

Maintaining High-level Preaching

Dear Jim,

Sunday *after* the sermon is a time of great relief to me. Come what may, I always enjoy the afternoon, feeling that I have done a great service for God in faithfully delivering his truth. I feel accomplished, contented and well. Then comes Monday morning, where I face a desk full of work and the reality that in six days I have to preach another sermon. The thought makes me sweat. Having been a pastor for over 11 years, I still have to cast out the demon called *fear* in the name of Jesus Christ.

A time comes for most preachers when our fountain of ideas is dry and we seem to preach the same truths under different titles or contexts. We have tried enriching the content by using illustrations from the media. But we have learned that this cannot cure an anemic message. Maybe we've even tried to adapt a message from another preacher. Likewise we learned that borrowing from world-class preachers doesn't guarantee success because they have their own congregations, and their own contexts.

What is worse is that people from the congregation may have come across your borrowed idea and come up to you after the service saying: *So, pastor, you preached a great sermon today. Will you be preaching on Chuck Swindoll's Moses part III next Sunday?*

I had one funny experience when I was attending a denominational board meeting. One board member seemed to have a connection with Dr. Haddon Robinson. During our lunch break he began to lead an impromptu preaching seminar. I listened with great interest. Of course, he talked about the homiletic stuff about *introducing a sermon*. Later, he referred to the incident of how Dr. Robinson was motivated to become a person of greatness by a Sunday School teacher who encouraged him after an incident in junior high. He commented that this person was a woman. *What?* I said to myself, that person was John Mygatt, a man of integrity. I knew it because I heard Dr. Robinson tell his own story before. Using other people's stories, especially using them inaccurately, can create embarrassment.

On the other hand, the right message, in the right context, at the right time is a winner every time! Your message, for your people, at their time of need guarantees receptivity.

High level preaching is facilitated by maintaining three related practices. First use *personal enthusiasm* to connect the Bible to life situations. Speak from your heart. Share your experiences in the light of the Biblical message. Use Joshua 24 and explain how you struggle to become a person of calling. Or move from Matthew 28:16 to share your short-term experience in Ghana, Africa. Try Ephesians 4:29 and describe your first personal evangelism experience in a gas station with some hair-tinted teens. Or, perhaps refer to Revelations and tell them that you struggled for three years with various interpretations and have not yet come up with a good *one-size-fits-all* theology towards the end times. Tell them

that you have not found those hours wasted, however, because you have drawn close to eternity, even though you haven't yet figured out everything. Remember, enthusiasm is the fuel of your preaching activities.

Second, *contextualize all of your preaching*. If you find that preaching ideas and themes from other preachers open your horizons to possible messages, then be sure to translate any ideas first into your own personal experience. Communication is a process of transmitting a *felt* concept. It is not merely words or ideas. It is an emotional and intellectual association between you and the congregation. The resonance derived from your experiences together is important because your people have to feel connected with you before effective communication begins.

Instead of using Oswald J. Smith 's messages on world evangelism, find the implications behind the message. Extract the ideas out of the incidents and then apply the biblical idea in your own context. Get at the idea first and then apply it. If the idea is about sacrifice, share a few experiences of those in the congregation who have gone on missions—unfiltered water, a shower every three days, sporadic electric outage, yet lives touched. When people identify with these experiences, you have a better chance to communicate effectively.

Third, *speak from your conviction*. Speak the truth as you have perceived it in the light of the Scripture. People will catch your point by your convictions. Truth is *felt* by the audience through your person. When you articulate what is deep in your soul, your voice will be firm, your posture will be strong, your hand will make the right motions and your facial expression will coordinate with your

body motion. You won't need a mirror for rehearsals. Just speak out with passion like Moses, like Joshua or like Paul. When we speak from what is inside us, in essence, fleshing out the biblical truth, we are bringing each message home.

There are many skills we can learn to become stronger preachers. But remember our purpose is never to impress people with our preaching skills. Our purpose is to communicate life-changing truth to each and every person. Our goal is to motivate our congregations to grow into Christ-likeness.

So, Jim, avoid carrying a business card that does not belong to you. Avoid short cuts. Your sermon jar may not be full, but it can be filled. Let the Potter work on you. Give God a chance to use your simple faith and straight-forward enthusiasm as clay to mold you into a piece of artwork—a unique preacher.

Your fellow craftsman in Christ,

Timothy Chan

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Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

2 Corinthians 2:17