

Preaching to the Crowd without Offending the Core

In the modern era there have been a generation of preachers whose approach resembled the self-help inspirational talks of Tony Robbins. You could find titles of sermons such as, “Five Ways to a Better Life,” “Four Steps to Overcoming Fears,” and “Three Phases to Raising Obedient Pets.”

I’m just joking about the last one, but you get the idea.

Suffice it to say, some preaching was dumbed down (stripped of theological depth) to reach the dechurched or unchurched by offering pragmatic ways people could have a happier and healthier life.

It’s a good motivation, but I think the wrong application.

I’m not saying that every attempt at preaching in a way that unchurched understand is dumbing down the preaching. I’ve written plenty on the value of seeker comprehensible preaching. I’m talking about those who so simplify the message that it is dumbed down.

Why?

Some of these pastors believed church had become inaccessible or boring to those who were not attending; thus there was a need for creating an environment that was more accessible, understandable, and—hopefully—meaningful.

At different times and places, such an approach did grow some churches.

For some, dumbing down the message resulted in churches that were, as the saying goes, “a mile wide and an inch deep.” The resulting shallow churches didn’t stop some in the younger generation from being captivated by the growth. Seeing the growth of many such churches—and elements that contributed to the growth—led many young preachers (or speakers) to trade theological depth for creativity, craftiness, cleverness, and catchiness.

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Don’t misunderstand what I am saying. I’m not railing against the contemporary church or the creativity they exhibited.

I believe many had a pure heart and wanted to see many people come to know the Lord—and many did. I am just highlighting a potential weakness within that movement that still exists today.

It’s probably obvious I am not a fan of the dumbing down approach. I firmly believe that one can preach to the unchurched (and dechurched) in a way that is both accessible *and* theologically rich.

I think we can make the preaching seeker comprehensible without dumbing it down.

Putting the Cookies Up on a Little Higher [Theological] Shelf

I'm far from the world's greatest preacher and teacher. But one of the things that marks our church is that we put the cookies a little higher on the theological shelf. If teenagers can learn trigonometry and the intricacies of marketing and economics—and if people can go to Starbucks and order a triple shot, venti, soy, no foam, extra-hot latte, with two pumps of sugar-free vanilla syrup—then they can come to our corporate gathering and learn about propitiation.

I understand there is a debate regarding who the corporate worship gathering is for—some believe it is for the believer, some think it can focus on the unbeliever. I hold that church is for the glory of God and His mission in the world, which leads me to shape corporate worship for both the believer and unbeliever, though for different reasons. (The believer worships. The unbeliever observes.)

Thus, when we do put the theological cookies up on a higher shelf, you may need to provide a stepping stool, or what I refer to as an “on ramp” for unbelievers or newer believers to reach the topic.

By not dumbing down the message, both the unchurched and churched learn and grow, and one of the greatest lessons they learn from aiming high theologically is that Jesus is both accessible and demanding.

A Growing Shift from Shallow to Deep

A while back, I sat down with Craig Groeschel, pastor of Life Church in Oklahoma. I asked him what has changed about his preaching over the years. He explained that, to preach to the unchurched, he had to start preaching deeper because even the unchurched want deeper content.

In other words, those for whom sermons were being dumbed down aren't dumb. They are interested in the truth or else they'd be out golfing.

I also had a conversation with James Emery White, author of [The Rise of the Nones](#)—one of the best books on engaging secular people—who told me that several things at his church (which leans more seeker-friendly) have changed over the years. One area that has changed was the depth content of the messages. Intrigued, I asked why? He said because they are trying to reach the unchurched and these are the questions the unchurched are asking.

So, it seems that some who would be classified as “seeker-friendly” are shifting their sermon content from having more of a pragmatic flavor to one that is more theologically deep.

Again, I would not put all such churches in the dumbing down category. However, they are increasingly in the digging deep category.

The Art (or the Challenge) of Preaching with both Width and Depth

Preaching with both width and depth is not only a challenge, but also an art.

It takes great intentionality and discipline to take the Scriptures and to develop the sermon content in a way that is faithful to the text and contextually relevant to a diverse audience that may include mature believers, newer believers, and those who may have never read the Bible before.

Here's the reality: if the sermon primarily focuses on believers it may not connect with the visiting unbeliever. However, if it focuses primarily on unbelievers, it may not grow the believers. Finding the balance is an art, and an art very difficult to master.

In my opinion, [Tim Keller](#), pastor of [Redeemer Presbyterian](#) in New York City, has mastered this well, and I'm influenced by his thoughts. He is one of the best preachers who "preach up" in a way that connects to both believers and unbelievers without dumbing down. Next time you find yourself listening to a sermon of Keller's, pay attention to how he weaves in biblical commentary, apologetics, current issues, secular philosophies, cultural artifacts, and cultural needs all the while concluding in a Christ-centered fashion.

When Keller was asked, "What advice would you give to that younger you just starting out in ministry?" he [replied](#),

It takes a long, long, long, long time and lots and lots of practice to become as good a preacher as you are gifted to be. There's a tendency to think if you are gifted then you can just do it... Then I went and started Redeemer in New York. I thought I was as good a preacher as I was going to be. But Redeemer was a crucible for me and my preaching because these were harder people and their feedback was more negative... It took me thousands of sermons to get to the level that God had gifted me to get to.

I know the easier route for preaching or teaching is to dumb down, to keep it simple, or to not worry about the unchurched who might be present. But, I think that there is a way that we can provide "on ramps" so our preaching can keep the cookie jar a little higher on the shelf theologically.

However, as Keller noted, it will take time and lots of practice for preachers and teachers to be able to rightly divide the word of truth in a way that is both deep and wide—reaching both the believer and unbeliever.

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