

Protagonist Corner

Stand and Deliver: Preaching in the Nineties

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I once was asked to take part in a workshop on preaching, and as a way to get my thoughts going, the convener of the seminar asked me to think of a movie title that describes my preaching style. That provided me with several days of fun with our church staff. They suggested anything—and everything: *Gone with the Wind*; *The Greatest Show on Earth*; *Saturday Night Fever*; *A Fistful of Dollars*; *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. You get the picture.

Finally, one of my staff said *Stand and Deliver* was the title she felt best described my preaching. I like to think she was right, because I often find myself preaching in the declarative voice. So that is the title I chose. But the exercise made me think about all the “voices” that could be included in analyzing preaching styles.

The Voices of Preaching

In a quarterly published for teachers of English, I once read an article that was made up entirely of self-reflective sentences, such as the one I am writing here. Self-reflective sentences, like this one, are really only a rare necessity. The too frequent use of this style of writing or speaking, as I am doing in this very phrase, strikes us as comical, but ultimately tiresome. Do you see how such a style, as the one presently being utilized, can begin to overshadow the content of the message? We begin to watch only for the gimmick, as we are doing in this sentence, rather than listen to the whole content.

This is a more or less perverse way to introduce my conviction that because the scripture from which we preach is amazingly diverse and rich, the preaching we do should come in a variety of voices. Some should be used infrequently, and only with great care, while other voices may be underutilized. For me, those voices need to be as diverse as the faces I see before me when I go about writing sermons. Not only are the people of the church diverse, but different words need different voices speaking them, and to avoid being bored by my own preaching—since I am the preacher I get to hear most often from Sunday to Sunday—I think I must not only include myself in the congregation as I prepare and preach, but I must listen to that variety of voices that can make preaching broad and rich, rather than single-minded and narrow. It is a helpful exercise for me to take a recent sermon and use colored underlining to identify each sentence by the sort of voice that is used.

Here are some of the voices I listen for as I prepare and preach.

Grey: Declarative Preaching

This is preaching. This is preaching as most commonly practiced. Preaching at its best has something to offer listeners. Preaching which has something to declare moves people along. Even so, preaching which is incessantly declarative eventually does one of two things to a congregation: it either makes them into rabid skeptics who—out of sheer intellectual desperation—come to question every declaration they

hear, or it makes them into half-witted worshipers who come to church like empty saucepans, not too deep, nor to be left on the burner for very long. The declarative voice may well be the most common way in which we hear preaching. But it can level the truth to a single dimension which, in the end, distorts it. On the whole, we tend to be overly fond of this preaching voice. Any declarative sentences in a sermon should be underlined in a no-nonsense grey.

Yellow: Interrogative Preaching

Have you thought about use of the interrogative voice in preaching? Did I ever tell you about the man in the first church I served who sat in the balcony and insisted on answering any rhetorical question out loud? Can you see how that might tend to make one timid about using the interrogative voice? But isn't there a point in using interrogatives from time to time anyway? Isn't it appropriate from time to time to ask questions so that listeners will be moved to provide their own answers? Even so, isn't it true that excessive use of this voice fills our sermons with equivocation and leaves people confused about what we are trying to say? Can you see why I would choose to underline any sentence in a sermon which uses this voice with the color yellow?

Clear: Inductive Preaching

If Jesus saved one person, he came to save every person. If it can be demonstrated that God created a single blade of grass, then the whole of creation falls into place as the product of God's will. Sometimes preaching works only when we can identify one specific truth which anyone can understand in order to demonstrate that a larger truth must also be true. That an apple is made up of three parts, skin, meat, and seeds, can only by induction be used to show that the one God can be made up of the three persons of the Trinity. If we had faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, we could use this voice in our preaching and be effective. Don't use any color to underline this voice in your sermons, because any single voice would not lend itself to appropriate, inductive generalization.

Black: Deductive Preaching

If it is true that there are many voices in preaching, and that they are a variety, and if it is further true that it is important to identify those voices from time to time, then we can conclude that one of those voices will be deductive. Whereas, wherever two or three preachers gather together there will likely be a broad generalization in search of supporting specifics, deduction can be of great help in our preaching down to the particulars of a situation, saving us from excessive use of overly broad concepts like the evils of gambling, and bringing our speaking down to the level of what we are going to do about old man Handly's preoccupation with wagering away his children's milk money. Color this voice black, like a line representing the direction of a road on a map.

Red: Imperative Preaching

Listen to the imperative voice and learn. Don't be deceived. You are the church of Jesus Christ, so get off your duff and get on the ball for the kingdom. Get angry.

Get with it. Get out of the way. If your eye offends you, pluck it out! If your hand offends you, cut it off! If this speaking voice offends you, think how your congregation feels when you use it! Use it sparingly, but use it, because Jesus did. But get accustomed to having hymnbooks hurled your direction if you use this voice more than just a very little. Underline these sentences as red as the blood of Jesus. That's what happens to people who use imperatives. Do it today.

Green: Affirmative Preaching

You *are*; *somebody*. We are children of God. No matter what happened in Uncle Frank's life before the day he died, God considers his life complete today. We may rest in the assurance of God's promise of eternal life. If you had faith the size of a mustard seed—and you do—you could do great things. Green, like a traffic light.

Blue: Impressionistic Preaching

The cavernous emptiness of modern life aches alongside the abundant, untapped wellsprings of the grace of God. I use existential blue here, for it always makes me feel this way in the end.

Orange: Metaphorical Preaching

God's hope for humanity is the life of a tiny baby. Preaching can be the door to the kingdom, or the door to the parking lot. The Bible is a lamp unto my feet. Too much use of the metaphorical voice begins to sound as though the preacher is searching for a word that rhymes with orange. If you use it much, remember not to hit the nail on the crux of the matter by mixing metaphors and losing the congregation in your alphabet soup.

White: Confessional Preaching

I have something personal I want to share with you today. And now that a majority of you are wondering whether it is something sexual or something financial—perhaps hoping for both—I can confess to you that sometimes this preaching voice is just an attention-getting device. Really, though, the confessional voice is my favorite voice in preaching, and I strive to use it more than I often do. For me, it is the voice that lets the congregation know that I am seated next to them as we hear the word of God together. It is the voice that constantly reminds me that the Word of God is addressed to every sinner in the room, including the one in the funny apparel at the front. It is the voice that causes me to erase almost every use of the word “you” from my sermons, and replace it with the word “we.” It is the voice that reminds me that I am called to help us remember what we already know to be true about God in Jesus Christ, and to apply it to our lives today. It is such a pure voice, use white.

Try this “colorful” method of sermon analysis just once, and see how linguistically varied your sermons are. Blessings on you!