

INCREMENTAL PREACHING

Many pastors want “fast acting” sermons. But what brings lasting transformation is a steady, intentional plan for the pulpit.

by Bryan Wilkerson



I still remember my first sermon as a pastor. In a fit of homiletical hubris that every seminarian will recognize, I decided to impress my new congregation with my first sermon by unlocking the mysteries of the Minor Prophets. As I prepared that week, I became convinced that this could well be the most important sermon I would ever preach. If we were to grasp the holiness of God as presented by Hosea, our lives and our church would never be the same. I preached that message with passion and expectancy. But when I looked out over the congregation the next Sunday, we were pretty much the same crowd as the week before.

There isn't a preacher alive who isn't at once both energized and dismayed by the sermon's potential to effect change. Why aren't people more deeply transformed by their weekly encounters with God's Word? The deficiency can't be with the Scriptures, obviously. And most of us manage to communicate biblical truth with a measure of clarity, relevance, and conviction. So why don't we see more real, lasting change?

VIM, not just vigor

In his book *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard unpacks the dynamics of personal transformation. He begins by informing us that “we live from our heart.” The heart, according to Scripture, is the control center of human personality. It's the deep, inner place where the mind, emotions, and will intersect, and where decisions are made. Our hearts have been malformed by our fallen world, and they need to be re-formed by the Spirit of God. This renovation of the heart, according to Willard, follows a predictable pattern involving vision, intention, and means—what he calls “VIM.”

In the vision phase, we come to believe that a particular change is both possible and preferable. But

desire alone isn't enough to produce that change. If it were, we'd all be fit, punctual, and debt-free! At some point we must decide—intend to actually get in shape, be on time, or live within our means. Having desired and decided to change, we finally need tools and practices, the means to get us to that new reality.

Any attempt to effect change that ignores one or more of these phases will fail. For example, many of us have dusty exercise equipment in our homes. We intended to get in shape, and obtained the means for doing so, but we have yet to embrace a vision compelling enough to follow through. Or consider those who dream of being professional singers but make fools of themselves on television. They have vision but lack the means—specifically singing lessons!

The same is true for preaching and spiritual formation. Some of us focus on visionary preaching, but fail to equip people with the means to achieve what is being described. Others focus their sermons on practical application. But without a compelling vision few people will actually implement the helpful wisdom we communicate. Transformative preaching requires planning so that vision, intention, and means all find expression. But this requires having a longer view.

Wanting change

A few years ago, we sensed the need to lead our congregation to a deeper understanding and experience of spiritual formation. In light of Willard's insights, and the depth of change we were seeking, we decided to devote an entire ministry year to the effort, and to apply the VIM template to our preaching and programming calendar.

We began in September with a vision series from the Beatitudes. The series was designed to paint a portrait of the kind of people we were capable of becoming in Christ—a picture so compelling that



GOT MATURITY?

people wouldn't just "get it," they would "want it." Week by week we worked our way through the Beatitudes, offering descriptions of each quality, seeing how it was displayed in the life of Christ, and imagining what it might look like in our lives.

For instance, "poor in spirit" was described as being desperate for God: needing him, and knowing it deeply. We discovered the many ways Jesus expressed and demonstrated his complete dependence on his Father. We began to envision how God-filled and attractive our lives would become if we were to embrace such dependence and humility.

In order to increase the visionary impact of the series, each week we invited an artist to illustrate one of the Beatitudes. By the end of the series, we wanted to be like the people in the paintings; we wanted to be like Christ.

Choosing change

But wanting it wasn't enough. We needed to lead the congregation to a decision, to declare their intention to become such people. We followed up the vision-casting series with a Commitment Sunday, unpacking the call to transformation in Romans 12. Toward the conclusion of the service, we provided people with a simple spiritual assessment tool and the time to reflect. Each person responded privately to whatever change they sensed God wanting to work in their lives.

Following the service, we invited members to mark the moment by visiting one of several large hearts we had hung on the walls of the lobby, and to put in writing their prayer for the year: "Lord, give me a heart that..." Those hearts remained in the lobby for weeks to remind us of our intention to become more like Christ.

Bringing change

After a break for Advent, we picked up the theme of transformation in January. Having embraced a vision for becoming more like Christ, and declaring our intention to do so with God's help, people now needed the means by which they could experience real change. We launched a new eight-week series on the spiritual disciplines. Using the metaphor home renovation, we taught people to create space in their souls by practicing simplicity, silence, solitude, and stillness, and then how to fill that space with prayer, Scripture, reflection, and God's Spirit.

To support the series, we created sacred spaces in our facility in which people could practice the disciplines we'd been studying. We also made available

customized versions of Scripture Union's devotional guide, *Encounter with God*, to support their daily time with God.

By this time, a palpable change had come over our congregation, and many of us were experiencing a fresh work of God in our lives. We changed the pace a bit during the Lenten season, but then picked up the transformation task again in the spring with an Old Testament series on David. The purpose in this series was to review and apply all that we'd learned by tracing the real-life journey of a "man after God's own heart."

We ended the ministry year in June with a Celebration Sunday that included transformation stories and a message on glorification from Romans 8, reminding ourselves that one day we will be fully "conformed to the image of his Son." As I listened to the stories, and looked out over the congregation, it struck me that we were not the same people that had gathered in September. We were changed.

One year at a time

In his book *Strategic Preaching*, William Hull makes a strong case for a year-by-year approach to congregational formation. He calls for "incremental preaching," believing that lasting change is more often the result of many sermons rather than a few. He encourages preachers to view each sermon as part of a larger, "concerted effort to guide the congregation in achieving its God-given destiny one year at a time."

Our year of experimenting with the vision-intention-means structure was so formational that we have continued to apply the VIM template to our preaching and programming calendar. In the fall, we cast vision for whatever we sense God wanting to do in our congregation, concluding with a call to respond. People are invited to declare their intention to pursue the vision with God's help. In the winter months we provide practical tools and opportunities that will become the means by which they will be formed spiritually. In the spring we focus on applying all that we've learned to the realities of everyday life.

Recently I interviewed a couple at the conclusion of our worship service. As the husband shared, he referred to "our year of transformation" as a pivotal season in his spiritual journey. When he mentioned the Beatitudes series in particular, there was an audible affirmation from the congregation. They clearly remembered the series too, despite the three years that had passed! I was once again glad we had taken the better part of a year to go after a theme, and grateful to be reminded that our congregation's destiny doesn't hang on a single sermon. (L)

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