**Excerpts from *That’ll Preach! 5 Simple Steps to Your Best Sermon Ever* (Abingdon Press) by Charley Reeb**

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**From Chapter One, pages 2-3:**

Unless seminary students grew up in churches with good preachers, their professors have the biggest influence on their preaching. Many seminary professors have little-to-no ministry experience in the local church. This includes preaching professors. They are far removed from the texture of parish ministry and generally preach to those in the academic world. So it follows that many seminary students get the wrong impression about what it takes to preach effectively “in the field.” A highbrow sermon may stir those in a seminary chapel but it will not work in the trenches of a local church.

Over the last forty years inductive preaching has become very popular in mainline seminaries. The impact of preaching revolutionary Fred Craddock and the rise of the “new homiletic” has led to a variety of inductive and narrative preaching styles. This style of preaching is known for turning “three points and a poem” upside down. Instead of beginning with the main idea of the scripture text and breaking it down into specific ideas, an inductive sermon begins with specific ideas and questions and concludes with a main idea. Quite often inductive sermons arrive at “open ended” conclusions so listeners can draw their own conclusions about the message. This is a noble thought, but it’s not realistic for most listeners.

There is a great deal to learn from inductive preaching. The sermons are clever and imaginative but the style and message are typically lost on average listeners. Novelty sometimes sacrifices clarity. Unless you have a congregation filled with preachers and seminary professors a steady diet of inductive preaching is not effective in most local churches. Most preachers don’t have the time to create such novel art every week. More importantly, most listeners don’t have the patience to sit through it. Listeners keep asking, “Is there a point?”

What I have discovered as I have taught other preachers is that many of them prepare sermons designed to reach the crowd at a seminary chapel service. They imagine their seminary professors sitting in the back pew critiquing their sermons. They have been rigorous in their research of the biblical text. They are diligent in communicating exegetical material. They quote biblical scholars and theologians to demonstrate their education. Basically, their sermons sound like a “research dump.” Other preachers sound like they have just come from a creative writing retreat. They have read everything Barbara Brown Taylor and Fred Craddock have written and seek to imitate what cannot be duplicated or appreciated by most listeners.

If you are preaching every week to other preachers and professors, stick with this approach. However, if it is your goal to reach the majority of listeners in churches you must change your approach. You will never become an effective preacher looking over your shoulder for your seminary professors. If you want the gospel to connect with real people who have real needs in real life you must apply the secret. Am I saying to forget what seminary taught you? Absolutely not! All of your knowledge must be reframed in a way that connects with your listeners. With that in mind, let me tell you a secret.

So what is the secret to great preaching? It is three simple words: **Engage your listeners!**

**From Chapter One, pages 4-6:**

If your listeners are not interested in what you have to say they are not going to pay attention to you. Oh, they may look like they’re listening but their minds and hearts are far away. They are thinking about the talk they must have with their bosses on Monday, their grocery lists, where they are going to lunch after worship, or the texts they have received that look more interesting than anything you are saying. They have checked out and the opportunity for them to be transformed by your message has been lost.

So how do you get your listeners interested in what you have to say? Engage them! And how do you engage them? To begin with, stop thinking about your seminary textbooks, commentaries, and professors, and start thinking about the lives of your listeners. To be blunt: Don’t be selfish when you prepare sermons. Think of others when you preach! Ask yourself, how will this biblical message engage those who take the time to get up, dress up, and show up to worship?

When you preach there may be a woman sitting in the back who is going through a bitter divorce. There may be a teenager who has been dragged to worship by his parents. He is texting his friends and can’t wait to get out of there. There may be a man sitting near the front who hasn’t been to church in years because of how harshly he was treated by his Christian friends. He is giving it another try. There may be a college student who scurried in late to the service. She grew up in the church, but now she is questioning her faith. There may be a nervous mother in attendance whose baby is in the nursery for the first time. You may also have a young family checking you out. They have just moved into your neighborhood and are looking for a church home. How will your sermon connect with each of these people? Will it connect? Be honest. Will they remember what you said thirty minutes after worship?

Here is a good exercise. If you are currently serving a church, spend ten minutes writing down everything you know about your people, both good and bad. If you are not serving a church make the same list about your family and friends—health issues, peer pressures, questions of faith, marital problems, graduations, family problems, issues with kids, issues at work, births, deaths, personal struggles and temptations, new jobs, job layoffs, money problems, great achievements in sports, and so on.

When you are finished with the list, take a good look at it and ask yourself this question, “Have any of my sermons in the last few months touched on most of these experiences?” Now ask yourself this question, “What difference do my sermons make for people who are going through these experiences?” And then ask yourself a third question, “Why should the people on the list care about the messages I preach?” Finally, ask yourself, “Is it easy for the folks on this list to understand my sermons?”

**From Chapter Two, pages 12-13:**

I remember hearing a sermon that covered every idea in Christendom. I was so amazed and amused at the cornucopia of subjects the preacher mentioned that I wrote them all down. He talked about Christ and redemption, the kingdom of God, peace and social justice, prevenient and justifying grace, heaven and the second coming, and the sacrament of communion. Oh, and he even threw in the power of prayer for good measure! It was like he thought he was going to drop dead as soon as he left the pulpit, so he wanted to preach about everything he could before he left the earth. Well, I am all for the idea of preaching each sermon as if it were your last, but if your sermons are fire hoses of information that lack focus one day your listeners will pray for your last sermon!

The truth is listening is hard work, which is why so few people do it. The average listener is not going to work very hard listening to a sermon, especially one that is confusing and lacks focus. I am not talking about your saint of an uncle who hasn’t missed Sunday worship in thirty years or your grandmother who said, “You can always get something out of every sermon if you listen hard enough.” I am talking about average listeners who show up to worship every six weeks if they don’t have any better offers and leave early to beat everyone to lunch. The burden is on you to keep them engaged. If they have difficulty tracking your sermon they will stop listening to you and may never come back to your church.

While writing this book I asked a worshipper what he looked for in a sermon. His reply was, “Pastor, I appreciate that you keep me awake.” Now you can scoff at what he said but that is where many of your listeners are coming from. Does that mean your job is to entertain them by making your sermon a shallow spectacle? No, but it does mean you must simplify your sermons so they are easy to follow. If your sermons are not clear and easy to follow, your listeners will start playing tic-tac-toe on the back of an offering envelope and begin passing the gum. There is an old saying in preaching: “A mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Give Them a Handle**

Every sermon needs a handle. Your sermon must be easily applicable. If your goal is to transform your listeners with the gospel they need more than knowledge—they need wisdom. And what is wisdom? It is the right application of knowledge. You must give your listeners direction on how to live out the message. The old preaching adage is true: Every sermon should answer two questions: “So what?” and “Now what?” Your point answers “So what?” Your application answers “Now what?”

**Rehearse**

Whether you prepare an outline or manuscript, the practice of rigorously rehearsing sermons is what separates good preachers from great preachers. If the idea of rehearsing sermons doesn’t sit right with you, consider this: What if your praise band and/or choir never rehearsed before worship? What would you do? You would get another director! The more you rehearse your sermons the more freedom you will have in the pulpit.

1. Attributed to Howard Hendricks.

   ***6 Keys to Great Preaching***

   by Charley Reeb

   Recently Pew Research reported that folks looking for a church home value good preaching most of all (<http://www.pewforum.org/2016/08/23/choosing-a-new-church-or-house-of-worship/>). While tasty coffee, edgy technology, and flashy worship services are effective, if visitors don’t hear inspiring sermons they will not come back to your church.

   The lesson is clear: if you want to attract people to your church you must make preaching your number one priority. Now that’s a strategy for church growth!

   If great preaching is essential to church growth, how does one become a great preacher? There is a simple secret you can apply to your sermons that will make you a compelling and captivating preacher. I am not talking about prayer. Prayer is essential to great preaching but if prayer was the secret every preacher would be captivating. Hard work is not the secret either. Sure, you must work hard to preach effectively, but I have known some of the hardest working preachers whose sermons would put their own mothers to sleep. The truth is you can prayer harder than a monk, be wiser than a desert father and know scripture better than your Bible professors and still not have a great preaching ministry.

   So what is the secret to great preaching? It is three simple words: *Engage your listeners*. I know. Looks too simple, doesn't it? To tell you the truth it is deceptively simple. Here are 6 simple keys to preaching engaging sermons:

   **Have a Point!**

   There is an old saying in preaching: “A mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew.” If you are a little unclear about the focus of your sermon the lack of clarity will be magnified to your listeners. You know what they say: “If you aim at nothing, you are sure to hit it!” Sermons are like taking people on a trip. There must be a sense of movement and direction. Listeners must feel the sermon is going somewhere or they will not take the trip.

   **Make It Stick**

   The mind understands and remembers an idea a lot like Velcro. Velcro is made up tiny flexible hooks and soft loops that connect with each other. Imagine the mind as a bunch of tiny hooks. These hooks are eager to hook on to something to gain a better understanding of an idea. Think of stories, images, and illustrations as small loops the mind hooks on to help bring clarity and concreteness to an idea. If an idea is connected to a powerful image, story, or metaphor it “sticks” to our minds like Velcro (Roy H. Williams, *The* *Wizard of Ads: Turning Words into Magic and Dreamers into Millionaires* (Austin, Texas: Bard Press, 1998), ebook edition, chap. 13). We think visually so our minds are always seeking to connect ideas with analogies and images. The lesson: if you want your listeners to understand and remember your sermons give them illustrations they can hook your ideas to.

   **Hold Their Attention**

   One of the “tricks of the trade” of every effective communicator is being mindful of the attention span of listeners. Dr. Harrison B. Summers taught radio and television broadcasting at Ohio State University. He did extensive research on what holds the attention of listeners and viewers during broadcast programs. Summers’s expertise and years of experience produced the secret to holding people’s attention: “Give the listener something new at frequent intervals” (Reg Grant and John Reed, *The Power Sermon: Countdown to Quality Messages for Maximum Impact* (Primedia eLaunch, 2013), ebook edition, chap. 11). There are several ways to do this: tell a story, use an illustration or metaphor, ask rhetorical questions, or relate your text to current events. You can also show a picture or video, use a visual aid, present a skit, or have someone share a testimony.

   **Touch the Heart**

   The latest psychological research shows that emotion leads to action and logic leads to conclusions. The only way you will persuade listeners to act is if you move them emotionally. Listeners are not motivated to do anything unless their hearts have been touched. You must be passionate about your sermon and that passion must come through in your delivery. You must also communicate ideas, stories and illustrations that not only reach the mind but also touch the heart. Maya Angelou was right: “People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)