

Why are some preachers better than others?

by Charles Swindoll

(This noted author pastor tells us how to win
the battle against boring sermons)

When I began my pastorate in Fullerton, California, I decided that I would stop playing church for good. I had found that going along with comfortable routines resulted in spiritual mediocrity. To do things out of habit or tradition was the easy way out, and I determined to be different. I wanted the preached Word to penetrate and meet needs. This meant that I needed to be free enough to develop a style of exploration that was my own. Not a touch of this and a smattering of that. It had to be me if I was going to lead this congregation under God. That was a turning point in my life, because communications is a serious matter. Sometimes you think you are communicating when you are not. It is never automatic, it is hard work.

Jack Paar, well known from the earlier days of television, has said that the greatest sin you can commit in public is to be dull. J. B. Phillips, the late Christian author who paraphrased the New Testament, said, "If words are to enter people's hearts and bear fruit, they must be the right words, shaped to fight defenses and explode silently and effectually within the mind." Unfortunately, the laws of good communication are often broken in the pulpit. It is a disgrace to the Scripture to speak without relevance. You convey to the hearers that the Bible is out of date and out of touch.

Many Christian communicators assume that if the Bible is open between themselves and a group of people, magic automatically happens. It does not. If anything, barriers go up. People have this incredible built-in resistance to spiritual truths. But as the Spirit of God uses his word to break through, people respond beautifully. We must remember Paul's admonition to the Colossians: "Let your speech be always with grace ... seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer every man." That message can be thought of as being particular interest to preachers, but notice that Paul seems to be talking to believers in general. The principles of good communications hold for all who share their faith.

I am not suggesting that you try to be clever or try to do cutsey things or make a fool out of yourself. Some people have the idea that because you minister in Southern California you swing in on a vine and that all pulpits come up out of the floor as flashing lights dance across the stage. Our congregation would walk out on that kind of nonsense. That's not the salt Paul was talking about. You can find what it is in the 12th chapter of Ecclesiastes, beginning with verse nine:

"In addition to being a wise man, the preacher also taught the people knowledge. He pondered, he searched out, he arranged many proverbs. The preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails. They are given by one shepherd."

Isn't that a great passage of Scripture? It's full of fertile information for the preacher today! Let me say three things about what goes into good preaching. Good communicators are well prepared. They do their homework. They make study a high priority. In order to teach the people knowledge, preachers have to study. They are worth listening to because they have thought it through. It takes time to ponder the truth of God. And it is not just pondering the linguistics, although that is part of it. But you think of your audience, those people who are going to be in attendance this coming Sunday. You put yourself in their shoes. You feel where they are, people who want to be fed, people who want to meet God.

Sir Francis Bacon said, "Reading maketh a (broad) man, (speaking) a ready man, and writing an exact man." A great deal of help comes in getting a yellow pad and a pencil and just going through the process of hammering out what the passage is saying. Be exact! Part of your task is to be broad in your reading. John Wesley said, "Either read, or get out of the ministry." I read everything Steinbeck to Bombeck. I have time for, from other pastors, the preachers read commentators, the newspaper and numerous of yesteryear, the periodicals. Reading is my world. Without it I get stale. People in the congregation help me with suggestions on what to read. Many preachers will say they're too busy to study enough. Too busy to study? No wonder you're dull. Stay up later or get up earlier!

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Incidentally, I believe we as preachers should be confronted by the congregation when they realize that they have heard those stories before. We need people who will say, "This is old stuff Chuck. Come up with new stuff." We need listeners honest enough to say, "You could have done better." The preacher in Ecclesiastes pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs because he wanted the people to know that God is a God of quality, a God of precision, a God who says what he means and does not stumble or stammer at it. He says it straight, and it is so relevant that you don't even have to make it relevant --- just show how relevant it is.

My second observation about good preaching is that it is interesting. Look at the preacher in Ecclesiastes. He sought to find *delightful* words. The term translated delightful has been described as meaning "to feel great favor toward something" or to feel emotional delight. There are times in great preaching when you will get from God such an enormous and insightful body of truth that you will want to shout! And under this is a sense of certainty and ring of reliability that your interesting information is also accurate. In this connection, it's important to use language that is understood by everyone. Don't talk secret codes if you want to be interesting, if you want to be heard. Too many preachers talk to themselves when they preach. And make sure you deliver your message with enthusiasm. If it is not exciting to you, guess what?

George Whitefield swept the 18th century with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In one area he ministered every morning at 6 o'clock and people trudged through the snow to hear him. The Scottish sceptic David Hume was seen walking to the chapel where

Whitefield was to preach. An acquaintance saw him and said, “Mr. Hume, I did not know you believed this message.” “I don’t,” Hume replied, “but that man Whitefield does and I cannot stay away.” It is remarkable how enthusiasm draws people like a magnet to the truth of God.

To be interesting, you will need to stay away from cliches as well. Find new ways to express yourself, and you will be amazed at how much better you can hold people’s attention. A little humor will be great. Perhaps I use too much, but a little from time to time does not hurt at all. Spurgeon was often criticized for his humor, and on one occasion he said, “If you knew how much I held back you would be proud of me.” In America people laugh, and it’s remarkable how a chuckle or an outburst of laughter will assist in communicating God’s truth. Don’t be afraid of it --- I was afraid of it for too long.

Third point: Good communicators are also practical. Look at that word “goads.” It suggests prodding, pushing, getting under the skin. If you are good at exposition, you will be good at application. Exposition is not simply interpreting the Scriptures and then closing your Bible and saying, “Now may God apply this to our hearts and lives.” The Spirit of God used you to interpret, and I am convinced he would like to use you to apply. Are the teenagers listening to you? If they are not, that’s probably telling you something. They vote with their feet, you know. In our older building in Fullerton we had a balcony full of teenagers. I’m telling you, they were excitement personified!

One dear mother was disturbed about what was going on there. “Have you seen what they are doing?” she asked. “Yes” I said, “isn’t it absolutely wonderful!” It bothered her to see some of the kids sailing airplanes and doing other distracting stuff. I told her there could be something a whole lot worse, namely an empty balcony. They’re here, and loving it, because the worse from God’s Book are like goads. I talk their language. I live where they live, because I’ve still got two teens in my home, and listen to them. I apply God’s Book not just to one segment of the audience or another. I think of teenagers and that world they have to survive in. I think of the abused wife. I think of the broken-hearted, or the emotionally disturbed young person or older person. I think of the business professional, and I think of those who are divorced and lonely.

Those are the people that want to meet with God. They want to know what that Book has to say about life and how it can change their lives for the better. But I can hear some of you say, “Man, I can preach like that just by jumping up and getting at it. Why do I have to go through seminary?” Let me answer . . . these are principles that are valid at all levels of communication, but the church does not need some who have special training. The reason is said best by C. S. Lewis, an educated Christian who also happened to be a great communicator. “If all the world were Christian it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the church whether it exists inside or not. To be ignorant and simple now, not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground, would be to throw down our weapons and to betray our uneducated brethren who have no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist if for no other reason than because bad philosophy needs to be answered.”