

# Preaching On My Feet

Could I speak  
for 35 minutes  
without ever  
writing notes?

by Craig Brian Larson

**I** have recently been experimenting with a preaching method that is stretching me like nothing I've done before. To use a phrase from author Fred Lybrand, I have been "preaching on my feet." And this appears to be an enduring adventure.

The adventure began when I found Lybrand's book *Preaching on Your Feet*, which I expected to describe the benefits of unscripted preaching that fosters eyeball-to-eyeball engagement with hearers. He did that, but he went on to describe what I had not anticipated—a preaching experience that includes a greater sense of inspiration, freedom, and being fully in the moment.

That caught my interest.

I could identify with his description of the disconnect that can occur with scripted preaching between the inspiration experienced in the study versus what actually happens in delivery. How many times have I outlined a sermon that was powerful to me in the study but sagged in the pulpit?



### No memorized script

As Lybrand describes it, preaching on your feet is not delivering a memorized sermon or even (necessarily) a memorized outline. It's not fundamentally about trying to remember what you thought about during sermon preparation. Instead, Lybrand encourages thorough preparation coupled with allowing the inspiration to come at the actual moment of delivery.

That was good news, because I've tried memorizing sermons and found that it's not an option for someone preaching once or more each week. Done badly, the results of trying to preach from a memorized script are worse than skillfully reading a manuscript.

Nevertheless, as intrigued as I was by the idea of preaching on my feet, I did not see it as a style that suited me well. During my 33 years of preaching, I have typically prepared full outlines: introduction, main points, all sub-points, and conclusion. When delivering the goods, I rarely stray from my prepared notes, though normally I maintain good eye contact and glance at my outline only occasionally.

Still, my sermon delivery is all about recall. I've never identified with preachers who describe getting ideas while they preach. If my ideas didn't come ahead of time, they generally didn't come at all.

That brings up something else relevant about me. I'm generally not a rambler. I usually don't follow associated ideas smoothly one after another, like someone surfing links on the web. Winging it has been the farthest thing from my experience. Most people would probably describe me as introverted and logical, carefully weighing my thoughts before they come forth like dollars from a money manager's hand.

So as I read Lybrand's book, I had lots of questions. How do you actually do this? How do you prepare? Preaching on your feet sounds like a great idea, but I could get 15 minutes into a message and run out of things to say. I might find myself wandering through ideas without direction—an embarrassing flub.

Even so, I was drawn to it irresistibly and figured it was worth a try.

### No crib sheet

One week I decided to go cold turkey. Lybrand says he writes several pages of notes in preparation, which he leaves in the study, and he suggests that makes for a better sermon. Most homiletics professors agree that writing a sermon brings clarity, even if you leave the notes behind. I know myself, though, and because I'm a writer I can be way too meticulous in my thinking when I'm writing. I figured that if I allowed myself to write notes, I would end up with thoughts too detailed to deliver well orally.

So not only would I not take notes with me into the preaching moment, I would not write notes at all. I'd inevitably be trying to recall a

phrase I'd written down.

I did almost all my preparation on Saturday with a block of several hours in the morning, a block in the afternoon, and a block at night. I thought. I prayed. I read. I memorized and meditated on my preaching passage. I asked my normal preparation questions: What's the subject of the text? What does the text say about that subject? What does the text teach about God, about humanity, about the gospel? How do these truths relate to my hearers? How should I organize my thoughts? And so on. I did my normal preparation, but I didn't write anything down.

I found that not writing my ideas down tended to keep them simpler, but they felt intangible, wispy, there and then gone. Words on paper feel so much more concrete and reliable! As a result, as much as Lybrand said that preaching on your feet should not involve a focus on trying to remember what you prepared to say, I found my Saturday preparation involved making mental Post-it notes of these fleeting ideas, memorizing what seemed to be my main points and trying to recall them in each subsequent preparation block. I knew I could not remember or sort out all the sub-points that occurred to me, but I did feel a need to have an introduction, main points, and a conclusion in mind. If this was going to be a debacle, at least let it be a minor one—a clear devotional thought if not quite a sermon.

Oh, by the way, lest I sound either too bold or foolhardy, you should know I do not preach to a large group of people. If I spoke to hundreds of people on Sunday, I probably would have done this experiment in another, smaller setting.

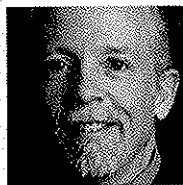
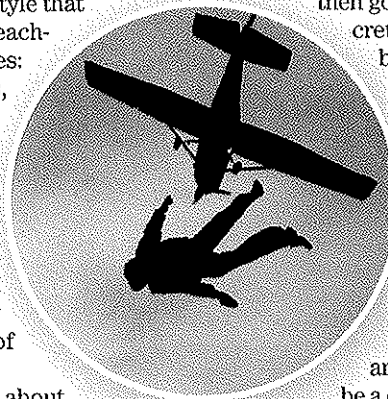
On Sunday morning as I drove to church, I couldn't help but review my mental Post-it notes, but I continued to meditate and pray freely on my subject, and new ideas kept flowing. I arrived at the hotel where our church worships and stepped into the current of a normal Sunday morning—normal except for the excitement that accompanies the first step in the beginning of a huge adventure. When the time came to preach, I felt like a guy who is about to jump out of an airplane for the first time. Yes, he has a parachute, but he is jumping out of an airplane thousands of feet in the air! Here we go. Help me, Lord!

### Preaching in the moment

That first Sunday I discovered I had better than a parachute; I had wings. On an experiential level, this kind of preaching was totally exhilarating, like getting shot at without effect, as Churchill says; you are thrilled to have survived.

On the level that really matters—How effective was the sermon? How well did I convey the truth of the text? Did I communicate clearly and with authority?—I felt the message was a complete success. In fact, no hyperbole, it was one of the better messages I have ever preached. I engaged better with the congregation. I had a much greater sense of freedom and inspiration and presence in the moment.

Lybrand compares preaching on your feet to having a



Craig Brian Larson is editor of PreachingToday.com and pastor of Lake Shore Church in Chicago.

conversation. You don't know where a conversation is going to go, yet go it does and with great freedom. I felt that. Ideas came freely and without fail. One thought led to another. I said things I had not planned. I truly was thinking in the moment rather than just remembering what I had written. This was part of the exhilaration.

In addition to freedom and inspiration, passion also came more easily. Concentrating on the ideas in my notes can distract me from being aware of God, from what is in my heart, and from the people in front of me. When I am not struggling to reproduce what I thought would work when I wrote the message, I flow more with what God (I hope) is releasing in my heart on the spot, and that tends to be urgent.

The salt of eloquence also found its way naturally into the soup. No, I am not an orator; but on occasion I do try to put words together in a special way: an extended metaphor, a turned phrase, a parallelism, a crescendo. I have found over the years that the occasional special phrase I have written into my notes almost never works authentically in delivery. However, in the time I have experimented with this type of preaching, occasional eloquence comes more naturally. It feels authentic.

I humbly graded my first sermon as a ten out of ten. My second was a six. Since then, the sermons have been sevens, eights, and nines. In my opinion, all have been better than my normal preaching from a full outline. As I grow accustomed to this way of preaching, the level of excitement and risk that I had at first, which likely contributed to the intense focus with which I preached, has naturally moderated some. Still, my passion and freedom are significantly ahead of where I was.

I have never had a moment when I came to a complete loss for words, which is a glitch ratio way better than when preaching an outline; with a written outline I will have one or more longish pauses or episodes of arrhythmia in delivery.

### **Hazards of da feet**

Preaching this way does have its hazards. There have been a few times when I have drilled down into an idea further than was necessary or strayed off briefly on something that was not important. I hate to say it, but I guess that's called rambling. When you preach on your feet, you have less time to weigh ideas that present themselves to you on the fly, and so I suppose you are more likely to say things that in retrospect you might regret.

Preaching on your feet is not as efficient and modulated as writing a well-balanced, finely-tuned manuscript, at least for me. You are preaching on wings and focused on staying aloft and soaring high. So if you are someone who tends to ramble, preaching on your feet could mean problems.

Closely related, perhaps identical, is the potential problem that could come with this style of preaching if you

**When  
you preach on  
your feet, you  
speak in a way  
that resonates  
better with  
listeners than  
readers.**

have trouble being clear. If you are challenged in the area of logic, I could see how preaching on your feet would increase the sermon clouds cumulonimbusly.

Another caution would be in order if you tend toward laziness about sermon preparation. Preaching on your feet may sound like a way to spend less time in study. Lybrand emphasizes that this must not be the case. It is a method that, if attempted without diligent preparation, will torture people with shallow, repetitious, self-indulgent sermons that fail to present the varied, rich biblical exposition that feeds the deeper reaches of the soul.

On that note, one preaching expert I know said his concern with this method is that it does not lend itself to the careful exposition of Scripture. He may have a point, but I don't necessarily see a problem here unless he is talking about a level of expositional detail that can't be internalized.

This method by no means rules out exhaustive textual study and note-taking, and many outstanding expositors have preached with nothing but a Bible in hand (Greek or Hebrew, of course). But they knew—truly knew—what they were talking about.

### **Two unexpected benefits**

I conclude with two final benefits. First, when you preach on your feet, you preach to the ear. You are much more likely to speak in a way that resonates better with listeners than readers. Second, you remain open until the sermon has been fully preached. Dave McClellan (see *PreachByEar.com*) uses the word *closure* to describe what can happen when we write a sermon and take the notes into the pulpit. When we finish writing our outline or manuscript, we have the sense that the sermon is "done." Unfortunately this closure is premature, and we may emotionally check out of the *discovery* phase (another word used by McClellan). Obviously that's not good. We want to remain open—learning, thinking, discovering, listening to God, shaping the message for who is actually in the congregation—right up to and during the time we preach.

My experiment has gone long enough now that the initial rush has passed and I can assess this method with more than a handful of sermons. I like it a lot and will definitely continue, but I think that for me, this will probably be my method about half of the time. In addition, I will sometimes use it for a portion of a message but use a full outline for the rest. Not writing any notes during preparation has been extremely good for me, but I actually enjoy writing them. So even when I plan to preach without notes, I will normally write notes during preparation.

Lybrand says it can take a couple of years to learn how to preach on your feet. I think it's worth it. When I preach on my feet, I feel as though my feet have wings. ①