

2nd Opinion: Six tips for building better sermons

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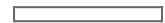
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Every weekend, bold Christians stand up in church and do something many parishioners wish they wouldn't do: They preach.

They stand inside lofty pulpits, behind lecterns or out among the people. Some hold a Bible; some hold a remote control for advancing electronic slides.

Some have spent hours in preparation; others "phone it in" and hope it doesn't show.

It's a strange activity, preaching. Jesus nearly got tossed off a cliff when his first sermon offended his audience. Early preachers Peter and John converted thousands by their preaching—and also got arrested and imprisoned. Stephen was stoned to death after a sermon calling his audience a "stiff-necked people."



Preachers have been chased out of town, burned at the stake, celebrated as heroes and broadcast to audiences numbering in the millions. Preachers also have been endured, scorned, treated to scathing reviews in the parking lot and fired for "meddling."

Over the years, as listening skills and attention spans have changed, sermons have gotten shorter—although some would say not short enough. The 60-minute oration of the 19th century might be a 12-minute homily now. Stories have replaced theological discourse. Some preachers use multimedia tools such as slides, film clips and music to deal with attention deficits.

Preachers traditionally focus on Bible passages being read in worship, although some venture into cultural and moral issues, and many, despite the Internal Revenue Service, tackle political issues. Even the boldest preacher, however, is unlikely to abide by the model set by Jesus, who devoted two-thirds of his teaching time to wealth and power and the need to give both away. Every preacher knows that even the devout tend to stone their prophets.

As one who either preaches or listens to sermons every Sunday, I'd like to offer "Six Tips for Preachers":

- **Show your passion.** People need to see that this matters to you, that you aren't just doing a duty. Show your passion for God. Your faith must be on display. Show your passion for your people, that you genuinely care about them and God's place in their lives.
- **Keep it short.** Long sermons are an irritant. Jesus' parables were invariably short. A few well-chosen words will have more impact than many words. Consider Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address." Short is harder, of course. Short requires focus and discipline.
- **Be bold.** Preaching is about life and death. It isn't idle chatter. So what if your words offend? The gospel is offensive. So were the words of the prophets. God's ways are rarely our ways, and God's standards exceed our own. We must not sell God or our people short by preaching a safe and harmless word.

- **Preach from Scripture to the world.** Hold the Bible in one hand and the world in the other. Each needs and informs the other. The prophets spoke not only to ancient Israel but to our world today. The gospel transformed first-century lives in ways God needed them transformed, and the same happens today. The preacher cannot simply explain Bible passages but also must read and explain people's lives in light of Scripture.
- **Tell stories.** Definitions, wordplays and cleverly connecting the assigned lessons show that the preacher studied Greek and Hebrew and knows theology. But it is stories that connect. Stories build bridges between life and faith. That's why Jesus told stories.
- **Preach about faith and life.** Faith isn't about theories, doctrines, logic or facts. Faith sees God in life, and life in God, and then faith looks beyond what it sees to imagine the "more" of God. Preaching builds a bridge between faith and life. Preaching walks both directions on that bridge and remembers that the point is a journey of discovery.

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