Volume #2, #3 July 2021

The ADC Disciple

Anabaptist Disciples of Christ is an affiliation of Conservative Anabaptist churches seeking likeminded fellowship, instruction, and accountability in church administration and congregational life in the Biblical pattern of the Apostolic church.

How to Improve Your Preaching

by Kevin DeYoung

For the past few years I've been thinking often about how I can improve as a preacher. I'm 42 years old, and I've been preaching pretty much every week since I was 25. In that time I've preached around 75 different messages every year. You can do the math; that's a lot of sermons. I hope my sermons are better than they used to be.

And I hope I am still improving. Preaching is a funny thing. It's part science and part art. It takes a lot of hard work and discipline, but also a tremendous amount of creativity. As a pastor, nothing feels as satisfying as a good sermon, and almost everything feels easier to do.

Evaluating preaching is extremely difficult. I've heard sermons that are models of the craft, but lack all unction and power. I've also heard disastrous sermons, from a technical standpoint, that nevertheless communicate the biblical text in an effective way and connect with the heart on a deep level. I bet I've preached both kinds of sermons.

If homiletical evaluation is tricky, it's also terribly subjective. I know some people think my preaching is too meaty. Other people have said I have too much humor. They may both be right, or both wrong. It's hard to say. Even our preaching heroes elicit varying responses. Spurgeon was undoubtedly brilliant, but was he a model expositor? Lloyd-Jones is one of my favorites, but he had all sorts of habits that should not be imitated. There is no one way to preach a faithful, effective sermon, and no one way to evaluate sermons. Even if I could get the godliest members in my congregation to give me the most candid feedback about my preaching, I imagine I would hear—along with many common themes—a wide variety of strengths and weaknesses.

But back to my main point: I want to get better. I may be a leader, counselor, manager, team builder, writer, teacher, mentor, discipler, editor, fundraiser, and a dozen others things as a pastor. But as the senior pastor the main thing I do is preach. I'd like to be as good at this one thing as possible. If others are supposed to see my progress (1 Timothy 4:15), I hope one area in which they see progress is my preaching.

So I keep listening to other preaching (although less than when I was a younger preacher), and I keep on reading (and re-reading) books on preaching. I don't hold myself up as a homiletical model. I resonate with Lloyd-Jones's comment that he wouldn't walk across the street to hear himself preach. But since the dear saints at Christ Covenant do walk across the street to hear me preach, I want to preach as winsomely and faithfully as I can.

Questions to Ask

Here, then, are 11 questions I've been asking myself as I think about improving as a preacher. I don't use these as any kind of weekly checklist, but these are the sorts of things rattling through my head and heart.

1. Am I cutting corners in my preparation? I'm not a slave to any particular rule about time spent in study. The whole "one hour in study for every minute in the pulpit" has always seemed ridiculously unattainable, and usually makes for overly stuffed sermons. The longer I'm a preacher, the less time it takes to produce a good sermon. That's the way it should be with anyone in any craft. I'm also sympathetic to the pastor who has Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Sunday school, and Wednesday evening prep to do. There simply aren't enough hours in the week to produce four (or three? or sometimes two?) quality messages. You have to borrow old material. You have to give one of those settings less than your best. But all those caveats aside, I want to make sure I'm not in the habit of recycling old material for the main teaching time, or leaning on the digested work of others, or letting all the demands of ministry crowd out my preparation week after week. Good sermons take time.
2. Did I learn anything new in my preparation? I love teaching and preaching because I love

learning. I have to use old material at times (especially when speaking outside my church), but the thrill of preaching is much less that way. Half the excitement is having learned something new during the week that I get to share with others. Basically, preachers can hold the congregation's attention in three ways: with the force of their personality, with the genius of their stories, or with the intellectual stimulation of their content. Of course, the Spirit is at work too and can work through all of these. But I think too many preachers run out of interesting things to say so they fall back on their own pathos (sometimes manufactured) to keep people engaged each week.

3. Was I personally moved by anything in my preparation? I don't just want to learn new things in my study. I want to feel new things, or have old affections rekindled. It is hard for a sermon to move others that hasn't first moved us.
4. Did the best parts of the sermon come from my closest attention to the text? Too often, the real payoff in the sermon has little to do with exegetical insight from the passage. The power (or so it seems) comes from an illustration, a rant, or a well-placed aside instead of from the treasures we've unearthed from the Bible in the past week.
5. Did the mood of the sermon match the mood of the text? Sermons sound the same when the text always takes on the personality of the preacher. So, if you are a caring, tender shepherd, every sermon sounds like a soothing balm of Gilead. If you are a rebuker and exhorter, every sermon feels like a finger in your chest. It's impossible to completely divorce the preacher's personality from the sermon, but every preacher must be careful that he lets the text set the mood not his personality. Gospel-centered preaching doesn't mean every sermon feels like the same message about acceptance in Christ. Sermons should be comforting, threatening, indicative-based, imperative-heavy, transcendent, or immanent depending on the mood of the text.
6. Am I getting enough sleep? It's hard to be emotionally healthy, intellectually rigorous, and rhetorically creative when you are exhausted.
7. Am I getting consistent exercise? You've read all the studies: our brains work better when are bodies are engaged in regular movement and activity. The best sermon prep is often a long walk.
8. Am I reading well and reading widely? To be sure, you can be a good preacher without being an avid reader. Not all preachers in all places at all times have had the access to good books that we have. But most people reading this blog have access to an embarrassment of theological, educational, and literary resources. I know I am much better equipped for the intense outflow that is congregational preaching, when I have a strong inflow of ideas from other sources. That means I need books, articles, stories, lectures, or almost anything that keeps my mind fresh, stretched, and engaged.
9. Am I thinking through the pacing and dynamics of my preaching style? We all have different personalities that will shape our sense of fast and slow, of loud and quiet. The key is not some rigid standard of uniformity, but the thoughtful variation of speed and sound. When I suggested on another occasion that we might want to shorten our sermons, the advice wasn't meant to eliminate important content. Rather, the comment was borne out of the conviction that many of us can eliminate unimportant content. We spin our wheels in preaching instead of moving on to the next point. We stay at one emotional pitch during the entire sermon. We are tour guides who only know one way of showing people around the gallery.
10. Have I considered experimenting with what I bring into the pulpit? I was taught in seminary to preach without notes. I did that for several years until I felt like I was wasting hours memorizing each week. I've tried using manuscripts too. That's what most of my friends seem to do. The discipline is good for me, and it makes the sermons much more useful in the rear-view mirror. For most of my ministry, however, I've used full-ish notes. I used to bring 6-7 pages of notes, then 5-6, now it's usually 4 pages. Each method—notes, no notes, manuscript—have their pros and cons. Why not try out one of the other approaches from time to time to see what you might like or learn?
11. Did I pray?

I still have lots to learn, but I am hoping to get better. Preachers, let's give ourselves to this task with renewed zeal and discipline. Congregants, please pray for your pastor when he stumbles and encourage him when he hits the mark. And if you think we need help, keep in mind most pastors are more sensitive than they let on.

Used with permission. Kevin DeYoung (PhD, University of Leicester) is senior pastor of Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina, board chairman of The Gospel Coalition, and assistant professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (Charlotte). He has authored numerous books, including Just Do Something. *Kevin and his wife, Trisha, have nine children: Ian, Jacob, Elizabeth, Paul, Mary, Benjamin, Tabitha, Andrew, and Susannah.*

Is God Building Up or Pulling Down?

by Dan Bouchelle

During the 22 years I was a preacher in a local church, the most difficult question I was asked routinely was, "How is the church doing?" I never knew what to say. How do you measure this? Should we count how many people show up for Sunday worship? How many baptisms we've had this year? Whether or not we're meeting our budget? How many people are truly on a discipleship track? How well are we impacting our city with tangible expressions of hope, justice, and righteousness? How enjoyable or challenging it is to be part of the congregation?

How do you measure the status of a church? That is even harder on a national or global scale. So, how is the church doing today?

How do you measure the status of a church?

From a global perspective, things look great if you measure growth rates. As I noted in my introductory post in this blog, this is a great time to be alive and love Jesus. Christianity is the world's fastest-growing religion by conversion. While there are certainly reasons for concern about the decline of the church in the former Christendom western countries, globally, Jesus is on the move.

Surprisingly, the country where faith in Jesus is growing fastest is Iran. That's right. A country known as a pillar of Islamic extremism and religious oppression is experiencing an underground movement to Christ with an average annual growth rate of about 12%. This is true despite heavy oppression. I have visited with many refugees from Iran, some still Muslim and others now disciples of Jesus. They tell horrifying stories of their government surveilling, threatening, deporting, imprisoning, torturing, and even executing followers of Jesus. One new brother in Christ from Tehran told me in 2017 that four people from his underground church were beheaded for their faith. While that is not a typical story, it is very common to hear of arrests, imprisonments, and torture of Christians.

One of the Iranian believers who works with some of the disciple-makers we trained at MRN told a group of us in 2019 that he was first moved to seek Jesus because of the way Christians in prison with him responded to torture. This brother had gone on to baptize over 500 Muslim-background people by 2019 and continues to be a powerful disciple-maker in a European country today.

In Iran, if you call the number listed at the end of a satellite-broadcasted Christian program, you will get a call from the government warning you never to do that again. The Islamic regime is doing all it can to stop their people from coming to Christ, but it is not working. The masses are worn out with radical repression in Mohammed's name and are turning to Jesus despite persecution. There may be as many as 800,000 to 1,000,000 Jesus followers in Iran, though numbers are hard to get.

Describing how the church is doing in Iran is not easy. It is growing but oppressed. You can't find it in the open. As an institution, it is missing, but as a people movement, it is thriving. It has no political power, but it is feared by politicians with power. The same is true in other countries as well.

My point isn't to chronicle how God is on the move in the Muslim world, as much as I love that story. For more on that, visit this page on our website. My point is that we should be cautious about presuming to know how the mission of God is doing at any given moment, as it is much more complex than what we can grasp."

This matters right now in my home country of the USA and many other countries that are in troubled times. In the USA, the church's institutional expression among the majority population was stagnant at best or even in decline before the pandemic. Now some experts are claiming 1 out of 5 congregations will never reopen when the pandemic is over. Every church is likely to experience a significant decline in attendance. Things have changed, and we fear the worst.

Are we being cut back or cut off?

Add to that the tension over various issues within our nation, and church life has not been an easy experience of late. But what does that mean? We feel pushed in the dirt. Are we being planted or buried? To borrow Jesus' parable from John 15, the farmer has come into his vineyard with a knife, and we feel the cuts. **Are we being cut back or cut off?** Is this a pruning of deadwood to make us more fruitful, or is the vine beyond recovery? **That likely depends on how we respond to this moment** (see Jeremiah 18:5-10).

I have for years been helped by a sermon from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, based on Matthew 16:13-18, which he preached on July 23, 1933, just as the German church was voting to endorse Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Bonhoeffer was a leader in the church resistance movement against the Nazis. He would eventually help form an underground seminary and was executed right before Germany was liberated by Allied forces.

At the moment when the complicity of the institutional church with Hitler was just beginning, Bonhoeffer preached this sermon to remind his congregation that assessing how the church is doing is beyond our ability. Jesus did not command Peter and the other apostles to build the church. That was his job. What faithfulness requires in this moment may cost us many people and all political influence. It may be the end of the institutional church for a time. So be it. We are not responsible for outcomes but obedience. Jesus called his followers to confess him, to proclaim him, regardless of what that produced in their world. We trust that Jesus will build his triumphant church in his time. Here is my favorite part of that sermon which serves as a useful word for us today:

But it is not we who build. He builds the church. No human being builds the church but Christ alone. Whoever intends to build the church is surely well on the way to destroying it; for he will build a temple to idols without wishing or knowing it. We must confess–he builds. We must proclaim–he builds. We must pray to him–that he may build. We do not know his plan. We cannot see whether he is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are times of collapse are for him the great times of construction. It may be that from a human point of view great times for the church are actually times of demolition. It is a great comfort which Christ gives to his church: you confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is my province. Do what is given to you to do well and you have done enough. But do it well. Pay no heed to views and opinions, don't ask for judgments, don't always be calculating what will happen, don't always be on the lookout for another refuge! Let the church remain the church! But church – confess, confess, confess! Christ alone is your Lord, from his grace alone can you live as you are. Christ builds."

(in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. GB Kelly & FB Nelson, 1990)

Used with permission.
Dan Bouchelle is the President of Mission Resource Network.
http://www.mrnet.org

PASTOR SPOTLIGHT

Judson and Amy Schrock are serving at Bethel Fellowship Church, Berlin, Ohio. Jud was ordained as an Associate Pastor on July 14, 2019. They have eight children – Whitney (22); Amanda (20) married to Jeremiah Miller; Sara (19); Annie (16); Isaiah (13); Benjamin (11); Lily (9); and Autumn (7). Jud is employed in sales at Berlin Gardens but will in the near future be the Administrator of Legacy Christian School. He will also be assisting his wife in her home business of Cottage Lights Candle.

Jud was involved in the Fair Play Camp School in South Carolina for twenty years as a Counselor, Supervisor, and Director. The Schrock family also served at the Comeraugh Wilderness Camp in Ireland for two years during which Jud served as Director. Jud also serves ADC by being on the missions development committee.

Jud recommends the book *Winning with People* by John Maxwell.

Jud reflects on his pastoral journey – "Being a pastor has been a real blessing. The moments of joy experienced in fellowship with God when preparing a sermon and also seeing the power of God in the renewing of a personal life that you work with are some of the joys I have experienced. My prayer for the calling God has placed on my life is to help people connect deeply with God and help them experience the joy that comes from walking with Jesus."

Thank you Jud, Amy, and family for your faithful service to Christ and the Church!

Wedding of Jeremiah and Amanda at
Walnut Creek Mennonite Church, Sugarcreek, OH

ADC Church Profile —

Berea Christian Fellowship, Nappanee, Indiana, was founded in 1962. The current membership is 135 from approximately 55 households.

The current pastoral team is composed of James Yoder, Lead Pastor; Keith Yoder; Leighton Yoder; and Jake Frey. Lavern Kuhns and Kermit Zimmerman serve as Deacons.

BCF started in 1962 when numerous young, energetic families wanted a deeper, spiritual church experience than their current fellowship. Very quickly more families were added, and by all appearances BCF seemed to be a healthy, thriving community of believers. However, zeal without spiritual maturity can wreak havoc. Within ten years of the church's inception, the members faced differences they found difficult to reconcile. When the dust finally settled, only a few families remained and for the next ten years the church would barely survive. But God was not finished writing His story. Today there is a healthy balance of senior, middle-aged, and younger families that comprise this body of believers.

BCF met in a rural setting until December 2019 when the membership bought a larger facility in their hometown of Nappanee due to outgrowing their original structure. Transitioning to an urban setting was a new experience but BCF members pray it will translate into being Salt and Light in their local neighborhood.

The demographics of the attendees has shifted significantly to a more urban setting than it did in earlier days. Many of these families have reached out to their neighbors and a few have even opted to move into the local trailer park as an opportunity for ministry. BCF has geared some Sunday evening activities in effort to reach out locally.

BCF is one of the supporting churches of United Christian School, a local Christian school that also partners with another local fellowship, Sandy Ridge Mennonite Church. In addition, the school draws students from a variety of other churches.

The church youth have also geared their activities to minister to local needs. They host an annual banquet for local first responders. This event, which includes the mayor, is warmly received. They also host an annual Valentines banquet that draws a broad spectrum of attendees and typically has a waiting list for those wanting to attend. They also do an annual, week-long mission trip that alternates yearly between in-country and out-of-country trips.

BCF has numerous youth and families that are also serving in a variety of organizations. Two families were serving in Myanmar, but COVID and - more recently - a military coup have currently interrupted their service.

The goal of BCF is to have a healthy vision of ministry both locally and abroad.

BCF mission statement: "Many people are hurt, lonely, and confused. BCF is a caring community of Christfollowers, committed to disciple individuals to a life of peace and purpose in Christ."

Interesting trivia – Twenty-two out of the fifty-five households live within the city limits of Nappanee.

PLANNING COMMITTEE
James Yoder – *Chairman*
Lonnie Beachy – *Vice-Chairman*
Paul A. Miller – *Secretary-Treasurer*

Nate Yoder – *Editor*
614-736-1727
janate3@frontier.com

P.O. Box 55, Walnut Creek, OH 44687 | anabaptistdisciplesofchrist.org