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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.

Five Mistakes Most Preachers Make

by Cary Nieuwhof

So maybe you're a preacher, or you listen to preachers (or stopped listening to preachers). Almost everyone has a perspective on what makes or doesn't make for a great sermon.

I've been preaching regularly for over 25 years, so I know a little bit about the head games preachers play with themselves.

What you do before a Sunday morning ever begins, for the most part, determines what happens on a Sunday morning. Chances are you've struggled through the mistakes below. I have. And what's hard for preachers is that we always make our mistakes in public.

How you approach preaching ultimately determines how you preach, which, of course, also determines how your audience interacts with your message and the effectiveness of your message.

Here are 5 preaching mistakes I've made from time to time. They're also mistakes I've seen others make far too often.

1. Failing To Get To The Right Kind Of Simplicity

Complexity is the enemy of great communication.

Come on, you know what I'm talking about. We've all sat through talks where we felt lost, and sadly, we've probably given a few of those talks as well.

But complexity is also a natural companion of preachers. Here's why. You are doing the difficult task of trying to relate God's word with our world. And both are complex. The Scripture is an ancient text that requires background, nuance, and understanding to communicate it well. And the human condition within you and around is, well, also complex.

Too many preachers settle for simplicity on the front side of complexity.

A lot of preachers get lost in the complexity. It's exceptionally difficult to push through the complexity of the text and the complexity of the human condition to get to a great message.

As a result, some preachers never wrestle through the issues sufficiently and just dump their unresolved, complicated ideas in front of a congregation and call it a sermon. Bad idea.

Others fight for greater simplicity. The best communicators make complex issues seem simple. That's been true for thousands of years, and there are the seeds of genius in it if you can do it consistently.

But here's the challenge: there's are two kinds of simplicity: simplicity on the front side of complexity, and simplicity on the other side of complexity.

There's a world of difference between them. Here's how to get the right kind of simplicity.

Too many preachers settle for simplicity on the front side of complexity. They find a simple line that sounds true but fails to really engage the scripture passage or life particularly well. You see them all the time on Instagram.

Maybe they're lines like "God loves prayer because he cares" or "God never gives a reason out of season." What do those things even mean? Sure…they rhyme, but they're trivial statements that don't really carry weight.

To me, it's always a sign that the communicator hasn't really thoughtfully tackled an issue. Simplistic never weathers the storms of life.

But there's a second kind of simplicity: simplicity on the other side of complexity. Preachers who have wrestled the text, faith, life, God, angels, and demons struggle deeply with complexity. And on the other side, if they stick with it, they bring insight that makes deeply complex matters easier to understand.

Steve Jobs leveraged simplicity on the other side of complexity when he introduced a phone that got rid of all the clutter of every other phone on the marketplace and introduced one screen. Elon Musk is doing it right now as he cuts through all the weirdness of electric and hybrid cars to produce a model that simply, cleanly and now, more affordably, works. These are leaders who worked through exceptionally complicated issues to find simplicity.

Preachers can do the same thing with ideas. It's just hard work to get there.

I've been working on a series on the book of Jonah for a while. It took me months to figure out the main approach to the book, but I came up with a simple sentence that crystallized the message of the book (and, in some respects, the Gospel) for me: God doesn't run away from runaways.

It's just six words, but it's the essence of the book (both Jonah and the Ninevites have run away) and in many ways reflects the Gospel itself. It has teeth and carries weight but it's memorable. And memorable, done right, is portable.

Memorable, done right, is portable.

Other examples of bottom lines that for me have crystallized things after wrestling down complex issues include:

Live in a way today that will help you thrive tomorrow (the antidote to burnout)

98% of pastoral care is having someone who cares (on what biblical pastoral care truly is)

Fixing your mind on Christ fixes your mind (on how to approach the self-talk that destroys us)

If you want to learn more about how to craft simple statements that convey complex truths, I wrote about the methodology here.

Do you have to have a bottom line for your message? No, of course not. But I agree with Andy Stanley that if you can't summarize your message in a single sentence, you don't understand it well enough to preach it.

Before you jump to criticize, remember, simple is not simplistic. Simple is clear, and it's memorable. Simple allows complex truth to live in the hearts of people in a memorable way.

2. Making The Bottom Line More Important Than The Text

So let's say you have a bottom line that you think works. Great.

You may be tempted to make the bottom line more important than the biblical text. Don't.

The goal of preaching is not to have a memorable bottom line, it's to help people find God's story in their story. And the text bridges that gap.

The scripture is always more important than what the preacher says about the scripture.

Don't make the text subservient to your clever bottom line. It's a trap I can fall into frequently if I'm not careful.

3. Making Your Exposition More Important Than the Text

At this point expository preachers are probably smiling smugly, thinking "Well, we'd never boil down God's truth to a single sentence. I preach biblically, not topically."

Great stuff. I've preached both ways and both have a role in the Kingdom for sure.

Except it's also really easy to make your exposition of the text more important than the text.

Second challenge: many preachers haven't wrestled past complexity to get to simplicity or even clarity.

Every preaching form has its pitfall, including expository preaching. This should surprise no one, since, after all, every preacher is a sin-stained human being.

4. Treating the Text As If It Was More Important Than Jesus

There's a lot of discussion about scripture these days, but what if the ultimate goal of preaching was not to get people to love the text, but instead to love Jesus?

I think that's what Jesus was driving at when he talked about scripture not being an end in itself, but rather pointing to him as the source of all life.

I have to remind myself of that all the time. The point is not to have a great bottom line people remember or even a text that comes to life, but to make sure that my preaching points everyone back to Christ (through the scriptures).

The goal of preaching isn't correct thinking; it's transformed lives.

The scripture can't give life. Only Jesus can. And the reason scriptures have life is because of Christ.

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5. Trying To Cover Too Much

Most preachers are far too ambitious in what they want to cover in 30-40 minutes. Our ambition plagues us on multiple levels.

First, it's usually best to keep a single sermon to a single big idea. When you say three different things, you usually end up saying nothing.

If you have three ideas, turn them into three separate messages. Teach a series, rather than trying to cram it all into a single moment.

The same dynamic plagues most of us in a single message. You may have one idea, but too often you try to cram too much content into that single message.

Why does that happen?

I can tell you why that happens to me. Most days, I'm afraid I don't have enough to say.

Guess what. In a quarter century of preaching and speaking, I've never been short of material. In fact, the opposite usually happens. I scramble to fit it all in in the 30-40 minutes allotted. When that happens, the ending (one of the most important parts of your message) suffers most.

So how do you get around this tension? Simple. Be willing to live with the fear that you won't have enough to say.

You'll deliver the message better because you won't be rushed. You'll have more space for grace and intentional pauses. And content will come to you in the moment that as you deliver your message with a more natural pacing.

Used with permission. Cary is the founding pastor of Connexus Church and began serving in ministry in central Ontario in 1995. He is passionate about leading people into a relationship with Christ and helping people thrive in life and leadership.

The Ministry of Death

by Steve Bezner

The death of his faithful ones is valuable in the LORD's sight.

—Psalm 116:15

Death is part of life, particularly the life of a pastor. We must counsel those grieving the loss of a loved one. We must walk with those who have received a terminal diagnosis. Funerals must be performed with a solid and steady manner. On occasion, we must sit with someone transitioning from this world into eternity.

There is a ministry of death.

Death is a tender moment— where the spiritual and the physical come together. You are called to shepherd in this moment.

Lately, our church has walked through the valley of the shadow of death. We have had a dozen or so deaths in a matter of weeks. I'm using this opportunity to coach one of our younger staff members in this ministry. Through the process, I am reminded that not everyone has had the opportunity to minister through death. With that in mind, I would like to share some of the practices I've learned over the years.

This list is by no means comprehensive, and I am certain many pastors would be able to add their own practices. These practices are not ranked in order of importance. They are simply thoughts regarding how to shepherd people in the moment of loss—so that we might make death a ministry.

The first ministry is that of presence.

Years ago I learned the difference between the pastoral response and the theological response. Theologically speaking, the Lord has numbered each of our days (Job 14:5). Theologically speaking, the Lord is sovereign over each moment. This is completely true. But this is not always what needs to be said in the raw moments of grief.

Our first ministry is that of presence. Show up. Sit down. Pray. Say, "I am so sorry." Then you should be quiet. You do not need to say anything in this moment. This is the pastoral moment to mimic the Incarnation. Just as Jesus walked among us and identified with our struggles, this is the moment to sit with the hurting and the grieving. Help with logistics. Get coffee or a meal. Be pastoral first.

Just as Jesus walked among us and identified with our struggles, death is the moment to sit with the grieving.

Theology must be appropriately timed.

There will come a time when the theological questions will come. Or a time will occur when you can naturally point to the Lord. If the death is a surprise or under especially tragic circumstances, you want to speak

the truth, but you want to do it in a way that is also loving. You do not need to feel the pressure to write hagiography, but you also do not need to berate. Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Speak in a way that you are truthful but also with an eye to shepherding those who are not part of a church for years to come.

The pastoral response in grief is "with-ness" first; theology second. Theology is useless until the heart is ready to receive it. Weep with those who weep first. Then, when folks are ready to talk about theology, bring the truth to bear. This may be immediately. Or months.

If you time your theological knowledge correctly, it will be more readily received, and you will have a better chance of continuing to pastor the grieving. Funerals are about the living, not the dead in many respects, so speak in a way that you are truthful but also with an eye to shepherding those who are not part of a church for years to come. The Lord often prepares hearts in moments of loss.

The gospel is truly good news.

If you are with someone when they are dying, if you have yet to do so, be sure to share the gospel. I have been blessed to lead some older saints to faith in Christ on their deathbed. But don't be belligerent. Share Jesus and then give space for a response.

Christians find hope in the Resurrection of the dead. Jesus got up out of his tomb, and one day those in Christ will do the same. Those of us in Christ will experience a glorious reunion with others who have preceded us in death. The cross continues to provide forgiveness for sins. We must proclaim the truth of our hope when we preside over a funeral service.

The reality of eternity cannot be avoided, nor should it.

I pastor in a global city. It is incredibly diverse. Some have said that I ought to not preach the gospel to respect members of other faiths and to avoid manipulation. While I believe I understand the spirit in which people say such things, I disagree.

A funeral service is one of the few moments in which distracted and wealthy Westerners consider mortality. The reality of eternity cannot be avoided, nor should it. If you are a Christian pastor, I urge you to oversee a Christian funeral service. Preach the gospel.

What if the deceased is not a believer in Christ? I speak of how they are loved by their family at the service, their life, etc. Then I transition to sharing the gospel and the hope in the resurrection.

Make funerals personal—where possible.

Logistically speaking, I have learned a few things over the years. These might help you.

1. **If you can, meet with the family two days before the service.** Ask about the deceased's faith. Look through the deceased's Bible, if possible. Look for important or underlined passages or verses.
2. **Keep a grief calendar.** Send a note or make a phone call on the first anniversary of the death, if possible. The grieved is hurting; your effort will make an impact. If you want to shepherd well, you will circle back after the death (as best as you are able). Setting calendar reminders with death anniversaries is a good practice.
3. **At the graveside or the urn garden—read the 23rd Psalm.** Point out to them the Lord is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death, so we need not fear. Remind them of the Resurrection of the dead. If there is a burial—remind them that graves traditionally faced the East so that they might meet Jesus face-to-face on the day he returns.
4. **Two days after the funeral, someone should check on the family or loved ones.** Do they need food? Help with legal matters? Theology? Counseling? Pray with them.

Above all, stay focused on Jesus.

This is a tender moment—what some might call a "thin place." It is where the spiritual and the physical come together. You are called to shepherd in this moment.

You can do it very well if you focus on the Lord and the grace given in Jesus.

Used with permission.
Steve Bezner is Senior Pastor of Houston Northwest Church. He holds degrees from Hardin-Simmons University (B.A., M.A.) and Baylor University (Ph.D). Steve is married to Joy and has two sons—Ben and Andrew. He is a professionally trained Bonhoeffer scholar and a completely untrained amateur cook. You can follow Steve on Twitter via @bezner.

ADC Church Profile —

Fairhaven Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN was founded in 1947 when Pastors Dave Bontrager and Mose Bontrager, who at the time were driving to Nappanee to worship at Maple Lawn, decided to start their own church with its own building.

The current pastoral team consists of Wilbur Yoder, Lead Pastor; Dale Hochstetler; Phaylon Schrock; and Marion Miller. Current membership is 174.

In the early 1990's, Fairhaven's membership declined to the point that the pastoral team sought assistance from outside the church. At that point, Woodlawn Church agreed to provide the needed assistance and in 1994 eighteen families moved from Woodlawn to Fairhaven.

Fairhaven is involved in Christian Mission Charities (formerly Jesus to the Iron Curtain) which was founded by the former Bishop Dave Bontrager; serving lunch once a month at the Teen/Adult Challenge in Elkhart; and packaging booklets for World Missionary Press, New Paris, IN.

PASTOR SPOTLIGHT

William (Bill) Mullet is a retired pastor attending Bethel Church in Berlin, OH. He and his wife Ellen have four children: Craig, married to Rosanna; Brent, married to Stacey; Sherry, married to Freddie Miller; and Andrea, married to Gene Esh. Bill and Ellen have fifteen grandchildren. Bill was first ordained November 22, 1981 and was ordained Lead Pastor of Bethel October 26, 1997.

Bill has retired from ProVia, a business he founded, and also from pastoral responsibilities.

Bill reflects on his pastoral journey: "When the call to ministry came, I felt a keen lack of preparedness. I knew in order to be Christ-centered, I needed to turn to His Word. There was no better way to start then to read the Bible in its entirety again and again. John 1:14 tells us 'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.' The only way for me to see His glory was to spend time in His presence and Word to absorb his grace and truth, two elements still very needful in life today.

God's grace and Spirit are certainly needed to prepare and present His message to the church. I found it enlightening and empowering to prepare my own heart in meditation and then to study the text. I also found it convicting knowing that I was called to expound what God was requiring of all of us, not just things I had attained.

A very important factor in my experience as a pastor was the opportunity to work under the leadership of Yost Miller. Yost was brilliant with a steadfast commitment to sound Bible teaching. I was very blessed to have him as my mentor.

Relationships that build community became ever more important to me. After all, the church is the body of Christ and is very important to Him. I needed to learn to treat others through that lens. I see this as one of the keys to feeling positive about my ministry experience. Of course, there were those small percentage of times that things were not pleasant and the work was difficult, but having had a wonderful and supportive team of co-pastors lightened the load.

God has been so good us, in spite of my human nature at times wanting to get in the way of His will. I am forever grateful for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the support of my fellow team members!"

Editor's Note: Bill served as chairman of the inaugural planning committee of ADC and was a key component of its founding. Thank you Bill and Ellen for your service to the Church of Christ!

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