

COMMUNICATIONS

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Dr. R. C. Sproul

Assignment 2

Preaching Self-Critique

By

Ronald Dunn

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A PREACHING SELF-CRITIQUE

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Preaching, both to the preacher and to the listener, is a highly subjective affair. Two people can listen to the same sermon and one goes away praising it while the other condemns it. Probably no preacher has ever preached as badly as he thought, and it is rare when one preaches as good as he thinks. But most subjective of all is the preacher's self-evaluation. To do it correctly requires the twin sacrifices of pride and humility on the altar of honesty -- which in itself is probably a subjective thing. But here goes.

STRENGTHS

1. Expository (Biblical) Preaching.

I was brought up in a fundamentalist church where the only preaching I heard was loud, sweaty, topical and evangelistic. My early sermons came from John R. Rice and the Sword of the Lord. Not all that I heard and received was bad, of course, but my idea of preaching was stunted. Then in college a friend persuaded me to read *A Man of the Word*, the biography of G. Campbell. I had never heard the term expository preaching before. But that book changed my life and my philosophy of preaching.

When I arrived at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1958, I found, to my delight, that the entire preaching faculty believed the only true preaching was expository preaching and they taught it almost exclusively.

In Texas, and especially at Southwestern, preachers were as thick as flies on a mare, and every single one was clamoring for a place to preach. But I noticed that those who were getting the opportunities to preach had a "gimmick", something unusual going for them -- ex-drug addict, ex-convict, ex-football hero (one of my classmates was a defensive lineman for the Cleveland Browns). I had nothing going for me. No outstanding testimony of being saved from a life of crime or drugs (I was saved when I was nine). I felt I had to have something special. I laugh about it now, but I remember the day when I decided that my "gimmick" would be expository preaching.

I have never lacked for a place to preach and I believe it is because of the expository emphasis. It is, I believe, my greatest strength.

2. Contemporary and present-tense outline.

I put my major points in the present tense and make them contemporary. Instead, for example, of saying, "Paul was a Man of Prayer," I would say, "The Person God Uses is One Who Prays," and then use Paul and the text as the example.

I avoid stock outlines such as The Curse, The Cost and the Cure. In recent years I have largely shunned alliterative outlines. I used to do this exclusively, both with major points and sub-points and sub-sub points. In my last pastorate I was preaching one Sunday morning and suddenly became embarrassed at the "neatness" of my outline and realized I was often more interested in making all the points start with the same letter than the message itself. I still use alliteration occasionally when it falls out of the text.

3. Contemporary Introductions.

I make my opening words contemporary rather than start with an explanation of the text. The first words should be relevant to the listeners world, using either an

anecdote, personal illustration, or statement that gets their attention. Then I draw it into the text.

4. Letting the Bible Speak for Itself

Often a preacher will go to a text with a pre-conceived idea of what it means, only to discover after studying more deeply the text and the context, it says something better than the original sermon idea. The power of preaching is letting the Bible say what it wants to say.

5. Conversational Delivery

As I mentioned earlier I was brought up in a tradition that believed if you weren't hoarse, dripping with sweat, collar button undone and tie askew when you finished your sermon, you had compromised. "The louder the better," was the statement I heard more than once. But then a wise old preacher told me that quietness, not loudness, gained attention. And I began to notice that I had a hard time listening to a preacher whose volume was always turned up to loud. And so I began to use a conversational tone when I preached, and found that the preaching was much more effective. One of the most frequent comments I receive is that I am easy to listen to and understand.

A conversational tone enables the preacher to speak earnestly and personally to his congregation. He is speaking a message, not delivering a sermon.

6. Preaching Without Notes

One of my professors in seminary strongly urged us to preach without notes. I found that you don't have to be a genius or have a remarkable memory to do this. And the freedom it gives you in the pulpit is worth whatever effort is required to learn to do this. You can remain in eye contact throughout the sermon, move away from the pulpit,

and it seems more like your talking to them rather than preaching at them. Also you can continue preaching if the lights go out.

7. Humor

While humor can be abused in the purpose, it can be a great asset to the sermon. Natural humor (no so much the telling of jokes) develops a rapport with the congregation, relaxes the listeners and enables them to receive a hard point more easily.

8. Movement and Gestures

Here again these must appear natural, not forced or planned. The same preacher who advised me about noise and quietness, also taught me a lot about pulpit movement. I'm not talking about pacing (or racing) back and forth across the platform, but movement with a purpose that helps drive home a point. I have found it effective to stand to one side of the pulpit, then change to the other side when moving to the next point. It can be compared to indenting a paragraph. This recaptures the congregation's attention and again helps them relax.

9. Illustrations

I believe the best and most memorable illustrations are those drawn from your own life, as opposed to the canned illustrations found in illustration books. In his introduction to *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant, speaking of the great philosophers says, "We too have had the experiences they had, but we did not suck those experiences dry of their secret and subtle meanings; we were not sensitive to the overtones of the reality that hummed about us." Our own lives are filled with illustrations if we can train ourselves to see them.

I have people come to me who heard me preach twenty years ago and while they may not remember the sermon itself, they remember the illustrations.

10. Loving and Honest Critics

My mother was the first. In the early days of my ministry, she would come to hear me and later would say to me, "You tried to sound like Billy Graham tonight. Be yourself!" But it's hard for a young preacher to be himself. But my Mom kept pounding away at me on this and one other point. "You're at your best when you stop trying to preach and just talk to the people." While those words often stung, yet I never forgot them and tried to heed her advice because I knew that she wanted me to succeed more than anyone else in the world.

Kaye, my wife, was and is my second loving and honest critic. She never criticizes my theology or interpretation of a text, but she is hard on me in other areas. Annoying mannerisms, mispronounced words, frivolous comments and ministerial license with the truth — none of this escape her loving and lethal notice.

WEAKNESSES

A person's strength is also his weakness and I've found the weaknesses are especially magnified during a "hard" service and I try to push to make something happen.

1. Pushing the Humor

Since humor comes easy for me (it's a part of my personality), I will sometimes overdo it, especially when the crowd is distant or unresponsive. In these times I find myself expanding the humor in an illustration, to the point that the point is lost.

2. Length of Sermons

I preach long sermons. One of my preaching professors said that you can't preach everything in a single sermon or cover every point in expounding a passage. I

haven't quite been convinced of that yet. Also I have a tendency to draw out my illustrations, which sometimes can lengthen a sermon by ten minutes. Like an artist, the preacher must learn selectivity and that's something my wife is helping me on.

3. Long Introductions

As someone has said, "It takes a long runway to get me off the ground." I tend to be repetitive in the opening of the sermon, saying the same thing over and in different ways until I sense that the congregation is with me. Kaye often says to me, "Get on with it."

4. Conclusions

I was taught that a good conclusion is necessary to a good sermon. But I have never spent much time working on conclusions and sometimes I'm at a loss as how to bring it to an end. Often I have an effective illustration to conclude with, but at other times I just end it. The most essential thing for me is a good introduction. I can't get into a message without one, so I tend to spend so much time preparing the introduction, I have little time to work on the conclusion.

5. A Growing Temptation to Slight Study Time

I've been preaching for forty years and in the past several years I've noticed that I am relying more on my experience and knowledge to get me through. I don't study as hard and as diligently as I used to. I have a growing tendency to slight my preparation time. This is especially so because I have an itinerant ministry and could probably preach the rest of my life without preparing new messages. Without the weekly obligation of new sermons, it is too easy for me to become lazy in my study.

6. Lazy Lips

That's what my Dad called it. Being born in Oklahoma and raised in Arkansas, I have a tendency not to finish words and sentences -- fishin', prayin', goin' and such like. And sometimes I won't finish a sentence, assuming that everyone knows what I'm talking about.

Pronunciation has never been easy for me. I have an unusually long tongue that makes it difficult to enunciate properly. When I was preaching through Colossians, I practiced a month on the word "lasciviousness" before I was confident to preach on it. "Phenomenon" still gives me cold chills.

"Fanger" instead of "finger," "wuz" instead of "was", "set" instead of "sit" are still words I'm working on.

Grammar has never been one of my long suits: I have trouble with lay, lie and laid and lain, sit, set, sat. drink drank and drunk. These are areas I am continually struggling with. I hate to listen to a tape of my own preaching because all these warts are so obvious.

7. One Last Weakness

God has been abundantly good to me in my ministry. He has given me the desires of my heart; I've preached everywhere I ever dreamed of preaching. I've preached to crowds of 15,000 and 20,000, I've preached in the largest churches in my denomination (as well as the smallest). I've shared the platform with men like Vance Havner, Bill Bright, John R. Stott, John MacArthur, Tony Campolo and many others. In other words, I've become an old hand at preaching. But something was brought home to me recently. I was being driven one Sunday morning by a ministerial student to preach at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis. He said to me, "Aren't you nervous about preaching at Bellevue." My answer was no, I had preached there many times. But I

realized that I had lost some special along the way -- that nervousness, the fear and trembling, the awe of declaring God's Word.

Many times I've wished that I could recapture that fear and trembling i had when I was a young preacher. To me, at this time, this is my greatest weakness and one I'm praying God will help me overcome.