

Special Delivery Sermons

by LORI CARRELL

If you're a preacher pursuing increased transformative impact, you may imagine that vocal expressiveness and word choice are decorative frills, but your listeners have a different perspective. In our ongoing sermon communication research with the Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership, listeners are unequivocal—your delivery influences your sermon's impact.

Delivery Impacts Your Message

Every act of human communication has content and relationship dimensions; we can never simply relay information without "commenting" on the relationship between us. Do I care about you? Do I care about the topic of conversation? Do I want us to interact again? These relational meanings are communicated through how something is said.

Delivery communicates the preacher's feelings about his or her listeners, the content, and the act of preaching. Your intent may be positive, but if you read in a monotone, speak with predictable expression, avoid eye contact, behave hesitantly, or choose vocabulary that's not as expressive as the language allows, you'll be communicating relational meanings that diminish transformation. Says one survey respondent, "It doesn't sound like he cares about the message or the listeners."

What we know of Jesus' delivery has become part of his message: thought-provoking parables, perplexing puzzle-phrases, and moving metaphors. Christ's word choices were memorable. Like your ultimate model, your primary tool for communicating spiritual truth is the spo-

ken word. Called to preach? Then you are called to the challenge of studying and crafting words—so that you may deliver the message as powerfully as possible.

Delivery Impacts Credibility

No public speaker has a greater demand for credibility than a preacher. The kind of credibility revealed by delivery is something listeners often call authenticity. Do you have passion for the message? Do you have compassion for the listeners? If so, does your delivery reveal those actual emotions? Your delivery affects your believability. "If he doesn't care, why should I?" scribbled a listener on a sermon survey. Indeed, this pastor may have cared, but the listener couldn't perceive caring in the delivery, so the credibility of the message and the messenger was compromised.

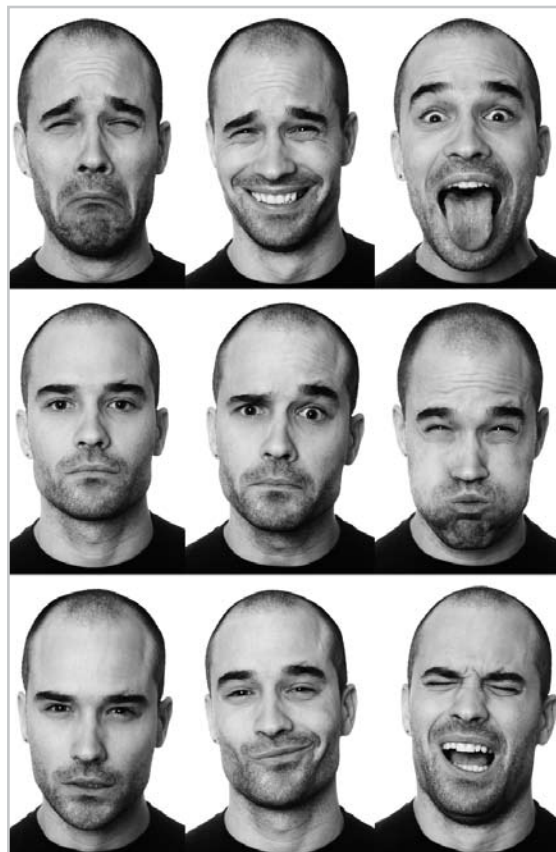
While other credibility issues may destroy a ministry career overnight, a perceived lack of authenticity can insidiously diminish results over time. If passion and compassion are not emotions you feel for your content, your listeners, or the hurting world, then spiritual-journey work is in order. If passion and compassion are present in you but not showing in your sermons, delivery work is needed.

In a recent sermon the pastor was visibly searching for a word to describe God's sovereignty and landed—seven times—on *awesome*. Imagine a different scenario for this pastor: In a pre-sermon dialogue group, he hears a parishioner tell a story

of trauma in which God's sovereignty was deeply and newly understood. The pastor meditates on the story, and then works—through oral rehearsal—to convey the awe that this listener experienced. In the process memories of peacefulness during a period of personal grieving resurface for him. When the pastor preaches this sovereignty sermon, the depth of conviction and emotion authentically revealed through language choice and vocal expression are powerful components of the biblically based message. No searching for words on the spot. No ornamental gesturing or PowerPoint trimmings. Words well up out of the journey, impacting credibility, with transformative results.

Delivery Impacts Inspiration

Do you know that a majority of listeners hope each week to be inspired by your sermon? Remember the typical listener profile revealed in this research: They already believe. They want to grow spiritually. But they usually leave church simply "reminded" of something they already knew. Statistically, sermons ►►



that inspire listeners to implement their beliefs are extremely rare.

Delivery is a critical component of inspiration. Rather than ramping up the volume, think about word choice. Inspiration includes reason and emotion. Said one woman in an affluent suburban church: "This series on Christ's tough teachings has been an inspiration. I never thought about the hunger of others being my responsibility. The way pastor talked about those people at the shelter—how much they needed tenderness and food—she made me see their faces and feel their feelings, and God moved me. I signed up to volunteer for the food pantry, and my friend is going to do the prison ministry." Inspirational delivery of biblical content can provoke listeners' thoughts, feelings, and actions.

When challenged about his uninspiring language usage, one preacher said, "We try to stay casual because we don't want people to think that Jesus or our church are, you know, like, out-of-touch. We want to make sure people see God



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as approachable." Yet a young listener in that church wrote, "The way he talks makes it sound like spiritual stuff is simple and easy—at the end of most sermons, I'm still thinking, *so what?*" Yes, listeners prefer a conversational delivery, but such a delivery can include inspirational language. How? Oral rehearsal at the editing stage of sermon preparation, not as a final "if I have time" polish.

Pop in a DVD of your last sermon. Listen carefully. Does your delivery enhance or distract from the message? Are the words you have chosen powerfully illuminating the content? Can you hear the compassion and passion you actually feel? Are you inspired?

Here's the research-based description of sermon delivery that contributes to transformative impact: *God's love communi-*

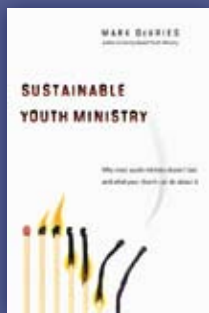
cated through sincere, warm, passionate delivery; conversational vocal variation; fluent, memorable, and appropriate word choices. You have the gifts necessary for such a delivery. What's required? An authentic spiritual journey. Pursuit of the powerful use of spoken language. A preaching priority that affects your calendar so prep time is sufficient. Commitment to oral rehearsal. And prayerful acceptance of this research result: Delivery is more than a decoration.



LORI CARRELL is professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin. This article is eighth in a series revealing results from the Lily-Endowed

Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership study. Rev! subscribers can access the previous articles in the back-issue library at rev.org.

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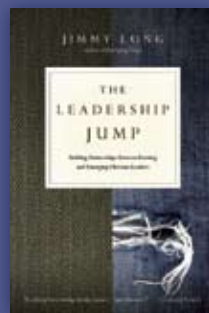


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