
GROWTH POINTS

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

Ideas on Preaching

Excellent preaching is more of an art than a science, but I've discovered a few things over the years.

Good preachers prepare. I have found that the best of preachers spend about fifteen hours each week in sermon preparation, divided over two weeks. In the first week the pastor spends about seven to eight hours exegeting the passage(s) of Scripture in order to understand it. The big idea or eternal principle is defined, and a tentative outline is laid out. Many pastors will then let the message percolate for a week of prayerful reflection. The following week, an additional seven to eight hours are given to filling out the outline with illustrations, stories, testimonies, and other didactic techniques, as well as practicing the delivery.

Good preachers preach 20-30 minutes; bad preachers shouldn't preach any longer. I recall the late Haddon Robinson, a world renowned expert on preaching, writing "Some men preach for an hour and it seems like twenty minutes, and some preach for twenty minutes and it seems like an hour. I wonder what the difference is?" That's a wonderful question. Pastors would do well to seek an answer to it.

Good preachers practice. The great soccer player Pele was asked how he defined success. Reportedly he said something like "Success isn't how many games you win, but how hard you practice after you lose." One pastor I know took Pele's definition to heart. Each Friday and Saturday, he'd go into the auditorium when no one was around and preach his entire sermon to empty seats—six times! Yes, six times he preached the entire sermon making changes, corrections, and adjustments. By the time he stood up on Sunday morning to preach, it was his seventh time! People thought his ability to catch their attention in the introduction, lead them through a well thought-out message, and end with a thoughtful challenge, was a natural gift. What they didn't know or see was his practice. Preachers that wear the speaker's hat well, put in the time. They practice.

Good preachers are interesting. If you're going to bore people, bore them with Shakespeare, not the Bible. Fruitful preachers live with a fear of boring people,

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that is, making the Bible and God—which are relevant—irrelevant. Boredom is a hard thing for people to tolerate. Instead of drawing people to God, boring sermons drive them from him. God is not boring, so why should our sermons be so?

Good preachers entertain people. I've heard critics say we shouldn't entertain people, but I'd like to file a minority report here. Entertainment means "to hold one's attention," which I think all speakers desire to do. What we should not do is amuse people, which means "to be without thought." Keep people's attention, but make sure to keep them thinking.

Good preachers listen to their people. Some members of a church will tell you one thing while criticizing another. They most likely don't have experience preaching, nor the training to diagnose or prescribe how to help you preach better. Their comments will point out a symptom that you need to hear and address. Listen to what they are saying.

Good preachers offer solutions. They spend more time giving answers than pointing out problems. I get it. It's easier to show others what's wrong than to offer solutions. It's a problem/solution issue. Many pastors spend twice as much time on describing the problem as on the solution. Make sure your most powerful illustrations and descriptions show people what to do.

An old Christian saint, Francis de Sales once noted "The test of a preacher is that his congregation goes away saying, not 'What a lovely sermon!' but 'I will do something.'"

Good preachers condition themselves. There's a difference between preparing a sermon and preparing yourself. No good long-distance runner attempts a marathon without conditioning their body ahead of time. Nor should a pastor step into the pulpit, or on the stage, without prior conditioning. Personal submission to the Lord throughout the week is a must. Prayer, journaling, fasting, solitude, reflection, and meditation help condition one for delivering God's word to the people.

Good preachers keep preaching. Many times you won't see anything happening week to week, but, unseen, God is working under the surface in people's lives. It's the Spirit of God that enlivens those who hear your preaching. It's similar to eating three meals a day. Most of us cannot remember what we ate last week, or even yesterday. Sure, we can remember an occasional fantastic meal, but most meals don't create any lasting memories. Yet, we'd be poor people without having eaten three meals a day every day over the last year. It's good to remember that preaching is like that, too. People normally don't change dramatically every Sunday. But your faithful preaching of God's word works over time to move people in the right way.

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