

Bill Thorn: Paint a picture with words

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SAN ANGELO—The secret to being humorous is same as most things in life, Bill Thorn believes—take what God has entrusted to you, work hard to polish it and be the individual you were created to be.

Thorn has spoken at about 200 events per year since his retirement 25 years ago, so he bases that advice on experience.

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“There’s a difference between humor and comedy. I don’t do comedy. I don’t make faces or things like that,” he said. “Humor, I believe, is an intellectual game. You have to think. If you don’t think, you’re going to miss humor.

“I don’t tell jokes. I don’t tell stories where Peter said something to So-and-So. There’s too much other stuff to talk about.”

Instead, Thorn—a past president of [Dallas Baptist University](#)—tells stories from real life.

“The funniest things that ever happen are what a child says to you. ... People come up with the nuttiest stuff, and to me, that’s humor. Most of my illustrations are things that happened in my ministry or to the giants of the past—and I knew most of them,” he said.

As an example, he recalled a time as a pastor when he looked over the list of prospective church committee assignments and saw that the town mortician had been selected chairman of the hospital visitation committee.

“Nobody wants the mortician to come see them in the hospital, but that’s what they had, along with a guy on building and grounds who had grass growing up in the windows of his house,” he said with a laugh.

Much of humor is not about what is said, but how it is said, Thorn added.

“You need the ability to paint a picture with your words. A story has to be in you and the way you tell it has to be a secret,” he said. Never try to tell a story just like you heard it, but tell it with your own intonations and way of speaking, Thorn suggested.

“I believe timing is the secret of any story, and you get that from the people. They give you the signal. ... Any person who really achieves things over the years is the person who know how to read the people whose faces are in front of him, whether it’s good or bad,” he said.

Not that he always possessed that skill, he acknowledged. Thorn recalled his first banquet speech many years ago came at the request of then Baylor University President W.R. White.

Thorn summed up the evening simply: “It was a mess.”

A month later, White called him with a second engagement. Thorn told him, “You can’t imagine how bad it was.”

“Yes I can,” White told him. “I was there.”

“But he saw something I did not see, and that was the beginning,” Thorn recalled.

While he knows he is invited to entertain, Thorn works to do a bit more with his speeches. He wants his humorous speeches—like his sermons—to have content that will help people.

While his public speaking dates back several decades, Thorn insists he is

not extroverted, and it remains difficult for him.

“Although I speak all the time, I never get up but that it’s a struggle,” Thorn said.

Nevertheless, he continues to speak around the state and nation. But he has a few rules he lives by when it comes to his public speaking career.

“I don’t advertise. If you’ve been in the ministry as long as I have and nobody wants you, you get the message pretty straight,” Thorn said.

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Bill Thorn on the importance of spontaneity in humor.

Neither does he set fees. If asked, he tells people who invite him to speak to do whatever they usually do for guest speakers. About 25 percent of his engagements don’t cover his expenses.

But his skill and longevity keep him busy. This month, he will speak at the National Antique Car Convention, and next month he will speak to 113 county judges.

His popularity as a speaker began more than 60 years ago, he said, when he spoke at a Brotherhood convention.

After his speech, Pat Zondervan approached him and told him that if he would put that speech into a book, he would publish it. The book was titled [*A Bit of Honey*](#). Six decades and four printings later, people still bring the book to Thorn to be signed.

Thorn insists he just does what comes naturally.

“Humor is tender. You can’t force humor. The worst thing in the world is for a fellow to try and can’t do it. It has to be spontaneous. It has to be

natural,” he said.

The best humorists are effective communicators—just like the best preachers, he noted. If God has called someone to be a pastor, he has given that person the ability to communicate.

“God called you, get up and use what he gave you. Keep working at it and keep getting better. After a while, if you use what he gave you, you’re going to be unique, which is what God had in mind when he called you, not that you would be like some other guy.

“Find what’s natural to you and then develop it; then you become unique. You become what God intended.”