Preaching Without Notes

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It has long been my conviction that the essence of good sermon delivery is to hit a middle between these two extremes. On the one side is being so tied to notes or manuscript that we will be perceived by our hearers as delivering an essay that is the conviction of our notes rather than a sermon that is the conviction of our hearts. The sermon may be a literary work of art, well organized and well-polished, but it lacks the interpersonal spark of connection that can set on fire the interaction between preacher and congregation. A visible – or perhaps even invisible - paper barrier is exerting its subtle yet quite tangible impact. Especially in a postmodern world, the deadly label of "inauthentic" hangs like an ominous cloud over the sermon no matter how sound the content.

On the other side is the sermon that is indeed very loose and free, delivered without any apparent reference to notes or manuscript, and yet what the preacher appears to be free of more than anything is a unifying central thought and a clear sense of direction. One of two things then happens. If the preacher possesses some skills in delivery, he may still hold his people's attention, but those hearers would have a hard time identifying a clear textual point emerging from all the words. The congregation was entertained, but they may not have been edified. Or if the preacher who is free from his notes lacks communication skills, if he spends considerable pulpit time searching for what he wants to say and the best way in which to say it, then most hearers will quickly lose interest. When he does finally bring the sermon in for a halting landing, the sense of relief will be palpable, the sense of benefit, not so palpable.

The golden middle for sermon delivery is to have a clear command of one's subject delivered in a sermon that is so well designed and organized that its words flow as easily and comfortably as a focused conversation with dear friends on important matters, all delivered without the least hint that one is tied down to notes or manuscript.   The hearers have no sense that the preacher was focused primarily on getting his precise words off the page but on reaching their hearts with the message of the text.

It is that golden middle that Joseph Webb seeks to discover in his book ***Preaching Without Notes***. While a confessional Lutheran reader will soon discover that Webb's doctrine of the Word leaves much to be desired, yet Webb's book offers a rich supply of practical step by step help to a preacher who wants to leave behind reliance on manuscript or notes without leaving behind clarity and coherence.

Here are some highlights section by section.

- In the introduction Webb lays out his rationale for why he believes preaching without notes is so important. Here are his three arguments for preaching without manuscript or notes of any kind: 1) it maximizes "connectedness" between preacher and congregation; 2) it maximizes

"participation" by the congregation as it allows for the preacher to utilize the moment by moment feedback of the congregation in how the sermon will be delivered; and 3) it reflects "authentic witness" since it will be received by many hearers as evidence that the sermon comes from the heart of the speaker rather than from his notes.

- In chapter 1, Webb deals with the reality that preaching without notes is not merely – and perhaps not even primarily – a sermon delivery issue. Preparing to preach without any paper props has an impact from the very beginning of sermon preparation. Careful note taking during the process of exegesis and the study of context can go a long way already to enabling a sermon to be designed that will be memorable both for preacher and people.

- Webb's directions on outlining (chapter 2) may be some of the most helpful advice in the entire book. Webb offers this four-step approach 1) isolating (identifying each of the key ideas of the text and supporting materials discovered during the sermon study); 2) arranging (seeking to develop a clear logical and psychological order to the sermon); 3) marking (providing a very brief summary of each of the main "sequences" of the outline so that the outline can quickly be committed to memory); and 4) evaluating (looking at the outline as a whole after it has been initially developed to check for clarity, unity, and logical flow). In all of this Webb offers a variation in what the outline looks like that moves away from the Roman and Arabic numeral outline structure so familiar to many of us since high school. Webb instead focuses on identifying the "sequences" that move the story or plot line of the sermon forward. It is the discovering, ordering and arranging of these sequences that Webb identifies as the outline.

- Webb's third chapter on committing the sermon to memory offers much practical insight on what one pastor (Webb) does in the nuts and bolts of getting ready to preach without notes. While he readily admits that the exact same pattern will not work for everyone, he identifies clear principles for how memory works as well as recognizing the barriers that tend to get in our way. Chief among the barriers is an all too common lack of confidence in what an amazing tool the memory is if we but train it for service and then put it to work.

- Webb's final chapter provides a wealth of practical advice for Sunday morning from the final preliminaries, to preaching the sermon, to clearing the mind afterwards to make room for the process to begin afresh the next week.

For all that can be learned from Webb's book, we who hold to a "high" view of Scripture as an inspired and errorless message of God delivered through human authors, will often find ourselves disappointed in how Webb seems to view the doctrine of the Word. In addition to that more obvious theological challenge in the book, there are also disagreements this reader has with some of Webb's practical encouragements.

- Chief among those disagreements is that Webb does not encourage writing out a complete manuscript. He commits his sermon to memory from what we would call an expanded outline. Webb appears to lean in this direction because he is so afraid of the powerful lure of taking a manuscript into the pulpit. He is so convinced that writing out the complete sermon will straightjacket us, compelling us to try to reproduce as the sermon is preached exactly what we had on paper. Webb believes writing out a complete manuscript will inevitably lead to

delivering a static essay rather preaching a living sermon. The dangers that come with writing out a manuscript are very real. Yet I am convinced that the discipline of writing out a complete manuscript for both new and experienced preachers has some distinct advantages. Taking the time to write out the manuscript can help ensure that preachers don't stumble into predictable patterns, especially for how to communicate a text's law and gospel. As long as we recognize that the goal is not to deliver the sermon precisely as written (preaching is not reading the invisible teleprompter of our mind), and as long as we learn to leave the manuscript out of the pulpit (since preaching is certainly not reading our manuscript in whole or in part), the written manuscript can be a very helpful tool in making sure we have thought ourselves to a clear and persuasive sermonic path from beginning to end.

- Webb's emphasis on creating (not discovering) a metaphor for every sermon and developing one's own "sequence" of order for the sermon, seem to move the preacher almost inevitably away from allowing the text to dominate the sermon. Perhaps it is unfortunate that the exemplar sermon that was used throughout the book was from a topical sermon series on characters of Scripture. The chosen biblical character was Mark, and so the sermon really had multiple texts as Webb moved in his sermon from one reference to Mark to another. But even in Webb's general encouragements, there was no urging to discover the inherent logical progression of the text. The preacher is directed to create his own outline rather than being urged to discover the outline already imbedded in the text. As Webb himself acknowledges throughout his book, one of the greatest hindrances to being able to preach without notes is the complicated outlines that were created by the preacher which he cannot follow without extensive notes. All of which makes it even more challenging for the hearers to follow the complicated logic. But when the natural thought progression of the text provides the outline for the sermon, the sermon is often significantly easier for the preacher to preach from memory and for the hearers to follow along without trouble. This distinction is the difference between what are often called "synthetic" outlines that jump around in the text and follow the more natural "analytic" outlines that allow the text's own order to dictate the order of the sermon.

Despite what this author considers to be weaknesses in Webb' s encouragements, this book offers a wealth of practical suggestions for those who desire to preach without reliance on manuscript or notes. It is well worth a busy pastor's thoughtful consideration.