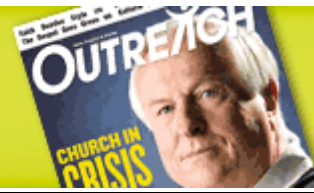


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Illustrations

Editor's Note: Our guest writer this week is Dr. Mark Strauss, professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary San Diego. You may recognize him from his published books or as an oft-quoted expert in the writings of Lee Strobel. Whether you are a young pastor still developing your preaching style or a seasoned veteran of the pulpit, Dr. Strauss offers a helpful word for calibrating our preaching to a high standard of biblical interpretation and delivery.

How Not to Preach! Or, Three Errors for Young Preachers to Avoid

Mark L. Strauss

I am not a full-time pastor or a preaching professor. But I do preach a great deal (every week; sometimes several times a week). As a professor of New Testament and Greek, I also train a lot of pastors. I would like to offer a little advice for young pastors seeking to develop their preaching skills. Here are three errors to avoid.

Error 1: Preaching less than the text

I am amazed at how often I hear sermons that miss the central point of a passage. A biblical text will be read and the preacher may start with this passage, but will then head off in a different direction. The problem is the preacher has a point to make and has simply used the text as a launching point.

The best way to avoid this error is to identify clearly the "big idea" or the central point of each passage you teach. Especially helpful in this regard is Haddon Robinson's classic book *Biblical Preaching*, which argues that every passage of Scripture has one central theme, and this is what the preacher should preach. All sub-points should relate directly to this central point, and your congregation should leave knowing exactly what the point was. This is because you have introduced it at the beginning, stated it clearly at each transition point, illustrated it regularly, and concluded with it. If you cannot state in one clear sentence the point of the passage, then you are not ready to preach it (see Robinson's book for details on how to find and compose the "big idea").

Error 2: Preaching more than the text

Another error common to young preachers is what I call "information dumping." An enthusiastic minister will spend many hours of preparation, gaining loads of wonderful exegetical insights into the text. Wanting to share these with their congregation, they will end up with a sermon that is more like a commentary than a message from God. People walk out with lots of data (and their heads spinning), but not really knowing what the sermon was about. The way to correct this error is to return to our first point. Never say anything that is not *directly related* to the big idea of the text. As in the making

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of a good movie, much more will be left on the cutting floor than shows up in the sermon, but the message will be more powerful and effective as a result.

Error 3: Abusing the original languages

Let me be clear. I am not saying, "Do not use the Greek." I am a Greek professor, and Greek and Hebrew are wonderful tools of exegesis. If I had my way, all preachers would have at least two years of Greek. What I am saying is "Do not misuse the Greek." Sadly, abuse of the original languages is rampant in our pulpits, and preachers often use the original languages to gain a sense of authority over their congregations (i.e., "I know something you don't know"). I always cringe when I hear a preacher say, "Now the Greek word for this is..." because 75% of the time what follows is simply wrong! The problem is those with a year or two of Greek tend to play with Greek words rather than interpreting Greek sentences.

Let me briefly illustrate. A preacher will say that the Greek word for "church" is *ekklesia*, from two Greek words: *ek*, "out of" and *klesia*, "called." So the church is "called out" from the world. This is an etymological fallacy. The Greek word *ekklesia* means a "gathering" or "congregation." By the first century it had lost any sense of "called out." This would be like saying that the English word "understand" literally means to "stand under." This is nonsense in English; and it is nonsense in Greek. Similar fallacies are that *dunamis* ("power") means "dynamite-like power" (an anachronistic fallacy), or that *agape* ("love") always means God's kind of love (a technical term fallacy). Words in any language (including Greek) do not get their meaning from their etymology, but from their semantic range (range of possible meanings) and the context in which they appear. For much more on this see Don Carson's excellent book, *Exegetical Fallacies* or Moises Silva's *Biblical Words and their Meaning*.

Of course there are other errors that young preachers can fall into, but these are the three I see most often.

God bless you as you preach the Word with accuracy, integrity and authority!

Mark L. Strauss (Ph.D., Aberdeen) is professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary San Diego. He is the author of various books and articles including, The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts (Sheffield Press, 1996), Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy (InterVarsity, 1998), "Luke" in the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary (Zondervan, 1999), The Essential Bible Companion (with John Walton; 2006), Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels (Zondervan, forthcoming), and Truth & Error in the Da Vinci Code (Alethinos Books, 2006).

He preaches regularly in the San Diego area and has a heart for ministry, especially bridging the gap between the academy and the church.

He lives in San Diego with his wife Roxanne and three children.

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