell with the text without demanding immediate payoff, trusting that formation unfolds gradually through sustained exposure. In this way, Scripture functions not only as a source of information about God, but as a means through which God continues to address and reshape those who listen.

VI.2. Hearing Sermons as Participatory Act

If formational reading requires a reversal of posture before the text, formational hearing requires a similar reorientation in relation to preaching. Hearing sermons as a participatory act means recognizing that listening is not a moment of passive reception, nor a task of immediate evaluation, but an ongoing engagement that unfolds over time. The hearer participates not by mastering the sermon's content, but by consenting to remain present under its address.⁸³

Listening without evaluation or immediate judgment is central to this posture. Many contemporary habits of sermon listening are shaped by critique and assessment. Hearers instinctively evaluate clarity, relevance, theological precision, or applicability as the sermon unfolds. While discernment is not inappropriate, premature judgment often functions as a means of control. By deciding too quickly what a sermon is or is not doing, the hearer insulates themselves from being addressed. Formational hearing suspends this reflex, allowing the sermon to be received before it is assessed.⁸⁴

Such suspension does not entail uncritical acceptance. Rather, it creates space for deeper engagement. When immediate judgment is deferred, the hearer is free to notice affective responses, resistance, boredom, or confusion without needing to resolve them. These responses become part of the listening process itself, revealing where the sermon intersects with the hearer's existing patterns of meaning and desire. Participation occurs not through agreement alone, but through attentiveness to what is stirred and unsettled.⁸⁵

⁸² Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 93–120.

⁸³ Jan-Martijn Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 29–56.

⁸⁴ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 175–201.

⁸⁵ Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement*, 57–88.

Silence plays a crucial role in sustaining this participatory posture. Silence before proclamation prepares the hearer to listen without haste, loosening the grip of distraction and expectation. Silence after proclamation allows what has been heard to linger without being prematurely translated into application or critique. In both cases, silence signals that hearing is not complete when speaking ends. It acknowledges that the work of the Word continues beyond the sermon's final words.⁸⁶

Cultivating patience with unresolved meaning is therefore essential to formational hearing. Sermons that are received formationally are not required to make immediate sense or produce immediate change. Hearers learn to carry what they have heard into the rhythms of daily life, allowing it to surface again in prayer, conversation, or experience. Meaning emerges gradually, often indirectly, as the Word interacts with the hearer's ongoing life.⁸⁷

When sermons are heard as participatory acts rather than consumable products, the relationship between preacher, congregation, and Word is reconfigured. The preacher offers the sermon as invitation rather than conclusion. The congregation listens not to secure answers, but to remain open to being addressed. In this shared posture, preaching becomes a communal practice of attentiveness, one that supports formation by honoring time, resisting closure, and trusting that the Spirit continues to work long after the sermon has been heard.

VI.3. Communal Practices That Support Receptive Hearing

Formational hearing is sustained not only by individual posture, but by communal practices that shape how attention is formed and maintained over time. The Church's shared rhythms, especially its liturgical patterns, play a decisive role in either reinforcing instrumental habits or cultivating receptive presence. When communal worship is ordered primarily toward efficiency, novelty, or immediacy, it trains hearers to expect rapid resolution and measurable outcomes. When it is ordered toward patience, repetition, and attentiveness, it forms capacities necessary for hearing under the Word.⁸⁸

Liturgical rhythms that slow and deepen attention function as formative scaffolding. Repetition of Scripture, prayer, and sacramental action creates temporal spaciousness in which meaning can unfold gradually. Such rhythms resist

⁸⁶ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 93–112.

⁸⁷ Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement*, 141–167.

⁸⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 132–158.

the demand for constant novelty and instead invite familiarity that deepens rather than dulls perception. Over time, repeated exposure trains the community to remain present without demanding immediate payoff, allowing the Word to work cumulatively rather than episodically.⁸⁹

Shared silence is particularly significant in this regard. When silence is practiced communally, it normalizes stillness as a faithful response rather than an awkward interruption. Silence before confession, after Scripture readings, or following sermons signals that hearing requires time and receptivity. It also creates a shared container in which individuals are supported in remaining present to what unsettles or resists resolution, rather than feeling compelled to manage their experience privately.⁹⁰

Communal prayer and reflection further extend this holding environment. Practices that allow members to articulate questions, struggles, or insights without forcing resolution reinforce the legitimacy of ongoing discernment. Conversation grounded in listening rather than debate trains the community to value attentiveness over persuasion. In such contexts, faith is not reduced to agreement or certainty, but is understood as a shared journey of response to God's ongoing address.⁹¹

Community itself functions as both stabilizing and challenging context for formational hearing. The presence of others provides continuity, accountability, and support, enabling individuals to remain engaged when the Word disrupts familiar patterns of meaning. At the same time, communal diversity exposes hearers to perspectives and experiences that unsettle narrow interpretations and invite broader reorientation. Formation occurs as individuals are held within a body that both sustains them and calls them beyond themselves.⁹²

Through these communal practices, receptive hearing becomes a shared discipline rather than a private achievement. The Church learns together how to dwell under the Word, how to tolerate tension, and how to trust the slow work of the Spirit. In such communities, Scripture and sermons are no longer isolated events, but integral elements of a formative ecology that supports transformation over time.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 159-186.

⁹⁰ Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, 113-134.

⁹¹ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 37-62.

⁹² Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 45-72.

VII. Implications for Discipleship, Leadership, and Followership

The argument developed throughout this paper presses toward a reconfiguration of how formation is understood and practiced within the Church. If hearing is fundamentally formational rather than informational, then its implications extend beyond preaching and Scripture engagement into the shared life of discipleship, leadership, and followership. These domains cannot be treated as discrete functions or roles, but as interrelated expressions of how a community learns to remain under the Word together.⁹³

This section explores the implications of formational hearing for the Church's formative ecology as a whole. It asks how disciples are shaped when formation is understood as long-term reorientation rather than immediate instruction, how leaders exercise authority when outcomes cannot be scripted or controlled, and how followers participate actively in their own formation without collapsing into passivity or compliance. In each case, the central concern is not efficiency or clarity, but faithfulness to the slow, demanding work of transformation.⁹⁴

Reframing discipleship, leadership, and followership through the lens of formational hearing exposes the limits of models oriented toward mastery, performance, or outcome management. It also offers a constructive alternative: communities organized around posture rather than productivity, patience rather than immediacy, and trust rather than control. The subsections that follow will examine how this reorientation reshapes expectations across these domains and what it requires of those who lead, follow, and learn within the life of the Church.

VII.1. Discipleship as the Formation of Receptive Capacity

When discipleship is approached through the lens of formational hearing, its primary aim shifts from the acquisition of information to the cultivation of receptive capacity. Discipleship is no longer defined chiefly by how much one knows, affirms, or performs, but by how one learns to attend, wait, and remain available under the Word. Attentiveness, patience, and availability become central marks of maturity, not as dispositions opposed to action, but as conditions that make faithful action possible.⁹⁵

⁹³ M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000), 12-18.

⁹⁴ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 1-25.

⁹⁵ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 25-44.

This understanding reframes discipleship as a long-term formation of perception and desire rather than a sequence of instructional milestones. Over time, the disciple is shaped in how they notice reality, interpret experience, and respond to God's address. Such formation unfolds gradually through repeated exposure to Scripture, preaching, prayer, and communal life, particularly where these practices resist immediacy and allow space for unresolved meaning to remain. Growth is evidenced less by certainty and speed than by an increased capacity to stay engaged when clarity is delayed.⁹⁶

Within this framework, maturity is marked by a growing ability to remain with tension, ambiguity, and resistance without disengaging or rushing toward resolution. The disciple learns to tolerate dissonance as a faithful posture, trusting that the Word continues to work even when understanding is partial or unsettled. Resistance is no longer treated solely as a problem to be overcome, but as a signal that deeper layers of identity and attachment are being addressed. Such endurance reflects not stagnation, but openness to transformation at structural levels of the self.⁹⁷

Stillness plays a crucial role in retraining desire away from control and toward trust. As a formative discipline, stillness interrupts habitual patterns of grasping, managing, and securing outcomes. It teaches the disciple to relinquish the need to master meaning or accelerate growth, cultivating instead a willingness to be addressed over time. Through stillness, desire is slowly reoriented, no longer organized around certainty and control, but around availability and consent to God's ongoing work.⁹⁸

Understood in this way, discipleship becomes the patient formation of a people capable of hearing. Instruction retains its place, but it is situated within a broader ecology that shapes posture and sustains receptivity. The measure of growth is not how quickly conclusions are reached, but how deeply the disciple can remain present to the Word as it questions, unsettles, and renews them across the long arc of faithful life.

⁹⁶ Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 160–181.

⁹⁷ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 274–297.

⁹⁸ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 55–79.

VII.2. Hearing as an Active Responsibility of the Disciple

Formational hearing reframes listening to Scripture and sermons as an active and demanding responsibility rather than a passive spiritual posture. To hear faithfully is not simply to be present or agreeable, but to participate intentionally in a process that stretches the hearer's existing capacities for meaning-making. Hearing, in this sense, is developmental work. It requires effort, discipline, and a willingness to be addressed at levels that may unsettle established identities, assumptions, and patterns of desire.⁹⁹

Hearing Scripture and sermons as a participatory practice involves recognizing that formation does not happen to the hearer without their involvement. The hearer bears responsibility for how they attend, what postures they adopt, and how they respond over time. This responsibility includes cultivating attentiveness, resisting distraction, and remaining present when the Word confronts resistance or confusion. Participation is expressed not through mastery or immediate assent, but through sustained openness to being shaped.¹⁰⁰

A central dimension of this responsibility is the recognition and resistance of instrumental listening postures. Hearers are often tempted to approach Scripture and preaching as resources to be evaluated, applied, or consumed according to personal needs or expectations. Such postures may feel active, yet they subtly place the hearer in control of the encounter. Formational hearing requires the discipline of noticing these tendencies and intentionally relinquishing them, allowing the Word to address the hearer on its own terms.¹⁰¹

Maturity, within this framework, is marked by an increasing capacity to remain under the Word without demanding premature resolution. Rather than seeking immediate clarity, reassurance, or application, the mature hearer learns to dwell with what resists understanding. This capacity reflects growth not only in patience, but in trust. The hearer trusts that formation unfolds over time and that unresolved meaning can continue to work beneath conscious awareness.¹⁰²

Such hearing is neither passive nor comfortable. It involves the courage to remain exposed, the humility to resist control, and the perseverance to stay

⁹⁹ Jan-Martijn Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 29–56.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 175–201.

¹⁰¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 108–125.

¹⁰² Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 45–72.

engaged when transformation is slow or invisible. By assuming responsibility for how they hear, disciples participate actively in their own formation. In doing so, they embody a form of faithfulness that honors the agency of the Word and the ongoing work of the Spirit, allowing hearing itself to become a site of genuine transformation.

VII.3. Participatory Hearing and Communal Responsibility

If formational hearing is to shape the life of the Church, it must be understood as a shared and participatory practice rather than a consumptive one. Discipleship is not sustained by individuals privately extracting meaning from Scripture or sermons, but by a community learning together how to remain under the Word. Hearing, therefore, is never merely personal. It is an ecclesial act that implicates the whole body over time.¹⁰³

Reframed in this way, hearing Scripture and sermons becomes a shared spiritual practice that requires mutual attentiveness. The posture with which individuals listen affects not only their own formation but the communal environment in which others are formed. Attentive presence, patience with unresolved meaning, and restraint in judgment contribute to a culture that can hold tension faithfully. Conversely, habits of evaluation, impatience, or demand for immediate clarity shape the community toward consumption and closure.¹⁰⁴

Over time, shared practices of hearing give rise to communal norms. Communities learn, often implicitly, what kinds of listening are valued and rewarded. Where patience, silence, and sustained engagement are honored, hearers are supported in remaining present to what unsettles or resists resolution. Where immediacy, certainty, or productivity dominate, hearers are subtly trained to treat Scripture and sermons as products to be consumed or assessed. These norms exert powerful formative pressure, shaping expectations long before conscious reflection occurs.¹⁰⁵

For this reason, the community bears responsibility to resist consumer and spectator postures. Hearing that is reduced to preference, critique, or passive reception undermines the shared work of formation. Communities committed to formational hearing must therefore cultivate practices that slow attention, normalize silence, and protect space for dwelling. Such practices do not eliminate

¹⁰³ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 132–148.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 149–169.

¹⁰⁵ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 19–34.

discernment or action, but situate them downstream from attentive presence rather than immediate reaction.¹⁰⁶

Participatory hearing, sustained over time, shapes ecclesial culture in profound ways. It forms communities capable of patience, generosity, and trust, communities that can bear disagreement and ambiguity without fragmentation. As the Church learns to listen together, it is gradually reoriented away from mastery and toward availability, away from control and toward consent. In this shared labor of hearing, formation becomes not the achievement of individuals, but the fruit of a community learning how to remain faithfully under the Word together.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement*, 201–230.

¹⁰⁷ Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 73–90.

VIII. Conclusion: Recovering the Courage to Be Addressed

The argument advanced throughout this paper has sought to recover a vision of Christian formation rooted not in mastery, efficiency, or outcome management, but in the courage to be addressed. At the heart of formational hearing lies a fundamental reorientation of posture. Hearing Scripture and sermons faithfully requires relinquishing control, tolerating uncertainty, and remaining present to a Word that exceeds our categories and resists our attempts at resolution. What is at stake is not a refinement of technique, but a conversion of attentiveness.¹⁰⁸

Hearing, in this sense, is best understood as availability rather than achievement. The temptation to approach Scripture and preaching as accomplishments to be attained, insights to be secured, or conclusions to be reached reflects a deeper desire for certainty and control. Formational hearing calls this desire into question. Faithfulness is reframed not as possessing clarity or confidence, but as sustaining attentiveness over time. The mature hearer is not the one who resolves tension most quickly, but the one who can remain present when resolution is delayed.¹⁰⁹

This reframing requires letting go of mastery as the primary marker of faith. Certainty and competence, while valuable, are no longer treated as ends in themselves. Instead, the capacity to listen, to wait, and to remain open becomes a sign of spiritual maturity. Faithfulness is expressed through attentiveness rather than achievement, through consent rather than control. In this way, hearing becomes an ongoing posture of life rather than a discrete spiritual task.¹¹⁰

Stillness emerges within this vision not merely as a personal discipline, but as a form of ecclesial witness. In an accelerated and distracted age, the Church's willingness to wait, listen, and refrain from immediate closure becomes a countercultural act. Stillness testifies to trust in God's agency rather than in human management. It bears witness to a conviction that formation cannot be rushed without being distorted.¹¹¹

As a community that practices stillness, the Church embodies an alternative imagination of time and faithfulness. Silence, patience, and sustained attention

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 130–152.

¹¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 155–174.

¹¹¹ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 135–158.

signal that transformation unfolds gradually and often invisibly. By resisting the pressure to produce immediate results, the Church offers a living critique of cultural patterns that equate value with speed and effectiveness. In its shared posture of waiting and listening, the Church proclaims trust in the Spirit's ongoing work.¹¹²

Such trust necessarily commits the Church to an open-ended understanding of formation. Formation is not a project to be completed, nor a state to be achieved, but a lifelong process of being addressed, questioned, and renewed. To remain under the Word is to accept that formation is never finished. Each encounter with Scripture and preaching reopens the possibility of further reorientation, deeper surrender, and renewed faithfulness.¹¹³

This open-endedness demands patience and humility. It requires resisting the desire for closure that would insulate the self or the community from further transformation. Yet it is precisely this unfinished character of formation that sustains hope. Trusting God's work beyond immediate results allows the Church to remain faithful without anxiety, attentive without control, and expectant without demanding outcomes.¹¹⁴

Recovering the courage to be addressed, then, is not a retreat from action or responsibility. It is a commitment to remain available to a Word that continues to speak, disturb, and heal across time. In choosing attentiveness over mastery, stillness over speed, and trust over control, the Church positions itself once again as a people who listen. In that listening, formation unfolds, not as an achievement to be secured, but as a gift continually received.¹¹⁵

¹¹² James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 187–208.

¹¹³ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 167–192.

¹¹⁴ Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 283–300.

¹¹⁵ Jan-Martijn Pleijzier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 231–252.