

Sharing the Driver's Seat

When pastors team up to write the week's sermon, can they avoid oncoming traffic?

by Brian Lowery | posted 5/09/2008

How does a team prepare a sermon, one to be preached by nine different speakers, in English and Spanish, at New Life Community Church's nine sites around Chicago? Brian Lowery was invited to sit in during their group sermon preparation to see how it's done.

After spending time in prayer, the pastors at New Life Community Church huddle around a table on this Monday to pull together next Sunday's message. The table is covered with Bibles, pens, notepads, laptops, and—no less important—mugs of coffee (the less caffeine-dependent clutch bottled water).

Here I watch 16 individuals with 16 different personalities and backgrounds do their best to shape one sermon that will be preached in nine locations to nine different congregations.

I can't help but wonder if this task is impossible for a group. I rarely agree with *myself* when putting together a sermon—let alone with 15 others! I struggle to keep just one audience in mind; I don't know how I could handle eight more. Adding to the difficulty is the text for this morning's session, Acts 4:32–5:14, the daunting story of Ananias and Sapphira.

For each sermon, I learn, one individual—chosen from among New Life's five main teaching pastors—is given the responsibility of "driving" the sermon outline. Okay, so this isn't all that different from what I've practiced in sermon preparation: one person behind the homiletical wheel. The difference here is that the one driver is responsible for pointing the sermon in a direction the whole group can go together.

If one person points out something along the way that's been missed, the driver stops the bus and takes a second look to see if the new discovery can fit into the itinerary. Doing sermon prep this way, you not only have to tolerate the backseat driver, you must learn to love him.

This morning's driver is Francisco "Paco" Amador. From the series of handouts we received as we entered the room, it's clear that Paco has already been on quite the road trip with our text. At the end of the previous week's prep time, he pitched the general boundaries of the text to get everyone on the same exegetical and creative road.

Now, a week later, Paco has identified specific landmarks and key intersections in the passage, highlighting key words and pointing out pivotal issues of context.

They held the text in their hands with the right combination of caution, care, and creativity.

After the passage is read aloud, Paco takes an in-depth look at his map with contagious passion. He's done his homework. He notes a few key words that populate the passage (the consistent use of the word *great* and the first use of *ekklesia* in all of Acts).

He makes sure everyone sees the benefits of this disturbing story being included in Luke's work—and what would be missing if it hadn't been—by pointing out some of the big ideas of the text. "Notice how the major themes of the story serve as scaffolding for the narrative," he tells the group. "We see themes of purity, grace, fear, accountability, greed, and community."

Paco then has us take a moment to marvel at the intriguing nature of verses 13–14, reading Luke's words with an emphasis on their irony: "No one else dared join them ... nevertheless, more and more ... were added to their number."

Paco even suggests possible uses of typology when he asks the group, "If Acts parallels Genesis, is it possible that Ananias and Sapphira may parallel Adam and Eve?" The depth of the conversation takes me by surprise. With such a large group, I was expecting a more basic engagement with the text. But within the first half hour, we're talking typology!

Along with the surprising degree of depth, I'm also overwhelmed by the many directions we could go from here. This is a Grand Canyon text. Some travelers may look and say it's simply a hole in the ground—the central idea seems easy enough to identify ("don't lie")—and move along. The more careful traveler, however, will apply the brakes and stare long and hard, noticing more nuances with every blink of the eye.

The group carefully points out the nuances here that speak to church, mission, fear of God, honesty, purity, community, and greed. We're only 30 minutes in, and I already see the potential for constructing three or four exegetically sound, God-honoring sermons.

As Paco navigates, backseat drivers begin pointing to what *they* see out the window. Paco is interrupted with questions, observations built atop his own, and a few thoughts on how best to capture the scene for the unique audiences everyone will face on Sunday. But these interruptions are actually productive. Most lead to an improved map.

Steering correction

Mark Jobe plays a pivotal role in the process. Jobe has been with New Life since 1986 and is the closest person to a senior pastor (he prefers to be known as "just one of the teaching pastors"). Though each session has an appointed driver, it's clear that Jobe is free to take the wheel at times.

On this particular morning, he voices a concern: "Let's remember the seminal vision for the upcoming message. When the series from Acts was first envisioned, this message from Acts 4:32–5:14 was intended to show the power and necessity of purity in the church. Let's talk through that particular theme a bit more." With a few words, Jobe carefully steers the group from the edge of the road to the center of the lane, assuring that the central theme doesn't get lost in stray observations.

One area the group adjusts is the construction of the sermon headings. They choose to keep the first of three headings suggested by Paco, but the final two are reshaped to reflect more specifically on purity. Some tangential issues are filed away for another time, another sermon.

Key texts that support the central idea are asked for and found. With the basic map established, the final 15 minutes are more playful.

Jobe gets an idea for an introduction from something he saw on the news. One of the men finds more information about the story on Google, offers a synopsis to the group, and sends a link to everyone so they can adjust the illustration for their own use. The story, however, is about high school students. One person urges the group to keep looking for other illustrations that will speak into a more adult audience.

"We don't want to alienate hearers within the first few minutes of the sermon," he says. Everyone agrees to keep in touch throughout the week as ideas take shape.

As more illustrations are suggested, other creative thoughts emerge. Someone shares a pithy application statement: "Inspect your life before you wreck your life." Another suggests that the central message of this sermon is a powerful foundation for celebrating Communion. Everyone agrees, and in a matter of seconds, the sermon wrap-up is pointing in a slightly different direction.

Paco, our driver, has been jotting notes in a flurry. In the next few days, he'll create a revised sermon map that draws from Monday's mountain of notes. The redrawn map will be sent to each of the main preachers.

Each will tweak the sermon to fit his personality and that of his congregation, but everyone agrees that what has happened in our time together has yielded a strong sermon structure.

As the group closes their Bibles, shuts down their laptops, and swallows the last few sips of coffee, Jobe—the driver for next week—hands out his initial map for a sermon on Acts 6:1–7, and the road trip starts all over again.

Surprised by the company I keep

Driving home, I reflect on what I have just experienced. The sermon prep team at New Life was full of energy, but the excitement never trumped their commitment to get the interpretation right. They didn't drive over the text, storming their way to a finished product that was all shine but no substance. They did not shape the text to their purposes; they allowed the text to shape them.

They shared a sacred energy that can only be generated when a group of preachers holds a text in their hands with the right combination of caution, care, and creativity.

Even after enjoying my morning with New Life, I can't help but think, *Group preparation is nice for them, but I don't think it's right for me. I like to pull things together myself, without backseat drivers.*

Or do I?

The next week, I was working on a difficult message. I was losing sleep, tearing up pages of notes, and driving my poor wife crazy. Finally, I reached out for help. I called my father to bat around ideas, I shared my notes with two trusted friends, and I cracked open books and commentaries to see who agreed with my conclusions and who didn't. I even consulted with one of my co-workers about the subject to make sure I wasn't crazy.

I may think I'm the only one driving my sermon preparation, but in truth there are many others taking the trip with me every week. I hadn't realized it before, but I do exactly what the teaching team at New Life does every Monday morning, although my journey is a bit less fun and fueled by considerably less coffee.

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