

Dumbing Down Preaching?

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After my post on making sense I received the following very helpful comment from Martin:

You make good points but I am left wondering.

There is so much dumbing down in America, are you encouraging the dumbing down of the sermon too?

How do you lift the bar for the congregation?

How do you keep the focus of the bright ones without leaving the newcomers behind?

In a rhetorical sense, should pastors check their brains (and learning) at the door to appeal to the least common denominator? In so doing, do the more educated listeners leave the service longing for more meat and less milk?

In sum, how do you balance these competing elements in the congregation?

Thanks for the comment. I am absolutely not encouraging the dumbing down of the sermon. I am encouraging making sermons understandable. The level at which the sermon is pitched should be part of the preacher's strategy, thoroughly informed by who is listening to the sermon (which implies knowing your congregation as well as possible).

Let's take, as an example, a tennis coach. Their job is to maximize the potential of the student by helping them improve their game. In order to achieve that goal, they have to make sure that everything they work on with the student is both understood and implemented. In reality they will make sure the basics are well-drilled, but they will also add to those basics the more nuanced elements of the game to produce a trained player who can play to the best of their ability. That will take many hours of training, perhaps hundreds of hours. But if you drop in at any point in the training, the student should understand what is being taught. A tennis coach that uses obscure language, unknown illustrations, omitted connections, rapid transitions, unclear speech, assumed knowledge and incoherent literary speech will not be effective, and unlike the preacher, will not be thanked for their "deep training."

So to lift the bar for the congregation we must make sure our preaching is stretching them by its content, rather than missing them by lack of clarity.

I think it is possible to communicate to several levels at once. Usually there is no need to differentiate massively in our preaching, "now for the more biblically astute listeners, listen to this..." Actually we can offer extra elements without overplaying the introduction. The key is for the listeners to be able to understand what you mean. Newcomers are helped massively by simple explanations of all that is happening, so that even if they don't fully comprehend every element of the service/message, they feel welcomed and comfortable (rather than alien and uncomfortable).

Pastors please don't check your brains at the door. But feel free to leave your egos there. An effective communicator uses a part of their skill and learning to make sure they connect with their listeners. Obscuring speech in order to appear intelligent is a prideful and profoundly unhelpful habit. The best sportspersons are the best because they make the profoundly complex look simple. The best coaches communicate effectively so that their instructions can be understood. The best preachers profoundly communicate the scriptures, using their skill to make sure that listeners understand them.