

Transformative Teaching: Lessons Learned

by LORI CARRELL

What do you call that thing you do on Sunday morning—when you talk and other people listen? A survey of Protestant pastors participating in the *Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership* revealed that 85 percent think of themselves as “teachers” and *not* as “preachers.” Why? Most important, we need to discover if thinking of yourself as a “teacher” can affect the impact of your sermons.

WHY DO SO MANY PREACHERS CALL THEMSELVES ‘TEACHERS’?

Countering Connotations

“I get uncomfortable when you use the word ‘preaching,’” said a pastor from the Midwest. “It’s just not something I want my people to think of when they think of me.” The top reason provided by pastors for this teaching term was “disassociation with negative connotations.” Ministers imagine their listeners as sufferers of a collective pulpit-banging hangover. A quick word association with “preaching” had pastors in this study predicting that their listeners would say things like “manipulative,” “pressuring,” “authoritarian,” “moralizing,” “lecturing,” and “judgmental.” Still others expected listeners to conjure up images of the most egregious televangelists.

Communicating Accessibility

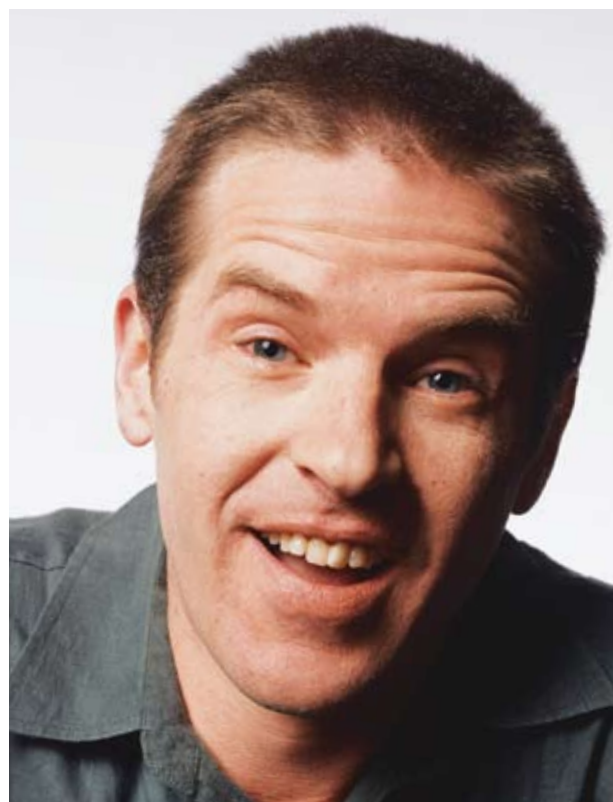
As pastors describe their teaching style, they picture a particular type of informal

delivery. The second most common reason given for identifying with *teacher* instead of *preacher* is the perception that this style contributes to making the gospel more accessible. Out from behind the pulpit, this approachable speaker-type maintains direct eye contact and avoids intensity in volume. Most important to the teaching style, according to pastors, is common, casual talk and the avoidance of religious jargon. Said one minister, reflecting the majority, “*Speaking in a way that helps me be seen as a teacher and not a preacher is very important to my ministry. I want people to know I am just one of them, not someone different, not more righteous or spiritual.*”

Now while some would suggest that the term doesn’t matter, how we talk about something can indeed shape how people think about that thing. A listener recently shared through her tears how a shift away from sexist language in a regularly recited church prayer had positively affected her spiritual journey. So, kudos to pastors who have made this shift in terminology. Given such positive intentions, the trend deserves inspection.

MORE IMPACT FOR TEACHER-PREACHERS?

This research reveals that those who



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self-label as “teachers” are more likely to have an *informative purpose* and spend a majority of sermon time *explaining*. In addition, they are less likely to directly ask for specific change during a sermon, less likely to rehearse orally, and less likely to use language well than their self-labeled “preaching” counterparts. Unfortunately, such characteristics are also associated with less than transformative sermons, according to listeners.

One pastor suggested that ministers should stop calling themselves teachers based on these findings, yet the very best teachers do use their public spoken words to transform. Rather than throwing out the term, perhaps we need to examine the teaching identity more fully. Researchers have been studying communication in the classroom for decades, measuring student learning to determine what works. Teaching that results in lasting learning is an art, and in the case of teaching that emanates from scripture, a sacred art. So, “teacher” preachers, please challenge yourself to prayerfully consider these lessons learned from teaching research:

Teachers as Change Agents

Some of the very worst of us professors have contributed to negative connotations for teachers—disseminators of irrelevant information that moves via monotone from yellowed notes to students' short-term memories for test-regurgitation. Lecture-pit memories anyone? The "ivory tower" phrase is (unfortunately) widely understood. Surely pastors don't want to trade one set of negative connotations for another. "Teaching" and "telling" should not be synonymous.

So, think about the best teacher in your life. Permanent impact, right? Teaching begins to become transformative when the person in the teaching role embraces a change agent identity. Teachers who are passionate about the potential impact of both their content and their learners are teachers who make a difference. Moving from informer to transformer requires communication not only of "what" but also "why" and "how."

Teachers as Dialogue Facilitators

Thinking of skipping this section because



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your church context or size just won't allow dialogue in a worship service? Think again. Dialogue actually means "the word between us." The best teachers—even when lecturing—are mentally engaging their listeners. Enter the classroom of an excellent teacher and witness nearly continual interaction. Such teachers move classroom process forward by asking well-planned open-ended questions, integrating students' responses into course content, and provoking student discovery. Challenging and affirming, they model and motivate.

Whatever you perceive your setting allows, is it possible for you to move one step in the direction of dialogue? For example, if you have no clue what your listeners think about a passage or topic, ask some of them *before* you preach. If

the comments you get following sermons are superficial, create mechanisms for content-based feedback with surveys or blogs. Can you stop for a moment mid-sermon to allow listeners to write or chat in response to an open-ended question? How about a provocative question to think about for next week? Said a surveyed listener, "In a good sermon, the preacher is talking with an audience, including them in the message so they have the opportunity to mentally participate." A monologue mentality does not serve transformative

impact in either the classroom or the sanctuary.

Teachers as Learning Leaders

Teacher-preachers are onto something when they pursue approachability. Investigate teacher communication literature and you will find study after study documenting teacher approachability as key to student motivation and learning. But a commitment to approachability must not negate leadership. What are your expectations for your learners' spiritual growth? How do you communicate those expectations? It matters! In a recent listener communication workshop, parishioners repeatedly challenged their pastors to more "courageous" preaching.

Take note of an interesting teaching phenomenon called "grade inflation." Professors perceive that student work and motivation are inadequate, but as they expect less, they begin to give higher grades for mediocrity. A cycle is created, as low expectations fuel low levels of learning. If higher expectations are clearly communicated, student learning skyrockets. What educational objectives did Scripture and Spirit direct you to set for your Sunday teaching last week? Christ's disciples will forgive, love their enemies, participate in community, forsake materialism, and give sacrificially. Are we there yet? Are you courageously and compassionately leading your learners as you teach?



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