

Preaching: Stand and Deliver

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God chose “the foolishness of preaching” as the preferred instrument for communicating the message of salvation, the Apostle Paul wrote.

But when the time arrives to stand and deliver that message, how does a preacher measure whether it’s an exercise in effectiveness or just plain foolishness?

We don’t always know,” Doyle Sager acknowledged.



How does a preacher measure whether his preaching is an exercise in effectiveness or just plain foolishness?

Preachers can learn a lot by watching body language and facial expressions, as well as listening to honest critiques by trusted friends, said Sager, pastor of First Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Mo.

But ultimately, he added, it comes down to “the witness of the Spirit.”

Something mysterious and wonderful happens when a preacher connects with his listeners—when God uses the words of the preacher to make his word come alive in the hearts of worshippers, several pastors noted.

But sometimes, even the most diligently prepared, best-delivered sermons fall flat—particularly if the preacher doesn’t keep in mind who is sitting in the pews on a given Sunday.

When Bill Shiell moved from Southland Baptist Church in San Angelo to become pastor at First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., he was introduced to an important lesson early. In one of his first messages, as a way of engaging his listeners, he asked for a show of hands from anyone who had worked on a farm.

“In San Angelo, nearly everyone would have responded. Here (in Knoxville), only one hand went up,” he said.

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Context matters, and it takes time for a preacher to learn about the people in a particular congregation and how to communicate with them, Shiehl noted.

“I preached a lot of great San Angelo sermons here that didn’t connect,” he acknowledged, pointing out cultural differences between church members in a small city in rural West Texas and a larger university city in eastern Tennessee. “It takes awhile to preach effectively in a particular place.”

Listeners intuitively will respond to a message that is “in their ZIP code” and tune out one that is not, Shiehl said. “It has to resonate with the people who are in that room at that time.”

Joel Gregory, professor of preaching at Baylor University’s [Truett Theological Seminary](#), affirmed that sentiment.

“All preaching is venue-specific,” he said.

Great preachers most often invest their lives in a “specific community of faith,” Gregory added.

Listeners recognize the authority of the message when they realize the authenticity of the messenger, several preachers noted.

Preaching involves more than communicating information; it involves an invitation into relationship, said Kyle Reese, pastor of Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.

“I believe one cannot be an effective preacher without being active in pastoral care,” said Reese, former pastor of First Baptist Church in San Angelo. “We are preaching a gospel that is always incarnational.”

A pastor who spends all his time cloistered in a study will find it hard to connect with listeners on Sunday morning, but the pastor who walks through life alongside church members typically will find a receptive

audience, said Gary Long, pastor of Willow Meadows Baptist Church in Houston.

“Be a pastor first. Focus on knowing the people,” Long said, when asked what advice he would give to other young pastors.

“Spend more than half your time living with the people and less than half the time working on a message to deliver to them. ... The authority to be heard comes when people know you love them and care for them.”

As he composes his sermons, Long said, he keeps in mind they are intended for “a particular community in a particular season of life.”

When the preacher is an attentive pastor who knows the congregation and the culture of the community in which they live, sermons become relevant to the listeners. But cultural relevance should not be seen as an end in itself, Long noted, pointing out the gospel carries a counter-cultural message.

“Relevance is not our goal. It is just a tool,” he said. “Our goal is not to be relevant to culture. We want to be distinct from culture.”

Effective preaching involves an ongoing conversation between a pastor and a congregation, characterized by mutual love and respect, Sager observed.

“All preaching is dialogical,” he said. “It is a conversation, even if the people are not speaking out loud.”

Sager, Reese and Shiell all noted the value in a preacher being able to make eye contact with listeners and read their body language to know if worshippers are connecting to the sermon. For that reason, they preach without notes or manuscript in hand.

“I find that speaking from memory gives me access to the listener’s world,” Shiell said.

But preaching without notes does not mean preaching without preparation.

Shiell looks at themes about four months in advance and begins planning “the basic plot” of the message two to three months before he delivers it. About two weeks before he preaches a message, he spends serious time studying, and then he typically writes a manuscript, which he memorizes.

“Most people can deal with only one main idea. Sometimes as preachers we try to say too much.”

Reese follows a fairly similar routine, planning in six-week blocks following the lectionary and the Christian calendar. Typically, he likes to preach in a narrative style, developing a plotline that leaves listeners with one main idea they can take from the text.

“Most people can deal with only one main idea,” he explained. “Sometimes as preachers we try to say too much.”

Although Reese and Shiell both prefer a storytelling approach in preaching, they stressed the literary style of the biblical passage—narrative, poetic, didactic or whatever—should shape the sermon. Some Scriptures lend themselves to retelling in narrative, and others demand a verse-by-verse exposition.

“Every sermon has a scaffolding—a framework. Some lend themselves to an exposed skeleton. Most of mine are hidden,” Shiell said. “I believe all of my sermons are expository, but they are not all expositional.”

Every preaching style has both strengths and weaknesses, Gregory observed. A very linear, deductive, expository approach may work best in preaching from the Apostle Paul’s writings and if the listeners are age 35

or older, he noted.

“If done wrong, it can become dull and predictable,” he said. “Done right, it can sustain a longtime pulpit ministry.”

The parables or stories from the Old Testament books of history naturally lend themselves to narrative preaching in its varied forms, he observed.

Young listeners particularly relate well to a well-told story, and they are more open than older worshippers to an inductive style that raises a question, offers a “slice of life” situation and compels listeners to “connect the dots.”

“Done right, it may be the best way to preach to people where there is a high resistance to authority. ... Done right, it sneaks up on people and draws them in,” he said. “The weakness is that it requires a gift of creativity. ... It takes a rare creative gift to do good inductive preaching.”

When the preacher begins by doing serious exegetical work—digging into the biblical text either in the original languages or in several English translations—and then relates the text to a specific people at a particular place, the end result is a biblical sermon, style notwithstanding, Gregory observed. That’s true regardless of the tendency of some preachers to elevate one preaching style over all others.

“We all like to baptize our preferences,” he said.

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