

Preaching without Notes

Perhaps I am overly opinionated on this topic, but I am convinced that those who preach with few notes or no notes at all tend to connect better with listeners. There are a few manuscript preachers out there who are excellent because they come across as if they are talking to people not paper. However, preaching is primarily a conversational event, not a written or read one. This is why good content poorly communicated will not be heard by the majority of people listening. Poor content effectively communicated will, regrettably, get a hearing. So it makes sense for preachers who have something worth saying about Christ and His kingdom to say it well.

I have rubbed more than a few of my preaching students the wrong way when I have encouraged them to preach with no notes or a slim outline. Public speaking is usually ranked high on the list of human fears. Public speaking without notes, then, elicits an off-the-charts fear. So, why would I ask my students and colleagues to give it a try? Because it can increase our dependence upon God, liberate us from our deepest fears about speaking, facilitate greater thoughtfulness in the development of the sermon's flow, and help us connect with our congregation at a deeper level during the preaching event. Here are a couple of ideas that can assist pastors in preaching without notes:

-Prayer: Prayerfully read and re-read the preaching text. This may seem like an obvious first step, but you'd be surprised how many preachers quickly run to commentaries or internet illustrations without even giving God a chance to speak to them through the text he/she will be proclaiming on Sunday morning. See this step as one that is devotional, one that is aimed at deepening the preacher's connection to the God who calls us to preach. As you read the preaching text, prayerfully ask God three questions: What are you saying to the original audience (i.e., Israelites, Galatians)? What are you saying to me personally? What are you saying to us corporately (congregation, audience)? Take notes as God gives you certain impressions. After this you can check your reflections and questions with a few good commentaries and dictionaries. But let God have the first word since He may want to lead you to a new discovery.

-Pictures: As you consider all the exegetical discoveries, illustrations, and applications that flow out of the biblical text you're proclaiming, think in terms of pictures. Picturesque language will not only help you remember what you want to say but will stick in the minds and hearts of listeners more than vague, propositional language will. As you think of the 7-10 spokes that will form your entire sermon wheel, think in terms of pictures (kind of like I just did in this sentence). I would also encourage you to actually think of the entire message as one big picture. If there is a picturesque metaphor that drives your sermon's main point, it will make the sermon memorable. I recently preached a sermon on being forgiven and being forgiving. I entitled the sermon "Getting and Giving Mulligans." You golfers know what I mean by mulligans, but now so does my entire congregation. When they think of forgiveness they will think of mulligans and when they think of golf or Tiger Woods (a media spectacle these days) they will think of the human hunger for forgiveness. Perhaps you will get to the place in your preaching in which you have pictures to describe the 7-10 parts of your sermon outline. I hope you do, for it will both aid the congregation in remembering what you said and in your ability to preach without notes.

-Placement: Now that you have all the pictures that make up the big picture of your sermon, you are ready to place the pictures in an order that allows for a seamless flow. This is extremely important because a poor thought flow will challenge your ability to preach without notes and

your congregation's ability to remember what you preached. Here is where, I think, lots of preachers drop the ball. I confess that for far too long I neglected prayerful and careful placement of the parts of my sermons. I threw things together haphazardly. As you place the parts try to aim for narrative flow. That is, arrange the parts of the sermon like the flow of a good story: setting, character development, plot/problem, climax, and resolution. The story structure is quite memorable, which is why oral cultures could preserve stories from generation to generation.

-Practice: Once you have all the parts of the sermon in an order that flows, you are ready to practice preaching the message. Go ahead and speak it aloud, slowly and prayerfully. As you're doing this, consider how you want to say certain things. Think about gestures that reinforce what your words are communicating. You may discover through practicing the message that your sermon is too long or too short, that something needs to be cut or added. Practicing the sermon will allow it to stick in your brain so that you can preach without notes. I usually spend about 60-90 minutes prayerfully practicing and reflecting on the message. I do this to allow the sermon to impact me before it "lays a hand" on the congregation.

When you preach without notes you might forget a few things you wanted to say but you will remember the most important pictures within the big picture of your message. Go for it!

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