



15 PRINCIPLES FOR POWERFUL BIBLICAL PREACHING

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As somebody who has been preaching and teaching the gospel since 1978, I have seen the “good, the bad and the ugly” when it comes to presenting the Gospel of Christ. (Both in others and myself). After being saved for only about six months, I started preaching on the NYC subways, then on the Staten Island ferry to thousands of people several nights per week. Hence, I learned how to communicate and preach the gospel by real life interaction with people. I have never formally studied homiletics (the science of preaching) but learned from observing my pastor (Ben Crandall-who was an outstanding preacher and teacher) and from experience. I also read books on homiletics and the art of communication.

The following are fifteen principles for powerful preaching

1 - Be your authentic self

I have seen many public speakers and preachers who attempted to sound and act like another person they admired; usually, that comes off flat and other people can tell you are not comfortable in your own skin. People know when they are listening to a phony and or a person who is not being authentic. They are attracted to a preacher who is real, transparent, and comfortable in communication. Disingenuous preaching turns off spiritually mature people who walk in discernment. Be yourself, be comfortable in your own skin, and let the power and anointing of Christ come through your personality.

2 - Don't act religious

One of the biggest turnoffs to me as a teenager (that made it difficult for me to join a church) was the religious nature of many Christians I met. For example, in casual conversation they were always saying things like: “praise the Lord”, Hallelujah”, “Amen” and so on and so forth. I was not brought up in a Christian family or environment, but in the rough, tough streets of Brooklyn N.Y. (I came to Christ at 19). When I picture the average un-churched person coming to hear me speak, I think they would be turned off if I repeatedly said “amen” and other religious words. Consequently, I made it my goal to communicate the way I walk and talk in my everyday life. Christians who always use religious language when they preach can come off as religious fanatics and people tend to mis-characterize and de-humanize them. To be an effective communicator, do not be overly religious in your presentation, unless you just want to reach other believers.

3 - Speak the language of culture

Point three goes along with point two; effective preachers of the gospel should learn to use the language of common culture (better known as making use of the vernacular, not vulgarity). When speaking, I regularly relate the biblical text to current events, sports, and latest trends in fashion, music and culture. When the apostle Paul spoke to Jewish people, he used the Old Testament to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah; when he spoke to the average non-Jew, he never referred to scripture but used nature as his reference point; when he spoke to intellectuals, he quoted their poets and literature to connect the gospel to their condition (Read Acts chapters 13-17). He said that he became all things to all people so that he may win some (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

4 - Treat the congregation like they know everything but assume they know nothing

One of the worst things a preacher can do is to be condescending and treat the people like they are idiots and or ignorant of things spiritual and biblical. When communicating, it is important to have a humble spirit and treat your audience with respect. In private, prepare your message as if they know nothing so you can cover all bases and not make a presumptuous mistake and speak over their heads.

5 - Don't impose your opinion on the biblical text

Many preachers make the mistake of taking passages out of context to fit their own bias and doctrinal position. One of the most important truths I have ever learned in biblical preaching was to first uncover the original intent of the author of Scripture before attempting to apply it in principle. Many preachers mishandle the biblical text by coming up with subjective, spiritual meanings they claim they received from God, which robs the hearers of learning how to interpret the word. Other preachers just use passages to "moralize" or to extract principles that they impose upon the bible. It is ok to bring moral application to a scripture as long as you first outline the primary meaning of the text. This is the only safe way to communicate the word without getting into exegetical error. We should also establish the antecedent meaning of a biblical theme by building upon how God unfolded it in Scripture from the time it was first mentioned. Showing the progressive development of a concept in Scripture is more useful than just stamping it with your interpretation from the start.

6 - Give practical illustrations and tell compelling stories

Most people connect emotionally more to a preacher and their message when they tell personal stories that illustrate a point of the sermon. Another icebreaker is using humour to get people to relax and be more open to the message. Finally, compelling stories is perhaps the most powerful way to communicate the emotive power of your message.

7 - End the message with practical application

Every sermon should include an attempt to summarize the thesis of the message by giving three to four "takeaways". Make it plain, simple and applicable by giving a few easy steps to put the message into practice.

8 - Don't answer questions no one is asking

Many preachers dive too deep into the historical, grammatical, and cultural setting of a passage and cause the main objective of the message to be lost to the hearers. When giving the historical, cultural background of a text, avoid unnecessary trivial details and only focus on aspects of exegetical analysis that will contribute to the main objective of the sermon.

9 - Gain the victory in private before you present it in public

I learned from several leaders I respected that the key to having power in the pulpit is adequate preparation. This does not only involve sermon preparation but heart preparation. In addition, having a robust prayer life enables me to receive insight from the Holy Spirit who illuminates the scriptures to me. For example, every time I am going to preach or teach I spend an adequate amount of time waiting on God in deep travail and intercession until I know that I have a breakthrough for the meeting in the spirit. When that happens, I have assurance in my heart of the success of the service and the sermon before I set foot in the pulpit. Also, I read and rehearse the text over and over again and remain focused on the message for many hours prior to my presentation.

10 - Preach out of experience more than abstract ideals

I have also discovered that the most powerful messages I preach are the ones I have walked out already before God and man. The messages I preach merely out of head knowledge will have the least effect on the hearers. This is because we can only really impart to others what we have already allowed God to impart to us.

11 - Read the text aloud for proper pronunciation and inflection

Often, I have been embarrassed for preachers (and embarrassed myself a few times) when they read a passage and mispronounced key words. Effective communicators read relevant passages as well as their sermon aloud in private to make sure they can present their message with a spirit of excellence. It is also important to make sure your body language lines up with the message. There are times when preachers are not aware of weird facial expressions they make and or bodily motions that can cause the audience to be distracted. For example, there are times when a preacher has an angry scowl, which can be a turn off to new people who do not understand their heart.

12 - Make believe there are no chapters and verses to understand the context

In my opinion, understanding the context of a passage is often more important than knowing the nuance of the original languages of Scripture. This is because, Hebrew and Greek words often have many shades of meaning

and a preacher can twist a text to mean anything they desire because of root meaning options. A method of bible reading that has greatly aided me in hermeneutics (science of biblical interpretation) is to make believe there are no chapters and verses. Chapters and verses were not inspired but were placed in scripture hundreds of years ago by the translators and publishers of bibles to help people memorize and locate scripture. Chapters and verses often isolate scripture and remove it from the context of the chapter and beyond. When I read scripture, I intentionally ignore chapters and verses, which helps me to read it the way it was originally written, as one flowing letter. This method of reading the bible has revolutionized and broadened the horizon of what I receive in my bible reading and preaching.

13 - Keep eye contact and be natural

Although I write out most of my new sermons, I read it over and over again the day before I preach, and then again several times right before I get up to preach. My goal is to be so immersed in the message that I will preach without the use of notes as much as possible so I can always keep eye contact with my audience. Also, reading notes looks unnatural to the audience because they intuitively expect preachers to communicate only from their heart and experience. Furthermore, maintaining eye contact with my audience enables me to more easily sense key points in the message the people are receiving as well as be open to spontaneous downloads from the Lord that can prophetically impart His heart to the people.

14 - Avoid discursive preaching

When I first started to preach, I was told that I preached fifteen messages in one sermon! That is to say, I continually chased rabbits and discussed numerous biblical themes without staying on point; this discursive form of communication makes it very difficult for the audience to walk away with anything practical. One helpful thing to do is to study the sermons in the book of acts which demonstrate how to utilize many forms of preaching without losing focus. Also, some of the most effective preachers in the world today use one-point sermons that present one theme many different ways to ensure that the congregation understands the thesis of the message.

15 - Utilize a preaching community for honest feedback after each message

We have had a preaching community in our church, which for years gave honest feedback to the presenter after each sermon. In my life, I have several people who give me honest feedback including my spouse and close friends. This honesty has greatly aided my effectiveness and enabled me to avoid continually making mistakes that will limit my capacity as a communicator.

Finally, may all of us commissioned by God to communicate the word, do so, understanding the grave task of revealing His will by preaching (Titus 1:3)