

A NOTE FOR PREACHERS: To manuscript or not to manuscript, that is the question

Some preachers are able to preach without a manuscript. Others seem so tied to the page in front of them that they lose contact with their listeners. The classic example of this latter style is a young preacher whose submitted sermon video for his elder's ordination requirements showed him motioning vigorously with his arms and hands in the air all the while with his eyes glued to his manuscript. It might have been mistaken to be a SNL sketch.

I have preached with and without a manuscript, but in the later years of my ministry I nearly always preached from my manuscript. The reason is simple: I was not blessed with a photographic memory. When I tried to preach my manuscript from memory the flow and pace of my delivery was too frequently tentative and choppy as my mind was working on two levels simultaneously. On one level I was concentrating on the mechanics of my delivery: volume, inflection, pace, emphasis, essentially all the principles of oral interpretation. On another level my mind was working overtime trying to remember what came next and how did I phrase it to achieve its maximum impact.

I grew up listening to great manuscript preachers so I knew manuscript preaching could be theologically deep, emotionally engaging, and extremely well delivered. Over the years I experimented with various ways of writing my manuscript. I would often highlight the first word or two of each sentence so that when I returned my eyes to my manuscript, I could quickly find what came next. But even this did not break up a full page of text enough to allow a smooth delivery. I have seen other preachers' manuscripts that crammed 15-20 minutes of text onto two pages with $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ inch margins. My eyes glaze over just trying to read that kind of manuscript, much less to preach from it. I learned that white space is a manuscript preacher's best friend. So, I began separating every sentence with a paragraph break, which broke up the solid wall of text on the page and made it much easier to preach more freely. When you have labored to write a well thought out and tightly edited manuscript, and have rehearsed it a few times, even reading it silently to yourself, often all you need is to glimpse the first phrase of a sentence to remember where you are going with it as you return your eyes toward the congregation.

Early in my first appointment I read a collection of Peter Marshall's prayers edited by his wife, Catherine. She explained his unique style of arranging words on a page, breaking up phrases and giving each one its own line on the page similar to a poetic style. I found this technique quite effective over the years and the "The Gift of A Name" at doncumplings.com under the "Other Sermons" sub-menu uses this format.

I also most frequently printed my manuscript on a 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ half page and carried it into the pulpit or to the lectern in a same sized leather folio which gave it a smaller foot print. Often I would print it as a booklet, especially during a few periods when I made these booklets available to the congregation. In my last appointment the sound system was not very good, and I had a few people with impaired hearing, so I got in the habit of making my manuscript available before worship so they could follow along on the printed page and catch what their hearing may have missed.

Then, the last couple of years when iPads became quite useful, I actually wrote my sermon in Keynote (PowerPoint). I only put two to three sentences on each slide so it was easy to glance at the screen and see what to say. A simple touch of the screen advanced to the next slide seamlessly. I actually came to like this method the best. Unfortunately, I didn't override Apple's default storage of my Keynote files in the cloud and after I retired they somehow all disappeared. Fortunately, I do have video or audio copies of those messages which can be found at doncummings.com.

If you preach well without a manuscript, by all means continue to do so. Our preaching styles are like a pair of shoes. No one pair fits everybody. So preach in the style that you are best at using. My experience was that I preached better sermons that I worked diligently to write, paying attention to context, word choice, phrasing, movement, clear introductions and strong conclusions. And my delivery was better when I learned to preach freely from my manuscript.

An old preacher story tells of a preacher explaining his style of delivery to his denominational supervisor who came to monitor his preaching. He said that he wrote a manuscript for the first two-thirds of his sermon, but always depended on the holy Spirit to speak through him as he cut loose from his manuscript for the last third. His supervisor advised him, "Well I must say you do a better job than the Holy Spirit does so you should write 100 percent of your sermon."

One of my mentors in preaching was a manuscript preacher who shared his belief and experience that the Holy Spirit can engage and inspire the preacher as effectively in the study writing the sermon as in the pulpit preaching it. I would add that if the Holy Spirit hasn't engaged us in the writing of a sermon, we ought not to be preaching it any way.

There is an important creative discipline involved in developing effective writing skills, which in turn hone our communication skills. I found great freedom in the writing process. I would begin with a clear beginning but would often be surprised by the direction the Spirit would lead me into as the words and illustrations and biblical/life connections began to flow. I also learned to edit as I wrote. A well written manuscript can save us from unintended offense caused by using loaded words or phrases that may be a part of our stream of consciousness when speaking extemporaneously but we know better to weed out of a manuscript into which they may have surreptitiously crept. Careful attention to all these things in the writing process can produce a first draft that is pretty effectively finished. Of course, using Microsoft Word or Apple Pages makes the writing process so much more effective.

One final thought: after crafting effective sermon manuscripts, why not extend the reach of your sermons by publishing them at least to the congregation. One never knows who may take a copy or with whom they may share it and the good it may do in someone's life. So, write, preach, publish!