



PREACHING LIKE YOURSELF

- DAVID L. ALLEN



PREACHING COACH

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Dr. David L. Allen is founder and editor-in-chief of PreachingCoach (preachingcoach.com), a ministry dedicated to equipping pastors and ministry leaders to communicate with clarity, competence, and confidence. Through personal and group coaching, podcasts, webinars, eBooks, Ministry classes, and other resources, PreachingCoach trains and mentors those who desire to communicate more effectively.

In 2022, Dr. Allen became the Distinguished Professor of Practical Theology and Dean of the Adrian Rogers Center for Biblical Preaching at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tennessee.

He began preaching at age 16 and has taught preaching from the bachelor to the doctoral level since the late 1980s. He earned his MDIV from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, where he became Dean of the School of Theology in 2004, and the founding Dean of the School of Preaching in 2016. He served as the Distinguished Professor of Preaching, Director of the Center for Expository Preaching, and held the George W. Truett Chair of Pastoral Ministry.

Dr. Allen is also a graduate of The Criswell College, Dallas, Texas, where he taught and held the W.A. Criswell Chair of Preaching from 1998-2004. He earned his PhD in Humanities from the University of Texas at Arlington where he majored in Linguistics with the goal of using the principles of linguistics in exegesis and expository preaching.

He has been senior pastor of two churches in Texas from 1982-2004 and served as interim pastor of 14 churches for almost 20 years.

Over the past 40 years, Dr. Allen has led or participated in more than 400 preaching workshops, conferences, revivals, and other events in the US and in more than a dozen countries abroad.

This extensive background equips him to champion, teach, and model “text-driven” preaching, and he co-edited a book by that title, as well as numerous other books and articles on preaching, Old Testament, New Testament, and theology. His books have been translated into Spanish, Korean, and Portuguese.



DAVID ALLEN

Preaching Coach, Pastor, Speaker, and Author.



INTRODUCTION

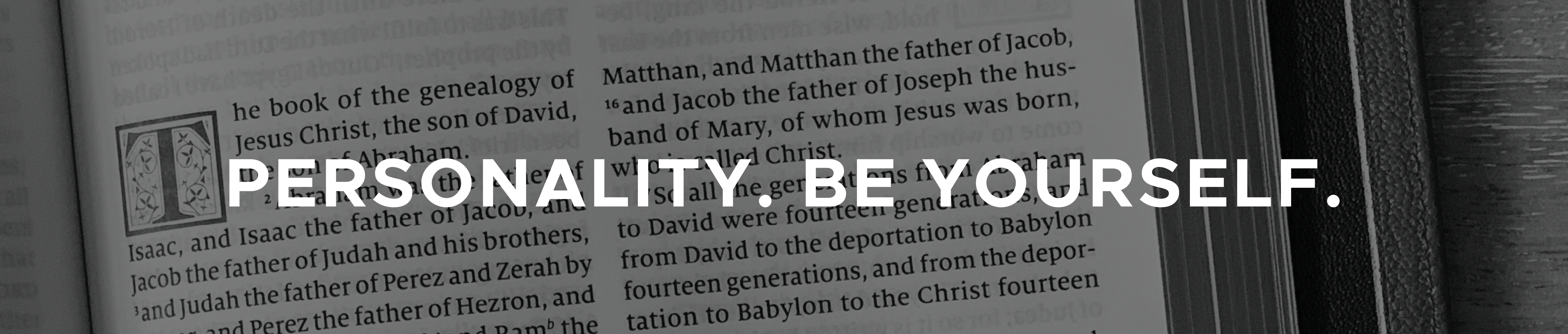
Personality. Originality. Integrity. The three necessary words if you are to “preach like yourself.”

What is preaching? “Truth through human personality,” according to Phillips Brooks in his famous Yale lecture on preaching. Preaching is the voice of the text through a human voice.

There are some things that remain constant in preaching. The text is one of them. It doesn’t change. John 3:16 was John 3:16 two-thousand years ago as it is today. John 3:16 contains the same number of Greek words, the same lexicon, the same grammatical structure today as it did two-thousand years ago, and that will be its structure a thousand years from now. Every preacher writing and preaching a sermon on John 3:16 wrestles with the text, its grammar, and its syntax—all of which remain fixed.

The same is true with the text's semantic structure—its meaning. It too does not change. It is encoded in the lexicon, grammar, and syntax, fashioned by the human author under the inspiration of the divine author, the Holy Spirit. God's love for the world has not and does not change. The fact of the giving of Jesus as a sacrifice for sins on the cross has not and does not change. The universal invitation of "whosoever" remains constant as the North Star. The promise of eternal life is as inviolable as the character of the God who made it.

If all these things remain stable, how and why do sermons on John 3:16 throughout history vary to some degree? The answer is simple: the preacher. Human personality. Same text, same meaning, but different preachers as varied as the snowflakes that quietly flutter to the ground on a winter's day—no two are the same.



PERSONALITY. BE YOURSELF.

Of all potent forces in preaching outside of the Holy Spirit, personality is probably the most effective. Personality is greater than education or genius. Study preaching and preachers and you will discover that personality in the hands of the Holy Spirit is their secret to good preaching.

Personality is individuality. There are no two identical blades of grass. God likes variety in his creation. He likes variety in people as well. Individuality is impressed on our facial features and our fingertips; on our retinas and brain patterns. Of the almost 8 billion people on the planet, no two are alike.

Does your preaching have your own person interwoven in it? In one sense, of course it does! After all, it is you preaching! That is, unless you are a counterfeit! Trying to be someone you're not. There is no successful counterfeit in preaching.

People expect authenticity and authenticity leads to good communication. "If God has made you a James, you must not nullify yourself by attempting to be Paul. . . . Wings suggest the air and fins the water. We prefer to see a swan on the lake rather than on dry land."¹ When you ascend the pulpit and proclaim of creation: "God spoke, and the stars scurried to their respective orbits like sparks off the anvil of omnipotence," your people may not know this is Spurgeon . . . but they will know it is not you. In fact, if we preached like that, people would ask, "What has he been smoking?" People do not like to listen to people who try to be other people.

Yet instead of being ourselves in the pulpit, some of us are parrots. We attempt to imitate someone else's style or content. Why would preachers

¹ Ian Maclaren, *The Cure of Souls* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), 76–77.

do this? Why is it when some preachers go into the pulpit they seem to transform into somebody else? What is it in human nature that drives us to want to be someone we are not?

Perhaps one answer is some preachers just don't trust the power of the Word or their own abilities to communicate it. They feel they must borrow heavily from others. They are insecure. They struggle to accept their birthright, and calmly be themselves.² We all must learn how to believe in ourselves even when we're so . . . ordinary!

Life has a way of making us self-conscious, sometimes morbidly so. From our parents to our teachers in elementary school through college, we feel like we are under a critical eye. Some preachers are that way about their preaching. We sometimes worry too much about ourselves and what others think of us. If we are not careful, we can fall into an unnatural style of delivery. "The unnatural you is who you are when you become self-conscious in front of a group."³ When it comes to your preaching, lose your self-consciousness—at least loosen it a bit!

Personality is personal. Definitions of personality fall into two general categories: internal and external. What people see of you is external. Whether you are gregarious or melancholy, that's what people see and experience of you—your personality. Internal personality is what a person actually is. A well-adjusted personality results when the internal you matches the external you.

The first rule of style in preaching is be yourself. You may say, "But I don't like who I am"! You may not like who you are, but trust me, it's worse trying to be somebody else—especially if you want to communicate! Aristotle pegged it a long time ago, "Naturalness is persuasive; artificiality to the contrary."⁴

2 Nathaniel J. Burton, *In Pulpit and Parish* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1925), 39.

3 Dianna Booher, *The Confident Communicator* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990), 39.

4 Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1954), 167.

As Mark Twain said, “‘Be yourself’ is about the worst advice you can give to people.” He’s right in one sense. If “yourself” comes complete with character flaws, bad habits, or bad behavior, then Twain is correct. But, if “yourself” means you are an original and not a copy, then good advice it is to “be yourself.”

God is not in the cut and paste business with his preachers. Sermon listeners are not entirely tone-deaf to the tell-tale tone of imitation. The voice of the parrot is easily distinguished from the human voice. In photography, there is a difference between a photograph and a photograph of that photograph. Visit any government office to obtain a Social Security card or a passport and you will quickly discover they do not accept copies of a birth certificate, only certified copies of the original.

God made you an original. Don’t pass yourself off as a cheap copy of somebody else in your preaching.

Dee Bowman was exactly right when he said:

YOU CANNOT BE SOMEONE ELSE, NO MATTER HOW HARD YOU TRY. YOU MIGHT LEARN TO SOUND LIKE SOMEONE ELSE, GESTURE LIKE SOMEONE ELSE, EVEN LOOK SOMEWHAT LIKE SOMEONE ELSE, BUT YOU ARE STILL ONLY YOURSELF PLAYING THE ROLE OF SOMEONE ELSE. WHAT YOU CAN BE IS THE BEST YOU YOU CAN BE. . . . THERE IS LITTLE TO BE GAINED FROM MAKING PREACHERS LOOK LIKE CUT OUT PAPER DOLLS. THE GOSPEL MESSAGE IS NOT HELPED BY HAVING A BUNCH OF ROBOTS RUNNING ABOUT DOING THE SAME THINGS, GESTURING WITH THE SAME MOVEMENTS, PARROTING THE SAME PLATITUDES, AND DOING IT ALL IN THE SAME, AFFECTIVE VOICE AND WITH BASICALLY THE SAME TYPICAL MATERIAL. WHAT A WASTE!⁵

5 Dee Bowman, *Common Sense Preaching* (Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Press, 1999), 156.

Henry Ward Beecher spoke bluntly about his own early attempts at imitation in preaching:

THERE WAS NEVER ANYTHING THAT SO NEARLY KILLED ME AS TRYING TO BE JONATHAN EDWARDS. I DID TRY HARD. THEN I TRIED TO BE BRAINERD; THEN I TRIED TO BE JAMES BRAINERD TAYLOR; THEN I TRIED TO BE PATIENT; THEN I TRIED TO BE HENRY MARTIN; AND THEN I GAVE UP, AND SUCCEEDED IN BEING NOTHING BUT JUST MYSELF.⁶

Young preachers are strongly tempted to imitate preachers whom they admire. Some may do it unconsciously, while others do it purposely. I've heard lots of young preachers trying to imitate John Piper, or Tim Keller, or some other favorite preacher. It never works.

Avoid direct imitation of any other preacher. Why? It is a violation of your own personality. You're not an old book published under a new title. Besides, most young preachers are not fully competent to choose whom they will imitate. "If a man is competent to decide who is the best model, he is competent to do without any, and to be himself."⁷

When I raised concerns years ago about a popular pastor/preacher who has since fallen from stardom, one of my friends explained to me, "You do realize, David, that all of your students are listening to him." "Yes, but maybe they shouldn't be," was my retort.

"If you attempt to be brilliant at the expense of others you will find your own expense will be sevenfold." Assimilation is one thing. Imitation is another.⁸

I have two words for you: never imitate. We think that somehow our imitation of a well-known preacher's method or style will magically grant

6 Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching, First, Second, and Third Series*, 3 vols. in one, Third Series (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1872), 275.

7 Jacob Fry, *Elementary Homiletics* (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1897), 115-21. Fry's section here on originality and imitation is worth a read.

8 Jacob Fry, *Elementary Homiletics*, 120.

us the same power and success they seem to have. But this is a fatal mistake. Their secret is not in their method or style. Their secret is in their individuality and personality yielded to the Holy Spirit. You cannot wear Saul's armor, so don't even try. But you can still win the victory over Goliath in your preaching! All you need is a sling and a stone.

Be someone other than you are and you will win other people's contempt. Be yourself and you will win their hearts.

But lest you misunderstand, I do advocate for the careful study of other preachers and preaching historically and in the present. Read biographies of preachers. You will learn their strengths and weaknesses. Read or listen to their sermons. This will accomplish two things. First, you will learn what to do. Second, you will learn what not to do. A study of error shortens the road to truth. Don't take all your preaching eggs from any one favorite preacher's basket. This will help you to develop your own personality and individuality in preaching.

Like you, I have my favorite theologians and preachers. If I'm not careful, I'll park my little self on the front row of their class and refuse to take any other professor, thus narrowing my exposure to the entire faculty. Our preaching should be team-taught. One day I sit at the feet of Dr. Luther, whose fiery mind, singular wit, and unflinching courage inspire me. I learn much from Dr. Luther. The next day Dr. Calvin comes to teach my class, and I am enthralled with how he theologizes and preaches. I learn much from Dr. Calvin. But the next day my teacher is Dr. Wesley. He invites me to consider truths and connections I did not apprehend from Drs. Luther and Calvin. Dr. Wesley, likewise, teaches me much about preaching. I learn to play different instruments in the orchestra by listening to the great masters of the past and present. The result is my theology and preaching is a whole orchestra instead of a one-man band playing the same one-hit wonder over and over.

I've learned through the years if you will know yourself and be yourself, you most likely won't preach yourself. The message is like water that

takes the shape of the vessel. But it is the water that slakes the spiritual thirst of those who hear us preach. “We have this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Or, to gloss, “we have this treasure in peanut butter jars.”

You will preach best when you preach as yourself. Not who you want to be. Not whom you want others to see, hear, and think you are. Unnaturalness in your preaching results from many factors, not the least of which is imitated mannerisms and speech. Some preachers feel they lack magnetism—the ability to connect with people. To be frank, some preachers do lack this quality. But the solution is not trying to be something or someone you are not. Maybe you just need to work on your verbal and emotional expression. Expression of emotion is taught in acting schools using the methods of pantomime and monologue. Try both before a mirror, or better still, before a friend or spouse. These methods will help you develop the “you” inside. Your preaching will improve, I promise.

The great homiletician of the 19th century, John Broadus, put it this way:

AND THEN IN THE CHOICE OF TOPICS, THE CONSTRUCTION OF DISCOURSE, THE ILLUSTRATION AND APPLICATION OF TRUTH, A PREACHER MAY PERPETUALLY DEVISE WHAT SHALL BE IN SOME RESPECTS FRESH, AND RELATIVELY TO HIM, ORIGINAL. AND IN FACT A MAN HAS HIS OWN WAY OF PRESENTING ANY SUBJECT WHATEVER, WHICH DERIVES POWER FROM ASSOCIATION WITH HIS PERSONALITY; AND OTHER THINGS BEING EQUAL, THIS IS FOR HIM THE BEST WAY. “PUT HONOR UPON YOUR INDIVIDUALITY.”⁹

Honor your individuality.

You ask, “What is the best preaching style for me?” Your natural style is the best style for you. Preach as if you were in an animated conversation with a friend. Be yourself in the pulpit.

⁹ John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1926), 131. You must read Broadus’ section “On Creativity” on pp. 129–37.



ORIGINALITY. BE YOUR BEST SELF, NOT A COPY.

I recently read a 2015 blog post by Scott Young entitled “Are You Trying to Be Too Original? What I Learned About the Value of Imitation from China.”¹⁰

He surprised me when he suggested that the majority of the skills, knowledge, and output we have and desire aren’t and shouldn’t be original at all. Even the most creative works like art and writing probably come from being only about 10% original and 90% imitative of prior work.

To illustrate this claim, he noted how movie director Quentin Tarantino is famous for being one of the most creative filmmakers, but his shots and scenes are borrowed heavily from films he admires. Tarantino utilizes just enough originality to make it his own.

This is how we need to operate in our preaching. Preaching is a “creative profession” if I may use such terminology. Preachers are creating sermons, usually on a weekly basis. Yet the result is not a *creatio ex nihilo*, a creation out of nothing. With respect to Scripture and doctrine, you cannot create. To attempt to do so will result in either you looking and sounding ridiculous or falling into error—or worse, heresy. Though you can’t swear by it, you can generally live by it: when it comes to Scripture and doctrine, “That which is true is not new, and that which is new is not true.” There is a difference between originality in the product and originality in the packaging.¹¹

¹⁰ Scott Young, “Are You Trying to Be Too Original? What I Learned About the Value of Imitation from China.” April, 2015. <https://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/2015/04/15/too-original-lessons-china/>.

¹¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994), 300.

In addition, there is a body of literature that has been written and preached about any text of Scripture in the form of commentaries, theological works, and sermons which are hundreds of years old and available to the preacher. Like an engineer or a surgeon, preachers are not and cannot be entirely original. The operative word here is “entirely.” You wouldn’t want your brain surgeon or cardiac surgeon to suddenly decide to think outside the box in the middle of your craniotomy or quadruple bypass.

In fact, you might be leery of your brain surgeon if just before surgery he explained what he planned to do in a southern accent punctuated with grammar and enunciation problems. Remember the comedian, Jeff Foxworthy? In one of his comedy routines, he talked about how people who are not from the South often view people with a southern accent. Being from Georgia myself, and having a southern accent that has been tempered somewhat by living in Texas for 46 years, I smile when I hear Foxworthy say some people want to deduct 100 IQ points when they hear a southern accent: You probably don’t want to hear your brain surgeon say just before he puts you under the anesthetic, “Aight, now what we’re gonna do is, saw off the top ya head, root around there with a stick and see if we can’t find that clot. . . .” Style matters . . . in brain surgery and in preaching.

Yet good preaching always employs a certain genuine creativity and originality. Phillips Brooks said that genuine originality is noble, but surface originality is miserable. “It is so easy to be a John the Baptist, as far as the desert and camel’s hair and locusts and wild honey go. But the devoted heart to speak from, and the fiery words to speak, are other things.”¹²

How might we describe stages of development of originality?

¹² Phillips Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 37. See also Brooks, *The Life and Letters of Phillips Brooks*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Allen (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1901), 190.

1. Faithfulness to the text of Scripture. This is the first step in true originality. There is more originality and creativity in every text than you ever dreamed. Find it. Ferret it out through careful exegesis. Then let the text itself guide your own original thinking and sermon development. This leads to the second step of true originality:

2. Ingenuity. Ingenuity is the quality of being individual and inventive. Genius refers to a high level of intelligence, while ingenious refers to being clever or inventive. There are few real geniuses, but every preacher can learn to be ingenious in sermon preparation and delivery.

3. The third step of originality is imagination. Do yourself a favor and read Warren Wiersbe's *Imagination in Preaching and Teaching*.¹³ Listen to those preachers who are known for their use of sanctified imagination in preaching. Study their content and methods. You may think you don't have a creative bone in your body. But such thinking is selling yourself short—and your creator as well! Develop your imagination in preaching and watch what happens.

Remember Brooks' definition of preaching: "truth through human personality." Truth is unchanging. But the truth of God's word can be brought to bear on people through your personality in ways only you can accomplish. The text is not new, but it is sifted and filtered by your apprehension and experience of it, and then packaged in your style of presentation. Learn to bring from the treasure house of God's word "things new and old" (Matthew 13:52). Greatness is not in the creation of content but in the use of it. "Originality does not consist in saying new things but in treating old things in a new way."¹⁴

Francis Rossow, the Lutheran homiletician, said, "If a preacher studies his biblical text thoroughly, determines carefully what it says, and then says

¹³ Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*. See especially pp. 289-300 on "Imagination and Creativity."

¹⁴ John N. Booth, *The Quest for Preaching Power* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1943), 110.

what it says in a direct, clear, coherent manner, he will often get credit not only for thoroughness, care, directness, clarity, and coherence but for creativity as well.”¹⁵

R. W. Dale once said:

If you want to be an original preacher, look at heaven and hell, life and death, sin and holiness, with your own eyes; listen for yourself to the voice of God; ask Him to reveal to you the glory of His love, the steadfastness of His truth, the energy of His righteousness, and tell the world what you have seen and heard. Get at the facts which lie behind appearances. In this way originality will come to you when you are not seeking it.¹⁶

Originality in preaching is exhibited mainly in your composition, language and style of delivery, and creatively weaving together a captivating message. What you say is text-dependent and therefore text-driven. How you say it is personality-dependent and personality-driven. Your voice, style, manner of delivery, and creativity is a matter of your personality and will be somewhat unique since you are unique. The exegete in you takes the text apart to understand its meaning and the preacher in you puts it back together again to communicate that meaning. Information is not communication. Information is not transformation. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.¹⁷ When your preaching is predictable, you will not get through. High predictability leads to low impact. Low predictability leads to high impact.

Through the years, I have worked on creativity in preaching. My hat is off to those five-talent preachers who seem to come by this gift effortlessly. For those of us who are one or two-talent preachers, it comes much harder. But it does come if I work at it, and it will come for you as well. Alvin Rueter, Lutheran pastor and homiletician, spoke of the “sweet agony of creativity,”¹⁸ and I can find no better phrase for it.

15 Francis C. Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983), 6.

16 R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1896), 297.

17 Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, 23-24.

18 Alvin Rueter, *Making Good Preaching Better* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 110.

Twenty years ago, I was preaching in the Philippines. It was my first time to be in that beautiful country. I was preaching in a large church in Manila where the pastor had been preaching through Romans. I was given an assigned text of Romans 6:1–13. As I prepared for the sermon, I considered ways I could creatively illustrate what it means for the Christian to be dead to sin's authority but alive to God.

As an amateur reader of World War II history, I visited the island of Corregidor while I was in the Philippines. I made the 53-minute boat ride in Manila Bay to the island for the tour. Corregidor was the site of two famous battles during WWII. I learned that after Japan surrendered in 1945, some of the young Japanese soldiers scattered throughout the islands decided not to return to their homeland due to the shame of their defeat. They remained on some of the remote islands and took up farming. At the time of my preaching in Manila (2001), some of those soldiers were still alive and would have been in their 70's or even 80's.

I learned the story of the famous Japanese soldier, Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda, who was on the island of Lubang at the end of the war. His unit was virtually wiped out. He hid out on the island and refused to believe that Japan surrendered, and the war had ended. He continued hiding out and engaging in occasional guerrilla warfare against island inhabitants . . . until 1974! An enterprising Japanese explorer, Norio Suzuki, researched the situation and concluded that Onoda was still alive and on the island. He traveled to Lubang, searched, and found him, informing him that the war had ended in 1945. Onoda refused to believe him. He stated that unless his former commanding officer, Major Yoshimi Taniguchi, ordered him to surrender he would not surrender. Suzuki returned to Japan, tracked down Taniguchi, who was in business in civilian life as a book seller. Taniguchi went to Lubang, and in a pre-arranged meeting with Onoda on March 9, 1974, ordered him to surrender. Onoda handed over his Arisaka Type 99 bolt-action rifle, five hundred rounds of ammunition, his knife and his grenades. Still dressed in his tattered 1940s Japanese army uniform, he

boarded a plane to Manila where he surrendered his sword to President Ferdinand Marcos.

From these two accounts, unique to the Philippines, I conjured up an imaginative story to illustrate the truth of Romans 6 that we are dead to sin's authority. "Imagine," I said, "that you fly to Manila. You then board a small plane and fly to the remote island of Lubang. You travel on foot into the recesses of the dense jungle until you come to a clearing. There is a small house next to a garden. You see an old man wearing a worn-out Japanese military cap out in the garden with a hoe in his hand. You approach him, and when he stops to look at you, you throw up your arms and shout: 'Don't shoot! I surrender.' The old former Japanese soldier shuffles slowly to his little house, retrieves an old rusty rifle no longer in working order, and then with back bent and barrel shaking, he returns and points the rifle at you while you say, 'I surrender!'"

I then continue: "Why would you do that? You go to sin, personified as a defeated enemy, and surrender to sin to be used for his purposes. Though he is a defeated foe and has no authority over your life, yet you yield to him your eyes, your ears, your hands, your feet. Such an egregious sin against the greatness of God's grace is unthinkable!" As Romans 6:12-13 says, "Don't surrender your body parts to sin; surrender yourselves to God and your body parts as instruments (the Greek word is 'weapons') of righteousness!"

The use of this illustration in my sermon in Manila was powerfully effective. In fact, I've used it since then and have heard many comments as to how it opened the meaning and application of the text to people. Original and creative thinking like this elevates a sermon . . . and thus, your preaching.

Use your imagination. It's magic—a flying carpet of Baghdad. The brilliant author Jules Verne hardly ever left the quiet confines of his own home, yet his imagination took him around the world in 80 days, 20,000 leagues under the sea, and to the moon.¹⁹

¹⁹ Walter Osborne, *Applied Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner, 1957), 1.



INTEGRITY. THE FINAL NECESSARY WORD FOR PREACHING LIKE YOURSELF.

Integrity is a quality. The quality of honesty and moral uprightness is what we mean by “integrity.” But it is also a state. A person of integrity is one who is whole and undivided. Integrity in preaching cannot be compromised—ever. You are not obligated to be famous, intellectually sophisticated, popular, or successful. You are obligated by God and his word to be a person of integrity in your preaching.

Engineers speak of “structural integrity.” Structural integrity is an engineering field that helps ensure that either a structure or structural component is fit for its purpose under normal operational conditions and is safe even should conditions exceed that of the original design.

One of the most remarkable feats of engineering is the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. By mid-1935, the north and south towers stood ready to support the two main cables which in turn would provide the support for the bridge. The bridge itself is just shy of 9,000 feet long—1.7 miles. Each of the cables measured a little over 3 feet in diameter and weighed 12,000 tons. They were far too heavy to carry across the Golden Gate Strait on barges and lift to the tops of the towers. The cables were constructed high in the air using a process called “cable spinning.” To spin the cables, workers pulled a wire, about as thick as a pencil, from the concrete anchorage at one shore, up and over both towers, and on to the other anchorage. The wire was then secured and sent back. It took many back-and-forth trips to place the 27,572 wires that are in each cable. Individual wires were grouped into heavier strands and compacted together to form the finished cable. The spinning of the cables took six months and nine days. As a result, the Golden Gate Bridge has structural integrity.

The integrity of the preacher and preaching is thousands of wires strung back and forth, spun together in massive cables, each one inscribed with “thus says the Lord” and anchored in the Word of God. Spiritual integrity. That’s the difference between a rickety foot-bridge kind of preaching and Golden Gate Bridge preaching.

The purpose of the Golden Gate Bridge is to provide a way for travelers to cross safely the treacherous waters of the narrow, 400-foot deep Golden Gate Strait, that serves as the mouth of the San Francisco Bay, connecting the San Francisco Peninsula with the southern end of Marin County.

Like the Golden Gate Bridge, our purpose in preaching should be effective communication, connecting our listeners with God and his Word. Any preacher worth his salt wants to improve his preaching and preach great sermons. Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich said, “A creative artist works on his next composition because he was not satisfied with his previous one.”²⁰

Never forget, however, your goal is not to become known as a great preacher; your concern is to do great preaching. Henry Ward Beecher said,

GREAT SERMONS, YOUNG GENTLEMEN, NINETY-NINE TIMES IN A HUNDRED, ARE NUISANCES. THEY ARE LIKE STEEPLES WITHOUT ANY BELLS IN THEM; THINGS STUCK UP HIGH IN THE AIR, SERVING FOR ORNAMENT, ATTRACTING OBSERVATION, BUT SHELTERING NOBODY, WARMING NOBODY, HELPING NOBODY. IT IS NOT THESE GREAT SERMONS THAT ANY MAN SHOULD PROPOSE TO HIMSELF AS MODELS. GREAT SERMONS WILL COME OF THEMSELVES. DON’T SEEK THEM; FOR THAT OF ITSELF IS ALMOST ENOUGH TO DESTROY THEIR VALUE.²¹

²⁰ New York Times, October 25, 1959.

²¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching, First, Second, and Third Series*, 3 vols. in one, First Series (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1872), 32.

Beecher spoke of “show-sermons” as the temptation of the Devil. “There is a false greatness in sermons as well as in men. Vanity, ambition, pedantry, are demons that love to clothe themselves in rhetorical garments, like angles of light.”²²

Seekest thou great sermons for thyself? Seek them not (my gloss on Jeremiah 45:5)!

Take notice! Seek to do great preaching, and great sermons will come. “Seek ye first the Lord, the text, and the people, and creativity will be added unto you.”²³

Be yourself. Be your best self. Be your uncompromised self—and preach the Word, . . . for there are yet sermons to preach.

²² Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching*, 33.

²³ Francis C. Rossow, *Preaching the Creative Gospel Creatively* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1983), 7.



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