

A Way with Words

Preaching
That Transforms
Congregations

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– Part 1 –

The Long-Term Sermon

Teaching a New Language

*You were taught to put away your former way of life . . .
and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to
clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to
the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

—Ephesians 4:22–24

PAUL'S WORDS EXPRESS the challenge for pastors. We strive to teach God's people to put away their former understandings and practices in favor of new life created in the righteousness and holiness of God. Then, when we look out at the congregation as we prepare to preach, we don't see what we hoped. Most every Sunday morning we have offered the congregation what (we think) they needed to know in three rhetorically balanced and clearly expressed points. Heads nodded, notes were taken, and, perhaps, even an occasional "Amen" was muttered. Yet the evidence of our words taking root, much less bearing fruit, can be lacking in the parish's life and ministry. Paul dealt with that situation by writing a six-chapter letter, but that approach is unlikely to be as successful in our contemporary congregational lives. We need another way to think about

what we are trying to accomplish in our preaching, and how we evaluate our success.

Our goals and evaluation are more difficult in congregations that have been around for a while. A congregation with dozens of new Christians showing up each month might look at baptisms or new members with some satisfaction. Most of us preach in a different context, however. The majority of churches, especially in the United States, are smaller and have a slower trickle of new members. While the eventual goal of preaching may be to get our wider community to come into personal relationship with Jesus Christ, our more immediate work with the people of God needs to have intermediate goals. The preaching task in these situations is to help the faithful in our community to make the needed changes in their individual and parish lives so they can live out the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

The world outside of the red church doors is not the same world most of our current church members were brought up in. We all know that. Changes in travel and communication, changes in extended family relationships and commitments, and changes in work and school activity schedules have all turned the traditional role of the local church upside down. Add to these practical changes the spiritual challenges of generations who are unfamiliar with the basic Christian narrative and an increase in a variety of non-Christian spiritualities, and the preacher has an enormous task to help even the most dedicated congregation respond effectively to the world around them.

Regardless of the big societal changes around us, we know that important, smaller-scale changes also need to happen regularly in a congregation's life. After years of focusing on an outreach program, we may need to do more evangelism. When the largest Sunday school class in recent years graduates, the teachers may need a break to go to a Bible study class themselves. We may need, for painfully obvious reasons, to drop everything and work on conflict resolution and rebuilding loving relationships. The changes and transitions that seem most straightforward to us still require time and patience to lead a congregation through them.

I remember getting frustrated by what seemed to me to be the glacially slow pace of the congregation coming to understand the need for an obvious change. Then I realized my time and the congregation's time did not progress at the same pace. I was focusing on the parish's life, conservatively, forty to fifty hours each week. For a particularly important issue like the one I was dealing with, some part of my brain was probably concerned about it almost every waking moment. (I know that isn't healthy, but most of us have been there about some issue or another.) Unfortunately, from my perspective, no one else in the parish was quite that consumed. My core leaders spent maybe five to ten hours a week focusing on the parish, which was very faithful. The issues I processed in one week took my leaders five to ten weeks. Most of these same leaders, however, had also been in the church for a long time. They had spent decades at church, learning one way of operating and diligently living that way out. When I preached, or spoke to them outside of the pulpit, I wasn't starting from a blank slate. Tapes were already playing in their brains—tapes that had to be erased and rewritten. No wonder things took so long, even for the church's dedicated leadership. For the person in the pew, who may average two hours of church time each week for two or three Sundays a month, things take even longer. A change that took me an intense week to process may take more than a year for the bulk of the congregation to understand and live into.

People who study change know how long the process takes. They also understand how frustrated leaders can get, and so warn against impatience. In his book *Leading Change*, John Kotter says that one of the primary reasons that change efforts fail is that the vision for change is undercommunicated by at least a factor of ten and maybe a factor of a hundred or a thousand.¹ I know that when something is important enough for the congregation for me to spend two or three sermons on it, by the time I've finished I feel like I have said everything I need to

1. John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 9.

say; I'm ready to move on. Kotter cautions me, however, that maybe the congregation still needs to hear it another twenty or thirty times. Or maybe even another two hundred or two thousand times. When I think about important changes that did not take root in the way that I had hoped, I can usually find places where I stopped sharing the vision for that particular change far too soon. Maybe a crisis came up, maybe I began a push right before Holy Week or the summer or another time that pulled away everyone's energy and attention, or maybe I just got bored and moved on.

Change, of course, doesn't happen in a clean, linear kind of way. The reign of God doesn't materialize simply because we gave twenty sermons or even two thousand sermons instead of two. Even so, thinking about the time spent does tell us something about how we might approach our effectiveness as leaders who preach. One piece of good news from Kotter is that many of the same elements that make up good preaching are also the best ways to help people understand the vision for change. Kotter lists as key communication elements the techniques of drawing verbal pictures, repetition, leadership by example, explaining perceived inconsistencies, and elimination of "jargon and technobabble."² His two other elements are communications basics that we can easily incorporate if we think about preaching more expansively than the fifteen minutes following the gospel reading. Kotter suggests using multiple forums and having opportunities for give-and-take.³ Many preachers have found their sermons more effective by getting feedback afterwards or even input before preaching, and every congregation has multiple avenues available for a pastor to reinforce their vision.

We know, too, that good preaching is going to illuminate and reinforce the work being done in the rest of the congregation's life. Today, perhaps more than any time in the last century, the sermon is foundational in leading a congregation to where God is calling. No longer can a

2. Kotter, *Leading Change*, 90.

3. Kotter, *Leading Change*, 90.

quality sermon expect to see fruit by merely instructing, cheerleading, or exhorting. If the sermon's purpose is to get people to do one thing or to make one change, we are probably thinking too small. The person who pays close attention and does whatever is asked might go home and try a spiritual exercise, read a Bible passage, or find a way to bring up Jesus in one conversation that week. Then, the following week, they will drop that discipline in favor of a newly assigned sermon task. Such behaviors aren't the fruit we need. Instead, we need to preach a new approach and understanding, with corresponding new actions and habits, and such preaching takes significant time and intentionality.

I believe that our contemporary preaching task is more like teaching people a new language than it is getting them to do something at the end of the sermon. When children are learning a language, the act of speaking and reading allows them to gain the skills, experience, and worldview needed to be able to process what they need to hear. This approach does not make any of the individual books or conversations unimportant. On the contrary, each particular element becomes even more important because not only does the content need to be appropriate to the situation at hand, but also the vocabulary and word-building skills have to be in place. Talking about a chrysalis to a three-year-old child is not going to be helpful; neither is reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to a sixth-grade science class. The goal of our particular teaching lesson, however, is not only for a child to put out a leaf for a caterpillar to eat or to spell chrysalis correctly, but also to come to recognize the beauty of God in creation while living an environmentally sustainable life. The immediate goals should help the long-term one. Focusing exclusively on the easy wins can lead us to forget the difficult place we need to be going.

Using the analogy a little bit differently, we might compare preaching to law students learning the legal language. While they have to work with specific cases and statutes, the particulars are all in the service of forming lawyers that will have the right capacities, approach, and skills. No one, however diligent, can memorize all the laws, and many of them will be modified by legislatures after those students have graduated. Nevertheless,

knowing how to write a brief, where to find relevant precedents, and how to handle various proceedings are all the fruit of intense study sessions, even though the specific details may never be encountered again.

One central outcome of giving people a new language is that they are able to use it. Children on the playground can look for and talk about caterpillars, and lawyers can go to court. Christians who hear a sermon about a new aspect of their walk of faith can talk about it together. Too many coffee hour conversations are restricted in their themes because people's understanding of church is limited to making sure the children have a good Sunday school or that enough money is raised to fix the roof. When the sermons begin a sustained discussion of topics like stewardship, or evangelism, or Christian conflict resolution, the people in the pews are given the language and the permission they need to have conversations about those subjects. What is acceptable to talk about has expanded. Those informal discussions are powerful mechanisms for the deepening faith and developing practices necessary to effect change. To me, the most striking effect of the long-term sermon is listening to parishioners using the new language learned to express their own understanding of what the church is about.

Thinking about preaching in this way is not new. What I am describing is the basic formation process. Paul expressed a similar sentiment when he talked about feeding people milk instead of solid food. Babies start with milk and eventually grow to the point of eating cereal, and then a whole range of solid food. But the process takes time. Trying to share a delicious steak with a baby just makes the baby sick (and wastes the steak). No one weaning a baby is planning to see a significant change in only one week, but the transition to solid food has to be made.

I am talking about preaching to help people learn how to eat solid spiritual food. I have not seen the discipline of preaching looked at in this particular way, although I assume others have thought about it. The books that deal with planning out sermons over the course of the year use a different approach and a slightly different set of goals. What I have found important is a long-term understanding of preaching that uses

sermons over the course of more than a year to help a congregation move in a specific direction.

I see preaching, especially by the senior or lead pastor, as an essential component to congregational growth and development. As people's lives get busier, the sermon in Sunday worship is *the* time people are willing to listen to something important. They may not attend a meeting or read an e-mail, but when they are in church, they pay attention to a good sermon. In today's church environment, any significant attempt to change without a preaching strategy is likely to fail.

Using a long-term preaching strategy does not mean ignoring a church's lectionary, engaging in forced readings of scripture, or preaching only on one topic. Regardless of the congregation's focus, preachers still need to cover an array of scriptural, ethical, and doctrinal subjects. Amid those sermons, however, an extended sermon strategy encourages preachers to find a way to insert a few minutes about the long-term goal into every sermon. Such inclusion may make the sermon less rhetorically tight or include detours from a single, unified focus. Most congregants listening to the same person preach every week, though, will be much more responsive to intentional formation over time than a series of perfect homiletical events.

Another way of thinking about the long-term sermon in the midst of weekly preaching is to compare it to a series of family road trips. Our family has driven a number of times from western Pennsylvania to southern Alabama. Each trip had a particular, and sometimes significant, focus. If we didn't get to Alabama, the trip would have been a failure. That was the point. The ultimate destination. But we also wanted to use the trips to give our children new experiences along the way. One journey included a stop to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. Another time we visited Nashville's Parthenon. Even if these experiences were a minor detour, they broadened our children's horizons and became part of our family's memories, helping us bond. We arrived at our destination a little bit later, but we were able to incorporate something important along the way.

To give a flavor of what I am talking about, I want to describe a two-year period in the parish where we decided to focus on increasing our passionate spirituality. In my parish, we came to realize that parishioners' lack of dedication to their own personal devotional lives was the primary issue holding us back as a congregation. Everyone loved coming together for worship and outreach and fellowship and anything else that happened at the church. But when they went home, they left their spirituality behind. The number of people reading the Bible, saying daily prayers, interceding for one another, or engaging in similar Christian practices was low.

The approach I took in preaching was to talk about spiritual practices frequently and repeatedly. One week, when the readings had a biblical character asking advice from another, I talked about spiritual direction and spiritual friendship. During a different week's reading on repentance, I talked about the practice of confession, including confession to other laypeople—which is acceptable in my tradition—and how it worked. I'm not sure that anyone went out and got a spiritual director that week, and I know that no one approached me for confession. In neither of those weeks was spiritual direction or confession the theme of the sermon. Instead, each was a slightly extended example of one way that the themes of the reading could be put into practice. Out of a fourteen-minute sermon, they were two- to three-minute asides meant to highlight ways that the spiritual life could be lived out in community on a day besides Sunday. My hope was that people would see that spiritual practices involving other people in a setting outside of the church facilities were a normal part of the Christian life. Unless those whose understanding of faith meant going to the church had heard enough examples of faith experiences happening in other places, they would never see it as applicable to them or try it for themselves. These examples might be repeated once or twice during the long-term sermon to reinforce the idea. Repetition at different times is also necessary to reach people who are away for a week, or in Florida for a season, or otherwise less regular in their attendance than a preacher would prefer.

While some examples during that time focused on spiritual intimacy with another Christian, other sermon pieces highlighted personal spiritual disciplines. Jesus's own prayer life was mentioned frequently, along with various concrete prayer practices paralleling Jesus's example. Different kinds of daily Bible reading methods were described, including the Daily Office, a read-the-Bible-in-a-year calendar, and *The Story*, which is a compilation of the Bible's greatest hits. The overall focus of most of these sermons was not on a spiritual discipline, yet I chose a scripture reading that described a particular devotion and took a few minutes to talk about it in more detail as an aside. Since the parish as whole was looking at the topic, the parish's Sunday morning adult group read through *The Story* and someone on staff led a read-the-Bible-in-a-year discussion. Some weeks, just being able to connect the lectionary reading with something going on in a small group discussion was enough to put the idea into people's heads that this was an important Christian practice.

One other initiative some parish leaders embarked on during that year was becoming what they called "spiritual trainers." They wanted to gain enough experience of prayer disciplines that they could help others pray better. Every two weeks they met to learn and to practice. Working the prayer practices the spiritual trainers group had studied that week into the sermon was a natural way to teach and reinforce a new language. While some leaders had been introduced to a practice, most of the congregation had not. By mentioning it in a sermon, not only did everyone hear about it, but those more experienced with the prayer discipline had an opening to talk about it at coffee hour or in other contexts. Even though most people did not begin to engage a particular practice, and often no one did, a variety of important things happened.

First, most people began to see deeper spiritual practice as normal for them and normal for their church. Many long-term Christians have many things that they believe they "should" be doing, but they aren't seen as important enough to them or their congregation to actually begin. By preaching over time about spiritual practices, everybody got

the message that their relationship with God had a component that happened outside of church. Different people took that message in different ways. Some just felt slightly guiltier for ignoring it, but their attitude still changed.

Second, how people talked about spirituality at church transformed and deepened. At the end of the two years we focused on spirituality, people expected prayer to occur at meetings where it was previously absent. Parishioners became more comfortable asking each other for prayer, even at coffee hour or in informal settings. Spiritual practices and spiritual growth became normal topics of conversation for the parish leadership and were seen as an integral part of a healthy church.

Third, those who were ready to engage a deeper prayer life found the opportunities and the tools they needed, and in some cases new practices really took off. A group of people began “prayerwalking” and praying for the greater community. A healing team was founded and prayed for people after services. After the first read-the-Bible-in-a-year group finished with only two people making it through the entire year, someone else started a read-the-Bible-in-a-year Facebook group. For me this felt like a huge win because the person starting it was not someone I would have pegged as the next person to do a Bible study and because it happened after we had stopped intentionally focusing on spirituality. The change in understanding we hoped to see was manifesting itself in the congregation. People had learned a “new language.”

The ideas in this book come out of my experiences as a solo pastor who preached almost every week. Thinking about preaching as a series of long-term term sermons to teach the congregation a new language is particularly important in congregations with a solo pastor. Most of them are small- to medium-sized churches with established congregations. The pastor wears many hats and has personal relationships with most congregants. The preacher also has the advantage of preaching almost every week with the discretion to focus those sermons freely. The preacher is an integral leader in almost every aspect of the church’s life. In such a context, the practice of using long-term sermons is easily accepted by the

congregation and a gift to preachers as they prepare their weekly message. Since the preacher knows the strengths and weaknesses of the parish, they are also the best person in the parish to choose the long-term sermon focus, even if the process of making that choice involves other leaders.

In a church with multiple regular preachers, these ideas are still effective. They will require more coordination and involve a discipline from all preachers to shape their weekly sermons in service of the larger goal, even if they were not involved in choosing that goal. Our congregations are not going to get where they need to go unless we are willing at every level to give up some of our autonomy to work collaboratively and to be accountable to other Christian leaders.

In their book *Rebuilt*, Michael White and Tom Corcoran describe the process of revitalizing their multistaff Roman Catholic church. One of their key learnings was the importance of preaching in feeding people. When they looked at themselves, however, they saw incredible inconsistencies in quality and substance. With multiple services each week, and frequent guest preachers, they realized they had given up their prime opportunity to lead their congregation with no expectations or quality control.⁴ They moved their church to a “one church, one message” approach where everyone preaching on any given weekend was covering the same themes in their homilies, and often those messages were parts of sermon series.⁵ White and Corcoran suggest that the preachers and other church leaders are invited into the process of determining the focus of sermon series.⁶ When they took their preaching more seriously, White and Corcoran saw significant church growth. They did not use the long-term sermon concept, but their approach to sermons series and involvement of multiple preachers, including guest preachers, provides a model for using the concepts in this book for larger parishes. While the

4. Michael White and Tom Corcoran, *Rebuilt: Awakening the Faithful, Reaching the Lost, and Making Church Matter* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013).

5. White and Corcoran, *Rebuilt*, 142–43.

6. White and Corcoran, *Rebuilt*, 148.

implementation details may change a bit, the important work of leading a congregation through intentional, consistent preaching into long-term change applies to all churches.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- What in this chapter made you think about preaching in a different way?
- When in your ministry have you stopped too soon in sharing a vision that was needed for change?
- What is the longest you have ever maintained a preaching focus?
- In what ways does the analogy of preaching as learning a new language resonate with you? In what ways is it challenging?
- What experiences have you had of coordinating sermons with other preachers or of getting input about sermon themes from congregants?

Practical Exercises

- Think about an important change you would like to see in your congregation. Find a way to insert a two-minute segment that would help the congregation with that change into your next sermon.
- Ask your vestry or board what themes they think are most important for you to preach about in the coming weeks.