

# ‘Pastor Ain’t Broke— Don’t Fix Him’ (or Her)

by LORI CARRELL

Some of the listeners participating in the preaching research from the Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership scribbled surprises on their sermon surveys. One such commentator encouraged the researcher to “get a real job.” Another respondent stated, “This pastor is a hottie” and also added in smaller letters, “Yes, this is his wife.”

But no comment was more memorable than the listener who wrote in large capital letters: “PASTOR AIN’T BROKE—DON’T FIX HIM.” Point taken. Most of preachers are not broken, but listeners desperately need the most transformational preaching that they can create.

A small group of pastors has been working together for a year—not to fix what’s broken, but to maximize their preaching impact. While these ministers have many differences, they are unanimous about one thing: *changing preaching habits and improving preaching skill is hard work.* Listen in and learn from the kinds of things these pastors are saying about the challenges of better preaching:

## Discouragement

*“I have never been more convicted about the importance of preaching well. It was ‘easier’ when I was satisfied. Now that I’m aware of how people remember very little from sermons and how little they change as a result of them, I’m struggling. It takes more time, effort, thought, self-reflection, honesty, and prayer than I ever imagined to truly connect God’s word with the lives and minds of listeners. This process makes me more depen-*

*dent on the grace and power of God, even though I’m working harder on it than ever. I’ve quit assuming that I’m ‘good enough’ and that’s a vulnerable place to be.”*

*“When I realized my sermons weren’t even asking listeners to change, I quit blaming them for being stagnant. Procrastinating preaching preparation is a problem. I can always fill the time with something that seems important. As I made a commitment to preaching as a priority, I had to look at my time use honestly. The awareness discouraged me at first, but now it’s freeing. My own spiritual journey has been enhanced as I’ve become open to God speaking through me—in spite of me. I haven’t been this aware of my own spiritual life since my ordination.”*

## Defensiveness

*“I find myself creating theological arguments to justify my habits so I can keep from changing. I have heard and used such arguments to rationalize rambling, irrelevancy, and inadequate preparation. Right now I’m struggling with the inspiration piece, because I tell myself I don’t want to be an emotional manipulator. Truth is, I’d rather just stick to explanation. I’ve had to think a lot about what inspiration actually means to get past my*



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*anti-emotion argument. Motivating people is a challenge. Trying to use language well is really hard work. I’ll tell myself ‘I’m a teacher like Jesus,’ but really, I just don’t know how to be inspirational. Self-awareness is coming through prayer—and watching myself on videotape is painfully helpful, too.”*

*“When I listen to listeners in the pre-sermon dialogue group, I realize just how different I am from most of them. We read a passage of scripture and they react. Sometimes I wonder how in the world they could not see what I see or think what I think. I’ve realized more than once that if I had preached what I planned to, I would have been very far from where they were. So the impact would be...well, not very strong, though God is always at work. I’m actually trying to listen to what they are saying, and then, with lots of prayer, lead them from where they are to where I think God’s word is calling us. The biggest*

change for me has been opening up to their perspectives. That's an insight that has lowered my defensiveness. I used to think relevance meant pandering. I need to keep listening."

**Discipline**

"I have committed to rehearsing orally early in the week. The few times I've actually done it, my thoughts have become clarified and my organization has improved. I can feel the transitions shaping up as I edit out loud. People seem to notice a difference. But though I intend to rehearse orally every week, I know I can manage without it—I have for years—and I'm comfortable editing on the computer instead of out loud. So when I'm short on time, which is most weeks, I revert back to the way I've always done it. Good enough—better than most—but not what it could be. Oral rehearsal is not established as a habit yet, but it's a goal."

"My spouse, my listeners, my trusted peers—everyone it seems—says my sermons have too much information. My

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struggle to change is that I feel convicted to preach everything I see in the passage. My sub-points have sub-points and I've learned that even the most committed listeners can't maintain attention. But every week when I'm preparing I can't decide what to cut—it seems wrong to leave something out. Going deep on one key idea will lead to more impact than eight or nine points. I get that. But the discipline to do the cutting is a struggle. I sit at the computer and do battle. God, what should I leave out?"

**Development**

"I realized my sermons often had just one-liner applications at the end. After spending an entire sermon explaining that God's word tells us we should be forgiving, I'd say something like, 'So this week, work on forgiving someone.' Duh. The feedback from listeners was clear. Everyone in the room knew when they walked in that they should forgive others—they just don't know how to do it. Trouble is, neither do I. That process is complicated, and not something they can probably do in a week anyway. Being biblical keeps me in principles, but doesn't often provide a 'how to,' so I was leaving that out. By not developing that part of the

sermon, with some subjects especially, I have left people feeling helpless or even guilty."

"I started the pre-sermon listener dialogue group for one reason: to get implementation ideas. But even the listeners get stuck. So, how do we bless those who curse us? Silence. Our best tact has been story. I heard a story on '60 Minutes' of a whole community experiencing healing through the actions of one person. The week I preached by telling that story and then opening God's word at the end was a week God moved. Developing sermon content involves illuminating how to be who Jesus calls us to be by his grace. The development of my content takes way more work than I used to give it. I'm reading more widely, listening more intently, and paying attention to what people are saying and doing."

As you can see, the preaching of these committed ministers is not "broke." Nonetheless beware of danger in listener satisfaction. Such affirmation may be a well-deserved reaction to your good intentions and kind heart, but accepting adequacy as the standard for preaching impact could lead to complacency. Instead, continuously and prayerfully commit to asking yourself, *Is the revolutionary potential of the gospel proclaimed making its way into the life of this congregation as fully as possible?*



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