
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Pastors and Preaching

Can pastors become better preachers? Yes, they can. And, if you want your church to grow, you must improve. Good preaching, of course, depends on a number of factors.

First, know your God. Pastors have all been taught, in one way or another, techniques or processes for putting a sermon together. But finding a formula for experiencing the awe or special anointing or work of the Holy Spirit in a sermon is akin to trying to find the smell of a rose by pulling off each petal.

There's a mysterious aspect that older pastors used to call unction. All pastors need some sort of process for putting together their sermons, but if a pastor doesn't know God personally, and deeply, nothing is likely to happen.

Second, know yourself. If we really know God, then we must consider ourselves in the light of his attributes. In doing so we realize our personal failure to live up to God's standards, and our own need of forgiveness and redemption. Thus, we come to the sermon *as one who needs the Savior*. The tone of our sermons inevitably

reflects this knowledge, as we appropriately admit our own struggle with living the Christian life. The sermon then projects an air of authenticity, rather than superiority. It communicates a feel of humility, rather than pride. It presents an aura of reality, rather than pretense.

We also must come to the sermon *as one who has the Savior*. Knowing ourselves means we not only know our weaknesses and failures, but we know the liberty, hope, and joy found from embracing the Savior's redemption. We can stand in the pulpit knowing our frailties, but also the Savior's grace. Thus, we preach *as participants* in the message rather than *performers* of the message. Instead of hiding our weaknesses (performers), we allow our personalities to come out (participants) knowing that God applies his word to human hearts through authentic messengers. It is a glorious thing to be yourself. Preaching really is delivering truth through personality.

Are you searching for a leadership coach? Email Dr. Gary L. McIntosh at cgnet@earthlink.net for full details.

Third, know your text. Pastors typically don't find exegesis hard. They can work their way through the Scriptural text, get the flow of thought, and understand the context. They know the basics of sermon preparation: choose the text, determine what it means, meditate on it, isolate the dominant thought, arrange the material to serve the dominant thought, add the introduction and conclusion, etc.

What's much more difficult, of course, is determining "What does it mean today?" Knowing the text implies both accurately exegeting it, but also letting it touch your own life. Good preaching arises out of truly wrestling with the text—thinking about it and experiencing it in some fashion. How has it touched your own life? Where have you seen it worked out in other's lives? Knowing the text is a two sided coin: Know what it meant to the original writer and know what it means to people today.

Fourth, know your audience. The major league of preaching is seeing people change their lives to become more like Jesus.

Be aware of the questions people are asking. Each generation asks different questions. Younger people in their twenties want to know where to

center their lives—around God, work, friends, etc.? Thirty-year-old's face serious responsibilities—mortgages, spouses, babies, in-law relationships, and work stressors. They have many questions revolving around these aspects of life. For people in their forties, they wonder about career and marriage disappointments. Should they scale back their dreams, or forge ahead? By their fifties, people wonder if they're past their prime. Few friendships, children leaving the home, and less than satisfying jobs force unexpected feelings to the surface. Some fight feelings of loss, search for intimacy in wrong places, and wonder if they bring value to anyone any longer. Those in their sixties wonder what it means to be old, if they look as old as their peers, and how to deal with long-term resentments. For people in their seventies and beyond, questions arise as to how long they have left on this earth, how to maintain their independence as they grow older, and what will happen to the family when they're gone.

You must know the people to address these fears, inadequacies, and regrets. If you can't peer into their eyes and see their hurt and lostness, you have little right to preach the gospel to them. You must know some of them well enough to speak to their pains, struggles, and hopes. Let them see that you know and understand what they need to know and do to follow Christ in their world.

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