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Wandering in the Wilderness

by LORI CARRELL

What are typical troubles for those who wander while they preach?

Pastor Bob is committed to biblical preaching, and spends most of his sermon preparation time analyzing the text. He preaches through each passage, explaining verse by verse, concept by concept, and sometimes, word by word. His listeners experience what more than one has called a “hodge-podge.” Says a long-term listener, “Not sure how these ideas are connected to each other or to us—seems random. But PTL—everything he says comes from God’s word and we’re grateful.” Hearing such comments, Bob has worked to include cues to keep people on track, such as, “Now, verse three.”

Pastor Terri is frustrated because she runs out of time before material. “I’m always rushing at the end, because I don’t want to shortchange the substance. I need to start by reviewing last week, so it will all make sense.” Unfortunately, her (very

common) sermon structure has “application” as the last main point. What do listeners experience? Redundancy and disappointment! Familiar content is over-explained and the implementation ideas they crave rarely come. “Does she think we can’t understand?” says a listener. “‘Love my enemies.’ Why does it take 40 minutes to explain that simple sentence, but we only get 40 seconds on how to do it? That’s the hard part!” In her last sermon, the series synopsis took the first 14 minutes. “It’s such good stuff,” Terri explains. “I don’t want them to miss a thing.”

Pastor Carlos learned topical, deductive organization from his mentor, a powerful preaching professor. He draws three to eight main points from the passage each week, and each of those points has several sub-points supported by separate scriptures. Said a listener, “There are so many Bible verses that I just get overwhelmed.” At the suggestion of his wife, Carlos has started using PowerPoint scripture slides and a “fill-in-the-blank” outline in the

bulletin. “People’s attention spans are just getting shorter and shorter,” he complained to his mentor in an e-mail. Says a listener (who admits he didn’t get all of the blanks filled in this Sunday), “I know he’s really smart about the Bible but I just feel lost most of the time.”

Pastors who have worked to increase the transformative impact of their preaching by maximizing listener energy have some practical suggestions for Bob, Terri, Carlos ... and maybe even you.

How can sermon wanderers find their way out of the wilderness?

BOB: Start with a change in your preparation process. Exegete, but reserve prep time to organize. Let your diligent study of scripture lead to the prayerful *selection of a sermon subject and response goal that you craft into one concise sentence*. That’s right. One sentence. Terri and Carlos can benefit from this idea too. The *focus* provided by that central sentence can then guide a disciplined selection of scriptural content, illustrative material, and main ideas. In this sermon research, even expert evaluators have difficulty discerning a central transformative concept in more than half of the sermons. A pastor who has made this change said, “Struggling for this sentence has dramatically changed my preaching. I tune in to the Spirit and ask, ‘What am I actually trying to say?’”

TERRI: Let your opening words generate listener energy and create high expectation for transformation. Start your sermon by connecting your listeners to your topic, cultivating readiness for compelling content from God's word. A loop back to last week can often take no more than a well-crafted sentence, and needs to come *after* listeners are riveted with this week's fresh focus. If you or they want to revisit last week, put the audio on your Web site.

CARLOS: If you are stuck in a structural rut, check a public speaking textbook for ideas. *Biblical preaching can take many shapes.* Let the scripture-generated subject and response goal guide your arrangement of content. An East coast preacher recently did just that, using a problem-solution structure to deal with grief. He began by telling the painful story of a murder-suicide in the community that left three children orphaned, and then asked the question on everyone's mind, "What can possibly be done in the face of such overwhelming sorrow?" After a pause, this spiritual leader opened the scripture to read Psalm 88:9, "My eyes are dim with grief. I call out to you, O Lord, every day. I spread out my hands to you." A time of prayer for all involved followed, as the congregation literally spread out their hands and called out to God. The pastor closed that service urging a commitment to such daily prayer as community healing began.

ALL PREACHERS: *think like a listener.* Watch a video of yourself preaching. Don't look at your notes, outlines, or slides. Can you follow it? When it's over, what do you remember? What do you feel? What are you ready to do? Perhaps you are especially good at cramming info into your brain, but *auditory processing* is a different task than you might be imagining. *Supporting scripture with scripture until we're saturated is not serving your listeners well.* Try vivid descriptions, thought-provoking analogies, current testimonies ... all *revealing* the truth of scripture. Imagine a sermon that alludes to every mention of angels in the Bible, on the premise of being true to

the text: TMI - Too Much Information! In this case, TMS (Too Much Scripture!)

BOB: Be sure that thread of your central sentence is woven through the sermon. *As you move from one point to the next, provide conceptual links that transition rather than announce.* Listeners need to hear how the coming idea is connected to the previous idea. They cannot read your mind or your manuscript. If listeners have to do the work of stringing together what they perceive as disconnected gems of wisdom, they will have less listening energy for the spiritual growth work they need to be doing as you preach.

TERRI: *Work out those central ideas verbally prior to stepping in the pulpit.* The sermon is an oral product that calls for an oral preparation process. Remember, spoken language clarifies thinking. There's no need to keep explaining if say it well the first time. The gift of time that comes from more concise explanations will assure that your vital "applica-

tion" material is not simply shoved into your conclusion. *Over-explaining zaps listener energy.*

Want to lead wandering listeners out of the sermon wilderness? This research with hundreds of preachers and over 20,000 listeners shows that well-organized sermons look like this: Main ideas clear and organized for auditory processing; focus maintained; transitions used; introduction and conclusion well-constructed and compelling; consistent integration of text into structure; and time well-used.



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