

# “In Search of the Great Sermon”

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Every preacher is unique, but most preachers don't know this. He/she spends hours preparing what is believed to be a “great sermon” only to learn that the audience did not receive the message because there was “information overload.” As a preacher, how many times have you experienced this? I've experienced it many times, having spent days studying and praying only to deliver a sermon that fell on deaf ears. Although I thought it was a “great sermon,” the people were looking for something else. Because I preach in many different churches, sometimes I find it challenging to adapt to a different style of delivery – one to which the congregation is accustomed. For example, traditional Pentecostal churches may turn a deaf ear if you do not preach “loud” and with lots of passion. They believe this is the “anointing.” Although not my preference, I'm not opposed to this style when it's genuine. So what are some of the major points to preparing a “great” sermon?

First , a minimum of one hour of sermon preparation should be spent for every minute the sermon takes to deliver. If your sermon takes thirty minutes to deliver, thirty hours of study and preparation are necessary. And this time schedule does not include fervent prayer and meditation on capturing the mind of God.

Once you're in the pulpit, preach from the “overflow” of what you've prepared. Don't stay glued to your notes, or your delivery will surely bomb. Eye contact with the audience is critical. Be dramatic and use your hands to express yourself. And, don't stand in the pulpit with a stone-face. On the other hand, I've also observed antics that have no place in the pulpit. Male preachers often condescend to screaming and shouting to capture the attention of the audience while the message may have little scriptural content. Notwithstanding, women preachers have their own antics as well. They may try to copy male preachers in style and voice, adopting a loud, deep voice like John Hagee. On occasion, they may go to the other extreme, using a humble, quiet voice tone like Kathryn Khulman in an attempt to be accepted by the audience. None of these maneuvers should be categorized as good or bad, but the question remains, “What about the sermonic content and exegetical insights?” Paul said, “We preach not ourselves, but Christ and Him crucified.” What is Paul saying? “If you don't preach Christ, you are preaching self.” Leave your attention grabbing antics at home and stay focused on Christ while you're in the pulpit.

Second , “Stop imitating TV preachers.” Don't try to copy them in your preaching. Be yourself. Make an effort to discover who and what you really are. Learn your biblical exegesis (accurate Biblical interpretation) so that you don't appear inept, or lead the sheep (people) off a cliff or into a ditch. A great philosopher once made a profound statement concerning “copycats.” He said, “A person that imitates another person who is attracting a big crowd will be deluded into believing that he also can attract a big crowd. But it

doesn't happen. He fails miserably. He must instead discover his unique identity by reaching deep within his soul to discover his unique abilities. Once he emerges after finding himself, then the big crowds will follow him, because he is finally himself above all else.”

Third, preach with “passion and polish” in spite of what you believe about yourself. During the first 300 years of early church preaching, few witnesses (preachers) were concerned about “polish.” All that mattered was “passion.” Times have changed. Today, you must have a little “polish” to go along with your “passion.” However, if you must make a choice between these two qualities, “passion” should be your choice.

Put a little of yourself into every sermon and it will become a message. From time-to-time use a personal illustration about yourself. Tell your audience stories about yourself, your spouse, your mother or father, your children, your adventures, etc. This will wake up the audience, hold their attention, and often make them laugh. Remember, your audience wants to know something about you. But never take your calling for granted by failing to prepare your message beforehand. God prepares the person who prepares the sermon. Then He shall prepare the people's hearts to receive the message. Don't make the foolish mistake of relying on your anointing to get you through a sermon. If you make this mistake, your “anointing,” may become “annoying” to your audience.

Fourth, there is no such thing as a “great sermon.” Although you may deliver a dynamic sermon with power, passion and polish, there is no assurance your sermon will not fall on receptive ears. Stop relying on the “amen” and “praise the Lord” statements as assurance that you are delivering a great sermon. People in Pentecostal churches routinely say “amen” and “praise the Lord.” Of course, some preachers ask the congregation to say “amen” even when they find nothing in the sermon that motivates them to do so. Such verbal responses are not indicators that your preaching is good.

When preaching, you must first do something to lower the resistance of the audience. Don't go too fast in the introduction stage of your message. Instead, warm up your audience gently to get past their anger, disinterest, personality defenses, or critical thinking.

You may appear more “down to earth” to your audience by sharing some of the issues you personally face. Be discreet, however, and do not disclose deeply personal matters as did one unfortunate soul who was finally forced to close his church. He felt he should tell the congregation all his faults (as well as his sexual hang-ups) from the pulpit. He felt this tactic would cause people to see him not as an exalted pastor, but one with problems just like them. However, this tactic “backfired” on him and wrecked his church.

Martin Luther once said, “Prayer and meditation will give you a sermon, but only temptation (the daily experiences in life) will transform your sermon into a message.” While Luther's statement is true and a preacher may explain how he overcame temptation, I maintain that a preacher must tread cautiously and not disclose too much of his faults. Be careful how you present yourself.

In conclusion, the “Search for the Great Sermon” is actually a myth. Search for it if you will, but the “great sermon” is elusive. Why? Because each person in the audience will respond differently to every sermon you preach. If you prepare a message from the book of Revelation, this does not mean the majority of your audience wanted to hear this topic. Perhaps they wanted to hear some other subject more relevant to their life. The parents in the congregation may have wanted to hear a sermon on how to improve communication in marriage, how to control their teenagers, or how to overcome inferiority. Although from time-to-time you may preach landmark sermons designed to wake people up, no sermon is “great” if it does not speak to the needs of the people.

But don't be disillusioned as you search for the “great sermon.” There is still hope for that “great sermon” you're looking for.