

3 Gospel-Nurturing Questions to Ask in Sermon Preparation

A few weeks ago, my daughter called to update me on her field trip to the nature center with my grandson Cash. When I answered the phone, her voice was shaky. Here is how the conversation went:

My daughter: *"Cash committed a murder today! We were in the butterfly exhibit and I took my eyes off him for like 30 seconds. When I found him crawling out from behind the trees, I could see he was carrying something. When I asked him to show me, he unfolded his cupped hands and - MOM - pieces of a dead, mangled, yellow butterfly fell to the floor!"*

Me: *"Oh no! What did you do?"*

My daughter: *"We hauled our heinie to the next exhibit as fast as possible! When the coast was clear, I told Cash; 'Hey buddy. You can't hold the butterflies. You can hurt them. They are soft and fragile. Ok?' Mom, it was so sad. He looked up at me and said, 'I just hold it a little bit. I just look at it. Teeny Tiny. So soft.'"*

I empathized with both sides.

- **The murderer:** How sad that this little nature lover accidentally killed something he adored. In his passionate zeal, he came on too strong. *He didn't realize his own power and it had irreversible, devastating consequences.*
- **The victim:** How sad that this butterfly had his life violently and unexpectedly crushed. I'm sure he thought he was in a safe place. *I mean, is there any place safer for a butterfly than in the protected butterfly habitat at the nature center?*

The story represented something else to me. It's really not that big of a leap, if you think about it. Church communicators can be murderers. Our message is the victim.

Here are three questions to ask ourselves so that we won't kill the gospel message in our zeal to communicate quickly and effectively:

#1: Am I coming on too strong?

Do we get in a hurry and come on too strong in our zeal? Are we *bypassing* Jesus in our eagerness to help people take steps *towards* Jesus? It's a common shortcut and it's tempting: just get people to the destination we've prescribed for them as quickly as possible.

We suck the life out of our content when we use all of our promotional real estate pointing people to programs and events in our church instead of next steps with Jesus. Our communication comes across as high pressure and out of touch when we forget to connect people to the higher ideals and spiritual disciplines outside our own church-sponsored events. Life change is not limited to an individual transaction on our church calendar.

Pro tip: Don't tell the whole story in promotions. Just share little appetizers to pull people into what you have to offer. Then build a sequence of little content nuggets around a central theme in all the communication intersections along your audience's journey of discovery (e.g., web, social media, platform, bulletin, lobby, etc.).

#2: Do I lack awareness?

Have we created a safe environment for people to ask questions and explore faith, or are we telling people what to think and do—rushing ahead to solve the problem for them? How can we slow down, trust God's part in the process, and spend more time pointing people to places they can find the answer on their own, even if they color outside the lines a little bit along the way?

When we are students of culture, we have better relationships with ALL people, not just OUR people.

Pro tip: Link to resources, articles, and content from a variety of sources that address the questions people are asking about life, relationships, community, and healing. Don't hesitate to share content from other leaders, industries, and environments to help people with whole life context around their spiritual next steps.

When we trust and empower individuals with a variety of reinforcements, they naturally take steps towards deeper levels of commitment inside their church family because they have ownership in the journey.

#3: Is my delivery sterile?

In our attempt to achieve professionalism and excellence, our institutional brands have become overdesigned, polished, and censored. Where can we do a better job embracing the imperfections of our humanity to demonstrate vulnerability and authenticity as fellow travelers on a journey?

When we create more space and environments for personal conversations, people are less skeptical and start to respond because they can relate.

Pro tip: While your corporate website can be centralized and standardized, loosen control over organic, conversational outlets like social media. Crowd source photos and content to build community, not perfection. Measure engagement, not graphics standards compliance. While the teams will need coaching along the way, be sure to promote connection over content and nurture conversation over correction.

Effective communications, on both individual and institutional levels, is about locating and disarming the landmines that have the potential to kill the message. But, it's not difficult to make incremental improvements.

Just look for, and reduce, the areas where you might be wearing people out, turning people off, or taking up space with white noise to bring life back into your messaging.

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