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Goals and Information Behavior in Religious Sermons

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Abstract

This study utilized Steven R. Wilson's (1999) cognitive rules model to analyze persuasion goals in American religious sermons that address obligation situations as well as the information used to support these goals. We coded a purposive sample of thirty sermons that were given in 2013 and 2014, gathered from an extensive sermon database, for evidence of goals and information use. Qualitative content analysis of these sermons revealed rich descriptions of several types of pastors based on their use of persuasion goals in addressing each topic. Analysis supports the claim that the activation of a goal likely occurs after the selection of sermon topic and is strongly affected by that topic. Analysis also found that the Bible was used as an information source in a larger number of sermons than other sources but accounted for a smaller percentage of the total sermon text, possibly an indication that the Bible needs less explanation, as it represents a shared information source that congregants are expected to know already.

The religious sermon in the United States is a means of persuasion and information dissemination. This two-sided goal is noted by Chapell (2005), who argued that the pastor's role in spiritual persuasion is (1) to maintain a powerful ethos—or personal character—to advance the persuasive power of the sermon as a rhetorical act and (2) to relay biblical information that is inherently persuasive.

Many scholars agree that the role of the sermon is primarily to persuade (Carrell 2009; Cunningham 1991). However, many individuals in religious circles prefer the word *transformation* to avoid the negative connotations that are associated with the word *persuasion* (Carrell 2009). Cunningham (1991) argued that theology is inherently partisan and therefore its goal is always to persuade.

The sermon also disseminates a wide array of information from the Bible and many other sources. Buchko, Buchko, and Meyer (2012: 690) argue that the sermon is a pastor's "opportunity to present information to the congregants that [is] seen as vital to their spiritual growth and development." Several studies have emphasized the importance of pastors in relaying health information (e.g., Campbell et al. 2007; Stewart 2012). Campbell and colleagues (2007) found that the success of church-based health promotion was helped in large part by a pastor supporting it with information in a sermon. Stewart (2012) noted that for African-American communities, pastors were important sources of information in the understanding of HIV support.

In this study, we seek to provide a deeper understanding of both the persuasive and informative functions of religious sermons. Given the importance of the religious sermon as a communication medium and the diversity of information that is embedded within it, the religious sermon represents a phenomenon that is uniquely situated for analysis of the combination of communication and information behavior. Even conservative estimates indicate that approximately 25 percent of Americans attend church weekly (Brenner 2011). Therefore an analysis of the persuasive goals of these sermons can provide insights into the information that a large number of Americans consume every week.

THE SERMON AS QUASI-INTERPERSONAL

In this study, we utilized Steven R. Wilson's (1990) model of interaction goals. Although this model is one of interpersonal dyads, it is applicable to the current research on sermons given by pastors. Berger (2005) argues that researchers must expand their definition of the term *interpersonal communication*. Ackerson and Viswa-nath (2009) point out that this type of communication occurs in a variety of realms, from dyads to entire organizations. Pastors interact with congregants at least every Sunday and usually during the week as well. Thus although the sermon is an example of public discourse, it is much more than that. It involves the people, relationships, prior events, and feedback that are present in interpersonal

communication. Sometimes the feedback from a congregation is immediate, such as the shouting of "Amen!" or "Praise God!" Sometimes it occurs after the sermon, in more intimate settings. Either way, the sermon itself is a response to the congregation and must take into account feedback and relationships. According to Cappella (1987: 189), "all encounters that are interactions are interpersonal." Therefore the sermon can be analyzed as an interpersonal phenomenon as it relates to this interactivity that is inherent in sermon content. Because of its unique identity as public discourse with interactive components, we refer to the sermon as quasi-interpersonal.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Wilson's Goal Model

Wilson (1990) outlined a model of interaction goals in interpersonal communications acts that feature obligation situations. These are situations in which one individual in a relationship has failed to meet an expectation of the relationship or of the other individual. Wilson explained how goals are activated by cognitive rules. Goals are what an individual is trying to achieve in a communication act within an obligation situation. These goals take into account a number of purposes and are formed when an individual has the requisite experience and knowledge. Thus the goals are developed somewhat subconsciously as the activation of cognitive networks within an individual's long-term memory (Burgoon, Berger, and Waldron 2000). The goals in any one interpersonal communication act could be numerous. These goals are affected by both primary and secondary goals of the individual as well as the larger social context in which the interaction occurs. As outlined by Wilson (1990), these goals include the following:

- *Compliance goals*: In the current study, this describes the pastor's goal of persuading a congregation to fulfill an obligation.
- *Supporting goals*: In the current study, this describes the pastor's goal of maintaining the relationship with the congregation.
- *Attacking goals*: In the current study, this describes the pastor's goal of threatening the congregation into compliance.
- *Image goals*: In the current study, this describes the pastor's goal of maintaining a certain perception of himself or herself by the congregation.
- *Account-seeking goals*: In the current study, this describes the pastor's goal of understanding why a congregation failed to meet an obligation.

Cognitive rules direct how a goal is activated, and this activation is based on a number of context-specific variables. These variables include the fit between goal

and situation. Once a cognitive rule has been activated to a certain threshold, a goal is formed for that interaction. Wilson's (1990) model sought to account for this process of goal activation, that is, asking the question "How is knowledge about a goal activated?"

In our research, we applied Wilson's (1990) model to sermons, asking this same question about goal activation. However, we analyzed how topics of obligation situations—for example, tithing—affect goal activation. Thus the topic itself serves as a means of encapsulating and providing the defining parameters for what the obligation situation is. Because of the purposeful design of the sermon, we argue that it provides insights into the situational variables that were noted in Wilson's model. These obligation situations are numerous but include any topic that addresses a congregation's failure to meet an expectation of the pastor. This could include actual failures or the perceived possibility of such failure.

Because the current research is exploratory and cannot analyze every obligation topic, we limited the topics for analysis to tithing, servanthood, and Christian practice. Tithing includes calls to give financially to the church; servanthood includes calls to increased volunteer efforts and civic engagement; and Christian practice includes calls to increased personal devotion and prayer.

> *Research Question 1*: Are patterns in obligation goals present in a given sermon and in that sermon's obligation topic?

Attribution

If no patterns are found, this may be attributable to a lack of clarity about why a congregation failed to meet a particular obligation. Wilson (1990) defined attribution as the assumption of cause or intent for the failed obligation. Pastors may view a particular topic from the viewpoint of an external danger. For instance, the attribution of failure for not tithing could be external, blamed on economic situations that are not under the control of congregants. However, the attribution of failure for servanthood could be internal, blamed on the congregants' lack of commitment. Kelley (1967) argued that when trying to attribute intent, individuals look at consistency of the behavior, consensus, and distinctiveness. Thus if a congregation usually tithes well, the pastor may be less likely to hold the congregation accountable for failures in tithing, instead blaming external causes such as economic turmoil.

Of particular importance to our study are supporting, attacking, and image goals. Wilson (1990) found that variance in the use of attacking or supporting goals was greater when it was less clear where blame should be placed for the failed obligation (i.e., on internal or external causes). Thus if a pastor has a clear sense that the failed obligation is a result of the congregants' own internal failure

and is done intentionally, the pastor may be less likely to form supporting goals. When fault is uncertain, however, the formation of goals may be attributable to other factors.

> *Research Question 2*: Are certain topics assumed to be more or less intentional, thereby increasing or decreasing the use of supporting goals?

Sources of Information

Pastors use different types of information in a sermon to make a point or to persuade congregants. This study adds to Wilson's (1990) analysis of goals by looking at patterns in types of information that are used to achieve these goals. Three types of information are of particular importance for our purposes: personal stories, expert references, and the Bible.

Personal stories include a pastor's retelling of an event from his or her life. Rowland (2009) argues that stories serve the rhetorical function of creating a connection between the audience and story characters. Springboard stories can alter entire organizational cultures as employees relate to the characters and events (Denning 2001). This persuasive function of stories tends to rely more on the story's ability to create an identification with audience members than on the internal characteristics of the story itself. "More often than not, the less sophisticated story remains entrenched—the unschooled mind triumphs" (Gardner 2011: 47).

Expert references include a pastor's referring to an external book or known expert to provide evidence for his or her arguments. Hornikx (2008) argues that the power of expert information depends on the expert's credibility, reliability, and relevance to the argument. Pointing to an expert that meets these criteria can enhance the credibility of the pastor's argument. Winter and Kramer (2014) found that the credibility of a journalistic source, in terms of reputation, was an important factor in its selection as an information source for parents about violence in the media. Similarly, congregants may be more likely to put sermon information to use if it has a connection to a reputable source.

Pastors use the Bible frequently throughout their sermons. The Bible is often read systematically at various times throughout the church service. However, we analyzed the use of the Bible as a direct source of evidence in trying to make a persuasive argument about a particular topic. The use of the Bible as an information source combines the identification of the story, as congregants are often familiar with the references, with the expertise function, as the Bible is considered the final authority for most Christian churches.

Research Question 3: What connections, if any, exist between the goals formed by a pastor and the information that is used to achieve these goals? How might this be explained?

METHOD

Content Analysis

We applied qualitative content analysis to sermon text. The goal of content analysis is to take large segments of text and narrow them into a small number of important, related categories (Elo and Kyngas 2008). Because we were using Wilson's (1990) model, we took a deductive approach to the analysis of the category of *goals* and *attribution*. However, following the methodology outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), we made an effort to ensure that concepts that were not noted in the literature would still emerge. The categories of *topic* and *information source* were arrived at inductively after we read through the sermons. We added these inductive categories to the established categories.

Qualitative content analysis allows for rich analysis and description of sermon text. Graneheim and Lundman (2003) argue that the analysis of text is always interpretive and subjective to some degree. A qualitative approach to content analysis acknowledges the subjectivity of this process and attempts to account for it by a detailed description of coding categories, a transparent description of method, and a sufficient amount of data (Morrow 2005). The use of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) coding method ensures that the analysis remains qualitative to account for the nuances of sermon text.

Coding

We coded sermons in three phases, following the model outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Sermons were first copied into Nvivo (a data analysis software program) for coding. At first, we coded only five sermons. This trial coding allowed for a reflection of the complete coding process. The process uncovered inadequacies in the concepts and technique as well as the best strategies for importing and coding sermons. Once the coding process had been established, we added more sermons. Sermons were continually added until a category was saturated with relevant examples.

The full set of sermons was analyzed and broken down into study-relevant concepts. We further analyzed these initial coding concepts in a second coding phase for relationships among concepts. A final coding phase was conducted to look for overarching themes and categories that could account for more of the data. Final categories included obligation topic, attribution, information source,

and goal. Further coding was done in the demographic categories of gender, religious denomination, and geographic region. These final categories show additions to the initial concepts noted by Wilson (1990), establishing the credibility of the coding methodology in that it was not restricted by previous findings.

Obligation Topics

Obligation topics included Christian practice, tithing, and servanthood. Christian practice included the obligation for increased community and fellowship; an increase in time set aside for personal Bible reading, prayer, and devotion; nonconformity to societal behavioral patterns; and action in social justice causes. Tithing included the obligation to give back financially to the church some of what God had given to congregants. Servanthood included the obligation to volunteer in conjunction with both church efforts and external community organizations.

Unit of Analysis

Rather than analyzing by words or entire sermons, Kassarjian (1977) suggests that themes are the most useful units of analysis. Because sermons are long pieces of discourse, they commonly show evidence of multiple goals and use a number of different sources. We categorized every word in the sampled sermons. Because we were interested in how goals lined up with information sources and topics, the unit of analysis was the individual instance of a category or theme rather than the entire sermon. Therefore individual instances were the unit of analysis. This allowed us to notice patterns in a larger sample of goals than would be possible if we categorized entire sermons according to a single goal. In the case of sermon topics, the entire sermon tended to be about a single theme, thus allowing us to categorize the entire sermon according a single topic. In a few sermons, other topics were introduced, but this was rare.

Sample

We selected sermon texts for analysis from a search of the extensive sermon database collected and maintained by the Center for the Study of Information and Religion (CSIR) at Kent State University. The CSIR database indexes more than 14,000 full-text sermons prepared and delivered by more than 200 clergy members from a variety of Christian Protestant denominations since 2008. A search request for sermons that were prepared and delivered in the years 2013 and 2014 and contained one or more keywords related to obligation topics such as tithing, volunteering, or servanthood or to the scripture passages John 17:1–26 or Romans 12:2 returned ninety-two sermon texts.

From these ninety-two sermons, we added sermons to Nvivo on the basis of obligation topic. Sermons that were based on John 17:1–26 did not contain a considerable amount of persuasive speech, so we eliminated them from the sample unless they specifically addressed one of the other obligation topics. Other sermons only minimally addressed one of the obligation topics and were therefore eliminated from the sample. This left forty-seven sermons in the sample. We tried to ensure that an approximately equal number of sermons addressing each topic were coded. Throughout the coding, we made note of patterns and possible findings of significance, and we added sermons to Nvivo for coding as new ideas continued to form. At some point in any qualitative analysis, categories become saturated with data in such a way that "further data gathering and analysis add little new to the conceptualization" (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 263). This is the point at which, as Miles and Huberman (1994: 74) note, there is "no significantly new explanation for data." We coded thirty sermons before reaching this point of saturation. The dimensions of each category were fully developed, and nothing new was noted.

Of the thirty sermons in the final sample, nineteen were given by male pastors, and eleven were given by female pastors. The earliest sermon was given in January 2013; the latest sermon was given in April 2014. The following denominations were represented: United Methodist Church (six sermons), Mennonite (five sermons), Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (four sermons), Disciples of Christ (three sermons), Presbyterian Church USA (three sermons), Episcopal (two sermons), Presbyterian (two sermons), Southern Baptist Convention (one sermon), Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (one sermon), Lutheran World Federation (one sermon), United Church of Christ (one sermon), and unaffiliated (one sermon). Of the thirty sermons, twelve were about Christian practice, eleven were about servanthood, and eleven were about tithing. Within these sermons, we found 427 separate instances of the units of analysis. This result indicates the depth of the coding process. Table 1 provides a numerical breakdown of these instances.

**Table 1: A Numerical Breakdown of Coded Instances of Goals,
Attribution, and Information Source in 30 Sermons**

Goals		Attribution		Information Source	
Attacking:	49 instances	External:	25 instances	Bible:	96 instances
Image:	57 instances	Internal:	17 instances	Expert:	37 instances
Supporting:	97 instances			Story:	49 instances

RESULTS

Research Question 1: Goals and Topics

Research Question 1 asked whether patterns in obligation goals were present in a given sermon and in that sermon's obligation topic. To answer this, we analyzed the sample for the alignment of instances of each topic and each goal. Table 2 shows a numerical breakdown of coded instances in which a particular persuasion goal coincided with a particular obligation topic. When discussing the topic of Christian practice, pastors were more likely to use supporting goals (forty-six instances) than either attacking goals (fourteen instances) or image goals (ten instances). When discussing the topic of tithing, pastors were somewhat less likely to use image goals (twenty-six instances) than either supporting goals (thirty-one instances) or attacking goals (thirty instances). However, we noticed no clear pattern. When discussing the topic of servanthood, pastors were much more likely to use image goals (fifteen instances) or supporting goals (twenty instances) than attacking goals (eleven instances).

Table 2: A Numerical Breakdown of Coded Instances
When a Particular Persuasion Goal Coincided
with a Particular Obligation Topic

Obligation Topic	Goals		
	Supporting	**Attacking**	**Image**
Christian practice	46 instances	14 instances	10 instances
Tithing	31 instances	30 instances	26 instances
Servanthood	20 instances	11 instances	15 instances

In-depth analysis of the content of each sermon allowed for a rich description of what each instance looks like. This description enabled us to create profiles for the characteristics of certain phenomena in pastoral preaching.

Attacking Goals. Pastors who used attacking goals when addressing the topic of Christian practice fall into the profile of *Judge*. These pastors attacked congregants for their limited devotional life but offered neither support nor a personal example of how to achieve success in this area. One pastor, in reference to those who argue that Christians should not judge, countered that although Christians are not the ultimate judge, they "are definitely to discern between right thoughts and actions and wrong thoughts and actions."

Judges also view certain practices as not optional and as clearly defined for Christians, actions that "every Christian needs to practice in order to be a fully

devoted follower of Jesus Christ." When discussing the need to read the Bible, one pastor noted, "These verses and others like them teach that the Holy Spirit works through the Word of God. There are no verses that tell of any other way to receive the Holy Spirit."

When addressing servanthood, pastors with attacking goals become *task managers*. Task managers are bluntly concerned with achievement of a volunteer effort and give no extra attention to providing support or elevating themselves as exemplars. One pastor referred to congregants "grumbling and complaining" about the church's efforts to provide shelter for the homeless.

Task managers get directly to the point: "We need greeters, readers, ushers, musicians, communion servers, people to help with the projection, people to help count the offering, people to help plan worship, people who are artistically gifted to help decorate the sanctuary. There are lots of things that need to be done." Task managers see fulfillment of volunteer obligations as the highest priority. As one pastor noted, "If you're not willing to do whatever is needed and whenever you are needed, I suggest that you may not really be committed to serving God."

When addressing tithing, pastors with attacking goals become *survivalists*. Survivalists are concerned primarily with financial support, not taking time to soften the request for fulfillment of an obligation that many pastors do not enjoy addressing. The discussion of tithing tends to be viewed as one that is done out of necessity. As one pastor said, "I wonder if a part of my reticence [to speak about tithing] has to do with that fact that you folks pay my salary, for which I am very grateful. Talking about financial giving usually ends up sounding like a pitch to give to a budget. Not very exciting!"

Survivalists may make claims about congregants' motives, as one pastor did in discussing money: "[Y]ou don't accumulate things unless you love them." When discussing finances, survivalists bypass congregants' concerns about reputation and point directly to God: "You shouldn't give seeking the approval of the pastor, or the financial secretary or the treasurer. You should give seeking the approval of God."

If the survivalist points to successfully fulfilled obligations, this is done to directly prompt fulfillment from the congregation. One pastor compared his denomination's average financial giving of 1.75 percent of income with another denomination that meets in his church on Saturdays: "The first 10% of their offerings is given away outside their church and then the church operates on whatever is given beyond the first 10%." Another pastor remarked that although many Americans are blessed with tremendous financial resources, "[s]ome of the richest feasts I've had were served up by some of the poorest people I've known."

Image Goals. All pastors who used image goals tended to point to God as the one to whom the obligation is owed, maintaining their own image by pointing away

from themselves. One pastor, addressing Christian practice, claimed that "Jesus said something in today's Gospel that makes people angry." Pastors with image goals approach troubling topics as matters that they are forced by God or the Bible to address. In speaking on the importance of consistent devotions, one pastor said, "Don't get angry at me. I am just telling you what Jesus said." When emphasizing the importance of servanthood, these pastors may preface their words by pointing to God: "I warn you that this passage is not for the faint of heart, but if you're serious about growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ, you need to pay attention to His teaching here about being a servant." When discussing the obligation to tithe, one pastor pointed out that "Jesus instructs his followers to sell everything and give their money to the poor."

Pastors who used image goals when addressing the topic of Christian practice fall into the profile of *life coach.* Life coaches help congregants through the process of fulfilling obligations in Christian practice, yet their words are not fully supportive in terms of exact steps needed to fulfill the obligation. Rather, the assistance is again directed to God as pastors tell congregants to look to God for support: "There are moral standards and God is clear on them. And where he is not, spend time with him and ask the Holy Spirit if it is something you need to be concerned with."

When addressing servanthood, pastors with image goals become *PR assistants.* PR assistants deflect the source of the obligation toward God to maintain their image, but this is done as a retelling of what God requires of congregants in their lives outside of the church: "Jesus responded with condemnation to those who abused and neglected the poor." Whereas the life coach addresses the internal lives of congregants, the PR assistant addresses their external practices of volunteerism: "We must be willing to be who we were created to be and to be vulnerable—to be tasted and seen."

When addressing tithing, pastors with image goals become *financial assistants.* Again, the "assistant" title is a means of setting the pastor apart as a conduit for what God says rather than being the direct source of the obligation. Financial assistants offer suggestions on how to handle personal finances. Noting the difficulty of tithing, one pastor said, "I think if you've never given away 1% or 2% starting at 10% can feel completely overwhelming." She encouraged her congregation to "keep working at it." Another pastor suggested that overcoming consumerism would help to increase one's tithing: "[A consumerist] is always needing more in order to be happy: a new TV, new car, renovated kitchen, new smart phone, and on and on and on." Some financial assistants are very specific: "At the end of May, [the church] has received about $48,400 and we have spent $48,800, which means that we have spent about $400 more than we have received."

More than life coaches or PR assistants, financial assistants tended to feel the need to reassure their congregants that the pastors themselves were fulfilling the

obligations they ask others to uphold. This is a very direct image goal. One pastor noted that he gives to a few charities but that "more than a tithe of my income is committed to this place because of what we all do collectively." Another pastor said that "month after month," her tithing grounded her. Yet another pastor shared that his family gives 5 percent to the congregation and another 5 percent to other charities. He referred to this as the "modern tithe."

Supporting Goals. All categories in which a pastor used supporting goals involve an understanding on the part of the pastor of how difficult an obligation can be to fulfill. However, the topics lend themselves to different types of support. Pastors who used supporting goals when addressing the topic of Christian practice fall into the profile of *best friend*. These pastors understand how difficult it is to fulfill the obligations of devotions and prayer: "Now I'll admit that praying in public, and maybe even in private, is not the most comfortable thing for most people to do."

Pastors who used supporting goals when addressing the topic of servanthood fall into the profile of *co-worker*. These pastors place themselves in the same position as the congregants, as one of them. The congregant and pastor are working on the same issues, trying to support each other in the same business of volunteering and servanthood. Addressing the difficulty of being active in volunteer work, one pastor admitted, "After a hard day of work, it's tempting to just collapse on the couch with a drink."

Whereas the best friend helps congregants to deal with the obligations of Christian practice that are done in private, the co-worker stands alongside congregants to help them deal with externally viewable obligations. This can involve showing congregants that fulfilling the obligation to volunteer is possible and rewarding. Several pastors pointed out examples of how members of their churches were volunteering; one pastor provided "[t]hree examples of how [we] are living Jesus' challenge." Best friends understand that this cannot be done alone: "Let the world see how live and hear your message, not because you're independently living such an upright and different life, but because God is living and working through you."

Pastors who used supporting goals when addressing the topic of tithing fall into the profile of the *spouse*. A spouse is best able to understand the difficulties of financial issues, as the partners work on them together. These issues tend to be more intimate than Christian practice or servanthood. They tend to resemble conversations that one might have with a spouse and often reveal vulnerabilities in the pastor. One pastor discussed the difficulties of money: "When I get a new electronic device, I am happy. I enjoy having technology. I enjoy having a nice car. I enjoy dining out." Another pastor lamented, "That big screen called to me,

but I walked on to the checkout with my little basket of items. I wanted it though, and I wished I had it."

Research Question 2: Topics and Attribution

Research Question 2 asked whether there are certain topics that are assumed to be more or less intentional, thereby increasing or decreasing the use of supporting goals. To answer this, we analyzed the coding for instances of external or internal attribution in discussing one of the three obligation topics. Table 3 shows a numerical breakdown of how obligation topics coincided with each type of attribution. Individual pastors were consistent in their attribution throughout the sermon; therefore counts are given for entire sermons rather than for instances. Because not all sermons showed a clear attribution, the total may be less than the final sample number.

**Table 3: A Numerical Breakdown of How Whole
Sermons with a Certain Obligation Topic Coincided
with External and Internal Attribution**

Obligation Topic	Attribution	
	External	**Internal**
Christian practice	5 sermons	3 sermons
Tithing	7 sermons	3 sermons
Servanthood	4 sermons	3 sermons

Attribution is the notion of where blame is placed for a failed obligation: either internally on the individual or externally on some cause that is outside of the individual's control. It is important to note that the pastor in each case was not necessarily citing evidence of failure; rather, the pastor was discussing possible reasons for failure—or evidence of past failures in other contexts—to help the congregants avoid failure.

Pastors were more likely to attribute the failure to complete Christian practice obligations to external factors (five sermons) than to internal factors (three sermons). Pastors were also more likely to attribute the failure to complete tithing obligations to external factors (seven sermons) than to internal factors (three sermons). However, attribution was not clear with failure of servanthood, being split between external factors (four sermons) and internal factors (three sermons).

The pastoral profiles that we described can be connected to external and internal attribution. The judge, the survivalist, and the task manager tend to attribute failed obligations to internal causes. One pastor blamed failed servanthood on laziness: "A volunteer might serve when it is convenient, but a servant serves out of

commitment and a sense of duty—whether it's convenient or not." Another pastor blamed servanthood failure on internal will: "But sometimes, our will, what we want, is different from what God wants for us." Another pastor blamed financial failures on lack of self-control: "This is how many people in world operate today. They don't take the time to ask if they can afford something. Instead they simply ask themselves if they want it." These profiles are also the ones that utilize attacking goals. Thus attacking goals are linked with an assumption that failed obligation is a fault of the person rather than the result of some external circumstance.

The PR assistant, best friend, financial assistant, co-worker, and spouse tend to attribute failed obligations to external causes. Often, the external cause is based on sin or an anti-Christian society. According to one pastor, "The world throws all kinds of stuff at us, and we have to constantly keep our hearts and minds on Christ and listen to the Holy Spirit to know what is of this world and what is of heaven." When speaking of tithing, one pastor said, "It is about resisting the forces in this world who clamor for our attention, day after day, begging us to buy into the myth of scarcity." These profiles are also the ones that utilize supporting goals. Thus supporting and image goals are linked with an assumption that failed obligation is the fault of an unavoidable external circumstance.

Research Question 3: Goals and Information

Research Question 3 asked what connections might exist between a pastor's goals and the information that the pastor uses to achieve these goals. Table 4 shows how often an information source was used when a pastor's sermon showed evidence of one of the three obligation goals. In the use of image goals, pastors tended to refer to the Bible as an information source (sixteen sermons) more often than they referred to experts (eight sermons) or personal stories (nine sermons). In the use of attacking goals, expert information (nine sermons) and the Bible (ten sermons) were used in a similar number of sermons. However, expert information sources accounted for 17 percent of the total sermon text in each sermon in which it was mentioned. The Bible, by contrast, accounted for only 5 percent of each sermon in which it was mentioned. Thus when engaged in attacking goals, pastors tended to use the Bible frequently but usually as a small, passing reference. Similarly, in the use of supporting goals, although the Bible (fifteen sermons) was used more often than experts (eight sermons) or stories (ten sermons), the Bible accounted for only 8 percent of the total sermon text in each sermon in which it was mentioned. This is less than the coverage of experts (10 percent) and stories (18 percent). Thus these percentages tend to provide a more accurate description of information use.

**Table 4: A Numerical Breakdown of How Whole Sermons
with a Certain Obligation Topic Coincided with
External and Internal Attribution**

Information Source	Obligation Goal		
	Supporting	**Image**	**Attacking**
Bible	15 sermons	16 sermons	10 sermons
Experts	8 sermons	8 sermons	9 sermons
Personal stories	10 sermons	9 sermons	6 sermons

DISCUSSION

Goals and Topics

The analysis of Research Question 1 provided detailed descriptions of types of pastors. The increased use of supporting goals in discussing Christian practice obligations, such as devotions or prayer, may reveal the understanding shared by pastor and congregants of the difficulty of such obligations. Servanthood topics included more instances of image goals in conjunction with supporting goals. This indicates that servanthood is not only difficult—as indicated by the use of supporting goals—but also a more assumed part of the Christian life than are devotions or prayer. The assumption that servanthood is an obligation that will be fulfilled could be a factor in why pastors feel the need to either show that they themselves fulfill the obligation or show that the obligation comes from God or the Bible as an ultimate obligation rather than from the pastor as a supportive suggestion.

Topics and Attribution

Wilson (1990) hypothesized that attacking goals are more likely to be used when attribution is unclear. In our study, attribution was not clear when pastors addressed the topic of servanthood, being split between external and internal factors. However, rather than noticing an increase in attacking goals when pastors discussed servanthood, we found that pastors were decidedly less likely to use them. A possible explanation is that all pastors in this sample tended to use attacking goals rarely. The religious sermon context is more concerned with either supporting congregants in their obligations or maintaining the congregants' perception of the pastor when he or she discusses congregant obligations. As a departure from a typical interpersonal encounter, much of this is likely to be the case because pastors consider themselves to have the same obligations and failures as the congregants themselves, thus minimizing the perceived need for attacking goals. Such an

identification would not occur in the situation of a failure to repay a loan, as Wilson noted. In the case of a religious sermon, the party who is not receiving the loan payment is neither the congregants nor the pastor but God. Thus both pastor and congregants acknowledge a failed obligation to the same universal party.

Goals and Information

The coding of the Bible as an information source in the current study included both a reading of the verse and the explication of the verse and further reference to that source in defense of an argument. So it interesting that the Bible was used in more sermons than were experts and personal stories but accounted for a smaller percentage of the total sermon text. It could be that stories simply take longer to tell, whereas Bible verses are already prepared. It could be that Bible verses need little explanation information because the Bible is a common information source among pastor and congregants. It could also be that the primary tool of a pastor's argument is expert and personal story information but the pastor feels that congregants would reject the entire argument without at least a passing reference to the Bible. The Bible reference itself may provide a reassurance to congregants that the argument is valid, requiring little further explanation. Stories and expert information, by contrast, need justification for their use in a sermon.

Connection with the Literature

In this study, we sought to answer Wilson's (1990) question of how goals are activated. We found patterns in the goals that pastors had when addressing certain topics. Although we cannot state that the topic caused the activation of a goal, it is reasonable to assume that pastors do not decide on a goal and then retrofit a topic to match that goal. Rather, goal activation likely occurs after selection of a topic. On the basis of the predictable patterns that we found, we conclude that these topics had at least some impact on the activation of a goal. This occurred with Christian practice and servanthood topics.

The study adds rich qualitative data to the analysis of goal formation, providing not merely evidence of a pattern but also thick descriptions of each pattern. These descriptions contribute to the study of religious sermons by outlining three primary obligation topics that were found in a randomly selected sample of sermons. These findings can be further explored in other texts to add to a growing understanding of the taxonomy of religious sermons.

Our results also add to the study of goal formation by adding an analysis of information behavior to the understanding of goal formation. Rather than merely showing that a goal was activated, these findings help to answer the question of how the goals are accomplished. The achievement of a goal depends on a number

of variables, but the decision about the information sources that are used to undergird a goal has long been a topic of rhetorical criticism. By providing a new area for the study of interpersonal goal formation—that of the quasi-interpersonal religious sermon—this study combines communication theory with the study of information behavior, providing extended opportunities for investigation in areas in which the two disciplines meet.

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