

## **“Overcoming the Fear of Preaching Naked”** *Preaching Truth in a Whatever World Conference (2004)*

When I was first learning to preach, I was naturally apprehensive. Before one of my sermons, a classmate encouraged me to imagine that my fellow classmates were naked. He assured me if I did so, it would ease my nerves. For some reason, this didn't work for me. Instead, it actually made me even more nervous.

Now, imagine with me that this scenario is reversed and you are the one that is standing naked before your congregation or seminary class. That would be both humiliating and frightening. It's hard to imagine anything worse. But a close second comes to mind. Imagine yourself fully clothed and in your right mind standing before your people with nothing but your Bible. I call this “buck-naked preaching.” It is every preacher's worst nightmare.

So what would cause a man to overcome his fear of preaching naked? Let me share my experience. When I was in Bible College, I began to learn how to preach. In my preaching courses, we were required to manuscript our sermons. All of our sermons were also critiqued by fellow students and video taped. After we delivered each sermon, we had to critique ourselves by watching our video. I'll never forget the first time I did this. I was horrified! I observed a young man standing behind a pulpit practically reading a sermon to a classroom of students. I couldn't believe it. Did I grab the wrong videotape? Was this preacher really me? Or was it someone that just looked like me? Did the videographer use camera tricks to incriminate me?

I learned a painful lesson that day: Video cameras and videotapes don't lie. I had to face the embarrassing truth that I didn't truly connect with my fellow students. I would even argue that I didn't truly preach. I made a commitment from that day forward that I would preach without notes.

### **1. Why should I preach without notes?**

- A. Excellent sermon delivery is critical. Research indicates that the vocal (55%) and visual (38%) account for 93 percent of a person's appraisal of credibility. Therefore, in order for our content to be believed and received, we must work to perfect our non-verbal communication skills. Interestingly, research has revealed that listeners retain approximately 36 percent more of the content when the message is delivered via extemporaneous speech. Tests repeatedly have found audience reactions more sympathetic and more attentive when speakers use direct extemporaneous speaking. Can you fathom a lawyer who approaches the judge or jury and reads his notes? Can you imagine Jesus reading the Sermon on the Mount? Peter unrolling a scroll on the Day of Pentecost? Paul looking down at his notes as he spoke to the philosophers at Mars Hill?
- B. The chief way the body communicates is through eye contact. You must maintain eye contact throughout your sermon (consistency + intensity = credibility). York and Decker suggest locking eyes with specific individuals for five seconds. See Luke 22:61. Related skills include employing a natural smile and various facial expressions. Note: Research indicates that our faces are capable of 250,000 different expressions.
- C. Vocal variety is the most significant factor in sustaining interest. Natural variety in pitch, volume, and intensity is naturally accomplished through extemporaneous preaching. See 1 Thess 5:14.
- D. You can be free to dialogue with your audience: “Are you with me?” “Did I say something troubling?” “Do you think this is important?” See Acts 17:17-31.

- E. You can be active and animated. The average scene change during primetime TV is once every 3.7 seconds. Moving objects generate attention. Preaching can dramatically improve when the preacher is mobile at appropriate times. The preacher that is not restricted by notes and pulpit can also exercise natural, enlarged, and unlimited gestures. See Acts 21:40.
- F. Passion commands attention. The great preachers of today have exceptional passion (“unction”) that sets them apart. Preaching without notes frees the preacher to unleash greater, more natural passion. See Acts 2:14-36.
- G. God honors the man who steps out in faith. Preaching without notes can be risky. It requires a willingness to be humiliated and a commitment to totally depend upon the Lord. See Heb 11:1.

## 2. How can I preach without notes?

- A. Overcome the “fear factor” (e.g., brain cramp, forgotten material, and a desire to be a wordsmith). Step out in faith and trust your memory and internalization to the Lord.
- B. Pray for concentration and retention. Petition the Lord for grace and mercy during the preaching event. Many distractions can come against you (e.g., technical difficulties, crying babies, people talking/sleeping) and it is easy to get rattled. Ask for the supernatural ability to tune out distractions and focus in on the message.
- C. Begin preparation early. I usually start my sermon prep for Sunday morning on Sunday afternoon or evening. This allows me to have an entire week to soak in the text. In order to *effectively* preach without notes, it is critical to prepare in advance. This means NO “Saturday night specials.”
- D. Exposit the Scriptures. Old Testament scholar and President of Gordon-Conwell Seminary, Walter Kaiser, loves to say something to this effect, “Preach one topical sermon a year and then immediately ask for forgiveness.” While this is an amusing overstatement, it is quite relevant when it comes to preaching without notes. I like to say, “I don’t preach without notes...I have God’s Word with me as I preach.” An expositor will never be at a loss for what he needs to say if his finger is always in the text. To preach a topical sermon without notes is a daunting task because you will have to memorize so much material. If you are responsible for just one passage, you are more likely to have a successful experience.
- E. Master your passage. Read your passage a number of times every day. Memorize key phrases and be familiar with the flow of the passage. This will enable you to express confidence in your preaching.
- F. Use a big idea with concise and parallel points. The goal is to simplify your structure. This will not only help you to remember your sermon during delivery; it will also enable your listeners to follow and retain your sermon.
- G. Internalize your message. Spend time every night or a few times a week reading through your outline or manuscript. This will allow what God has laid upon your heart to preach to be naturally communicated.

### **Note-Free Preachers:**

Origen  
Augustine  
John Calvin  
John Knox  
Jonathan Edwards (late in his ministry)  
John Wesley  
George Whitefield  
Charles Finney  
Charles Haddon Spurgeon  
Robert Murray McCheyne  
Henry Ward Beecher  
Alexander Maclaren  
John Broadus  
G. Campbell Morgan  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer  
R. C. Sproul  
Haddon Robinson  
Charles Stanley  
Tony Evans

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