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Model Preaching

There are some things in preaching that are better caught than taught.

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Twenty-five years ago my sights were set on moving "up" from the church I served of several hundred to something bigger. I was in my early 40s, had a good track record, and was deeply committed to vivid expository preaching. I was restless, watching my mailbox for inquiry letters. Then I went to a conference on preaching. In one session Dr. D. A. Carson spoke on the centrality of preaching and in the middle of that, in a kind of aside, he said, "If, God forbid, I were Pope I would move the best preachers in the nation around [our seminaries] for this simple reason: it would provide models for the next generation of preachers. There are some things in preaching that are better caught than taught."

Time froze for me right there. My desires and direction changed. "Lord, if you'd let me do that—influence young preachers," I prayed right there, "I'd be content with a smaller church."

So it came to pass that a few years later I was called to a small church one mile from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, and almost every Sunday for the last nineteen years I've preached to ministry students, including up-and-coming preachers.

I've only mentored a few in preaching but I have modeled preaching to scores. When I step to the pulpit I'm always aware of my dual responsibility, first, to feed my flock God's Word, but second, to model pastoral, expository preaching.

I want my sermons to exemplify a tapestry of textual details, homiletical skills, and my personal response to Scripture.

My models

Dr. Carson was right, of course, that "some things in preaching are better caught than taught." We learn from all kinds of preachers, to be sure. I learned from D. A. Carson, John Stott, and Warren Wiersbe. I loved the imaginations of Calvin Miller and Fred Craddock. But these gifted men weren't my models because I wasn't wired to work as they did.

For me, Dr. Walter Kaiser both *taught* and *exemplified* how to draw a sermon's main points from the biblical text and how to express them in timeless terms. When I listened to Pastor Chuck Swindoll I realized that I could emulate the way he wove stories and gentle good humor into exposition. Dr. David Larsen stirred my own capacity for oratory—sculpted speech that seemed to bring attention to a sermon's most important words the way music brings out the lyrics of a song. I listened to African-American preachers like E. V. Hill and was drawn to the boldness and color of their rhetoric and their ability to build one point to a moving climax.

Absorbent preaching

When I consider my own responsibility as a model, I consciously work at several things that I hope students can absorb.

Go easy on exegetical detail. Rookies often come at sermons like they do term papers. I certainly study words and grammar, to be sure I let the text speak its mind. Recently I showed how a chiasm helped us understand a passage from Genesis. A couple weeks ago I found a vivid way to explain a word with a contemporary image. God's people like to know how a Bible passage works. But a sermon that piles up textual information and quotes from scholars is not likely to persuade people to godly thinking or behavior. I want my sermons to exemplify a tapestry of textual details, homiletical skills, and my personal response to Scripture.

Model your enormous confidence in the biblical text. The text has the floor, not me. I seldom range around Scripture in a sermon. I usually stay in that one text in an effort to let that particular author speak his Spirit-inspired mind. My main points come from the text, as I was taught. Recently a new Ph.D. student in our church came up to me after a difficult sermon from Genesis 21 comparing Isaac and Ishmael. "I really appreciate how you draw your main points from the text," he said.

Invest in presentation. Just as a chef attends to a meal's presentation so must preachers. I believe in well-turned phrases, thoughtful pacing, and the power of stories and metaphors. I want students to see how they work in a sermon. A few months ago a student quoted to me a phrase I'd carefully word-smithed in a sermon. He'd seen the significance of doing that because it had stuck in his memory. I remember when it dawned on me as a young preacher that the speakers who shaped me most used stories. I made it a life goal to find, categorize, file, and use stories well myself. They are like the skillful use of stage lighting in theater, helping the listener focus on what matters most in a particular moment.

Inspire God's people with God's truth and grace. Seminary classes don't usually have time to teach young preachers how to use well-crafted language, pacing, and stories to move people. Every Bible passage has a kind of emotional pitch—a tone—and the preacher's job is to help God's people not only understand the meaning of the words but to be in tune with the pitch—the passion of a passage. I don't know how to teach someone to do that but I know that having models gives young preachers inward freedom to try it themselves because that's what happened to me. Musicians learn ear training—the ability to tell when their voice or instrument is in tune. That's what I hope I do for up-and-coming preachers.

Be classy. What we're doing up there at a pulpit is a big deal. It is akin to the honor of speaking at a banquet, a graduation, a wedding reception, or a convocation. We represent the King. We deliver a message fit for an ambassador or an angel. Don't be sloppy with grammar, humor, clothes, or time. Be very wary of shooting from the hip. Be warm and personal, conversational and genuine, but don't be glib or goofy. I want people to see in me spiritual and emotional dignity and elegance.

Find your voice and help other preachers find their voice. This is one of the hardest things to explain to someone. I remember standing with Dr. Kenneth Kantzer in the foyer of the chapel at Trinity while a student was preaching. He was a good preacher but he kept jumping between academic language ("As Dr. ___ says in his commentary on John ...") and the passion he'd learned from his own African-American heritage. After a while Dr. Kantzer said, "That young man needs to figure out who he is." As a model to students, I certainly don't want them to try to preach like me, but I do want them to see in me someone who has found my voice as a herald of God's Word.

The greatest advantage

The greatest advantage to young preachers in having a seasoned older model is the pastoral heart they witness. Many young preachers these days grew up in large churches where the preaching they heard, often from young pastors, reflects more cultural savvy than shepherding experience. Some have never sat under a preacher who knows his people by name. Yet most of these students will eventually preach in average-sized churches where pastoral touch is especially important.

Knowing my congregation deeply, especially as an older man myself, gives me a kind of sympathy, gentleness, kindness, and respect I doubt I had years ago. My sins and weaknesses have humbled me. As their pastor, I know how much people want to serve Jesus, how earnestly they wish they were more devout and obedient, how life has shaken and drained them. You preach differently when you see people that way. You're not so hard on them.

I'm more soul-oriented than I could be when I was young. I don't preach to the surface of the will but to the deeper things of the heart. Contemplating Scripture opens richer veins of gold than I found in my olden days. Because I've

had the high privilege of studying the Bible for a long time I'm often able to tap into deeper currents of Scripture. I see the spiritual genius and grace I would have missed thirty years ago. When students hear this kind of preaching they may not be able to do what I can now do but they get an idea of what awaits them if they persevere.

A few months ago I received an email from a dear brother who was part of our church for several years while he earned his Ph.D. He is now a professor back home in Singapore. He wrote, "I've had opportunities to preach in our church, and more are coming up. It's been hard work thinking and communicating homiletically rather than academically. Often in my preparation and speaking, it would dawn on me how much you and your preaching have touched and shaped me. *Speak words of grace. Be kind.* Your demeanor, your honesty, your shepherd's heart. Such things well up within me, get a hold of me, when I work on sermons. Thank you, my dear friend."

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