

Preacher, Text, and Audience Interaction in Preaching

Mako Nagasawa

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Part I: Considerations for Effective Preaching

Question: What do you think makes a good sermon good? Discuss.

Below are some characteristics of effective preaching:

Connecting with the Audience and Sustaining that Connection (Connection)

Making a Point Relevant to the Audience (Relevance)

Being Accurate and Faithful to the Biblical Text (Accuracy)

Explaining the Reasoning Process from Text to Audience (Reproducibility)

Being Culturally Sensitive in Terms of Confrontational Style, etc. (Sensitivity)

Giving the Audience a Sense of Connection with the Larger Christian Community (Church Universal)

Enhancing the Authority of Both Text and Preacher (Authority)

Part II: Methods of Preaching

One Level Model: Text – ‘Dry Exposition’

Biblical Characters or Material	Who are the characters or addressees? How do they enter the story?	How do they end the story?
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<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
Connection		Even though the text is explained well, the connection to the audience is not clear.
Relevance	Tends to have little to no relevance for today.	
Accuracy	This tends to be a good commentary on what the text meant back then.	
Reproducibility		Even though the text is explained well, the connection to the audience is not clear.
Sensitivity		Tends to be less directly engaging and appealing to an audience
Church Universal		Because it tends to be overly centered on the text, there is little contextualizing of the audience into the broader church
Authority		The preacher usually sounds too academic and irrelevant, so her/his authority is undermined

One Level Model: Audience – ‘Poetic’ or ‘Creative Exegesis’

Audience	What are their lives like now? How do they enter the story?	How should they leave the story?
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<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
Connection	Preacher can focus a lot of time on connecting with the audience, bringing in a lot of humor, drawing on shared experience, speaking into particular experiences that may not be covered explicitly by the biblical text.	
Relevance	Preacher tends to be relevant, poetic, and direct. This tends to be an effective exhortation.	
Accuracy		This sometimes winds up taking texts out of context, and giving them a meaning that is not the original.
Reproducibility		It is hard to get people to understand the text faithfully and effectively this because they don't see into your thought processes. They may ask, "Nice point, but how did you get that out of this text?"
Sensitivity		Sometimes an audience is confronted too directly or with too much emotion.
Church Universal	This can be done	Or not depending on the preacher's emphasis.
Authority		The preacher eventually relies on and tests his/her personal authority, especially with a more educated audience, because the points made may not be coming clearly from the authority of the text.

Two Level Method: Audience & Text

Biblical Characters or Material	Who are the characters or addressees? How do they enter the story?	How do they end the story?
Audience	What are their lives like now? How do they enter the story?	How should they leave the story?

<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
Connection	Audience tends to feel engaged and involved in the preaching experience	
Relevance	By alternating between text and audience, preacher is set up to be relevant to the audience	
Accuracy	Preacher usually explains the text well	
Reproducibility	Audience can understand how the preacher came to those conclusions. This method reproduces understanding of the text.	
Sensitivity		Sometimes an audience is confronted too directly.
Church Universal		Sometimes the audience loses a sense of their relationship with other Christians, either historically or in other places. Their sense of community is limited to who is there at the time.
Authority	The authority of the preacher is derived from the text rather than just herself/himself.	

Three Level Model: Audience, Text, & Other Audiences

Biblical Characters or Material	Who are the characters or addressees? How do they enter the story?	How do they end the story?
Audience	What are their lives like now? How do they enter the story?	How should they leave the story?
Other People	How have others interacted with God about this?	What did God do in the lives of others?

<i>Consideration</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
Connection	Audience tends to feel engaged and involved in the preaching experience. Preacher can keep the typical audience more alert because it uses more parts of your brain.	If the preacher wants to focus a lot of time on connecting with the audience, bringing in a lot of humor, drawing on shared experience, speaking into particular experiences that may not be covered explicitly by the biblical text, and still making it as expository as possible, it may be a long sermon.
Relevance	Preacher can be relevant, poetic, and direct.	
Accuracy	Preacher has to explain the text well.	
Reproducibility	Audience can understand how the preacher came to those conclusions. This method reproduces understanding of the text.	However, the three subject method takes more preparation to do effectively and requires good storytelling skills.
Sensitivity	The audience can be confronted more gently and indirectly. The preacher's emotion can be filtered through a story about people other instead of the audience. Can inspire your audience by appealing to other stories.	
Church Universal	Preacher can maintain a sense of relationship & connection with other Christians, either historically or in other places. Their sense of community is expanded.	
Authority	The authority of the preacher is derived from the text rather than just herself/himself.	

Variations on the Three Level Preaching Model

These are not sermons in their entirety, merely attempts to feel the rhythm of a sermon over time.

Standard Expository Preaching

Other People (including yourself)	████████ ██████████ ██████████
Your Audience (including yourself)	███ ██████████ ██████████
Biblical Characters or Material	██████████ ██████████

“Prophetic” Expository Preaching

Other People	██████████ ██████████
Your Audience	██████████ ██████████ ██████████
Biblical Characters or Material	██████████ ██████████

Some sermons which I’ve heard given by African-American preachers (e.g. Dean Trulear’s IFES ’98, Pastor Paul Shepard at Abundant Life Christian Fellowship in East Palo Alto, CA) take the ‘prophetic,’ punchy quality and also weave biblical language back and forth throughout the sermon.

Other People	██████████ ██████████
Your Audience	███ ███ ███ ██████████ ███ ███ ██████████ ███ ███
Biblical Characters or Material	███ ███ ███ ███ ███ ███ ███ ███ ███

Extended Example from Luke 5:1 – 11, given on September 12, 2002

Sermon Section	Text	Others/Me	You/Us
<p>Simon agrees to set out for deeper water. Maybe he does it out of respect for Jesus, or maybe out of respect for the fact that Jesus healed his mother-in-law. Either way, he sets the sails and moves away from the shore. Things must have happened so quickly after that that Simon didn't have much time to think. In v.6-7, "6 When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; 7 so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink." The fish must have swarmed towards them from out of nowhere. The nets got so full they were about to break. They quickly called for the other boat to come over to help, but the fish keep coming. In a second, both boats are sinking! I love what this shows us about Jesus. Jesus first gets into Simon's boat. Then he gets into his life. He gets into Simon's own expertise, which "happened" to be frustrated. Simon had been running his own fishing business for years. And on the best of seasons, he still had to deal with frustrations like catching nothing all night.</p>	x		
<p>You see, most of us have an area of your life where you feel like you are the expert (it's an illusion!) or an area of life where you feel like you want to be the expert. It's what makes us feel great even though it causes us frustration, too, because that's where we feel most invested. Jesus will just touch that area in some way, and when he does, everything changes.</p>			x
<p>When I was a freshman, I was a friend with a frosh woman next door to me. She was wrestling with giving Jesus her whole life. Once she decided to pray, "All right, Jesus, I'm afraid of what will happen if I really give you my whole life. But I want to take a step." In a sense, she said, "I want to let you into my boat," so to speak. That night, she felt like Jesus was challenging her to hang out with and care for certain people a little longer than she had planned. That night she had to write a paper. So she went down to the computer cluster in her dorm at around midnight. When 2am rolled around, she was still down there, exhausted. There were times where she would nod off with her fingers on the keyboard. But when she would wake up, she would find that she had somehow typed a few paragraphs. She didn't remember typing those things at all. When she finished that paper an hour later, she couldn't explain where the thoughts in her paper had come from. She said, "They were even better than what I would have written on my own. I think that Jesus is telling me something." That never happened to her again. (!) But that didn't discourage my friend because she took it in the right way - not as a guarantee that every time she reached out to people that Jesus would finish her homework, because it wasn't that. It was a sign to her that her own dreams were too small. Wouldn't it feel weird to see that Jesus could do in a snap what you could never do in your whole lifetime? Simon had to acknowledge that he could never have caught that much fish in his life ever. My friend had to acknowledge that Jesus is much smarter than her, and that her old dreams and ambitions were so small they were ridiculous. Jesus got into her boat. He got into her life. He got right into her frustrations and stresses and what she thought of herself. And by making those things seem trivial, he cracked open a whole new world to her. He showed her that her life could really be about greater things.</p>		x	
<p>In part, Jesus has come to show us that our dreams are too small. Our lives are too small. Now this kind of thing may or may not happen to you, but the important thing is that Jesus wants you to reevaluate all your hopes and dreams. Why are you here? Is it just to get away from your parents? To party a little more? To find someone to marry? To get good grades, so you can just get a "decent" job? Is it to do things that are, frankly, mediocre?</p>			x
<p>In fact, as we reflected yesterday on September 11th, it appears that we have hit a crisis of significance in our society. Two realizations appeared on the American conscience that affect our sense of significance. First, that any of our achievements can disappear just like that. Second, that our way of life has somehow been built at great cost to other people. In light of that, what should our dreams be anyway???</p>			x

<p>When I was a junior in high school, despite how independent I wanted to be, I found myself drawn to Jesus. I was interested in who he was. I started going to a worship service where I learned about Jesus. After about seven months of this, one of my friends from this church said to me, "Let's go spend our spring break in Mexico." There was a group of Christian folks who were going to go there and do various things. I thought we'd be building affordable housing or new buildings or something: something I could see with my hands and be proud of, something that I could look back on and say, "That was a total guy thing to do, and I did that." Later I found out that 2,000 other Christians were going as part of the larger program. Well, we got there, a small town near the border of California and Mexico, and I saw poverty like I had never seen before. People were living in cardboard shacks with three walls and an aluminum roof. We had to be really careful about drinking the water and being in the shower. And we didn't get to build any buildings. Instead, we played with kids and taught them little Bible lessons. In my mind, that wasn't a guy thing to do. All those kids cared about was, "Are you going to come back tomorrow?" They didn't care about the fact that I had big dreams and that I was going places. But it hit me that the love that the kids showed me was kind of like the unconditional love that God said He had for me; He didn't love me because of what I had done or what I thought I was going to accomplish. That was a lot for me to handle. I didn't want to be there anymore. I was taking a week off of swimming training almost in the middle of the season to be there, and I was risking my performance that season to care about these kids. But I looked around me and there were 2,000 people there who loved Jesus who were glad to be in Mexico and glad to spend their time that way. At that moment, my life just seemed so selfish and small it was unbearable. I felt like I had wasted my life up to that point. That's when I said, "Jesus, I'm sorry. My life just feels ridiculously small. Take my life and do what you want."</p>		x	
<p>What about your life? Do you get the feeling that your dreams are too small? That your life is too small? That your nets are too small? That your boats are too small? That the highest visions you've had for your life are still too blasé for Jesus? In the movie Braveheart, when William Wallace says, "All men die. Not all men truly live," meaning their lives are too small, do you nod your head, saying, "Yeah, that's true"? Or even, "That's true of me"?</p>			x