

**“There Ought to Be a Church for a Guy Like Me:’
Making the Case for Less- Assumptive Preaching”**

“There ought to be a church for a guy like me,” Rick said. The words left me speechless and changed the trajectory of my sermon development and delivery ever since. We were sitting at a Furr’s Cafeteria in East Dallas having lunch. I had met Rick just three days ago, on Sunday after the worship service that I helped plan. In one conversation Rick changed my preaching forever.

Rick didn’t go to church, until last Sunday. Having moved back in with his parents who lived behind the church where I interned as a seminary student, Rick was in debt after another failed marriage. He hoped for a church that would help him make sense of his broken dreams and navigate a better future path. He assumed this church might help... this church assumed more than Rick had hoped. He told me as much as we shared lunch that day, almost 25 years ago. Below are three things Rick taught me to “Assume-Less” about when preaching...

Assume-Less about Listener Interest

Too many preachers fail to ask themselves what every successful fisherman asks. They fail to ask what bait will hook their hearers. Preachers may think that since their seminary training only needed an open Bible and syllabus notes to learn effectively, then the same should be true for their learners as well. This line of thinking assumes that what was good enough for the preacher’s training in discipleship should be sufficient for everyone else. ‘My Bible teachers didn’t cater to me and I learned the material presented just fine,’ the preacher may think. This thinking assumes more motivation than is typically true for many sermon-hearers.

The learner is more motivated to engage the sermon’s subject when it addresses life crises that the learner is experiencing. These crises may be obvious, such as an impending divorce or the death of a friend. But, other life crises are less dramatic to the outside observer but are equally intense for the person experiencing them. Examples include relational conflict with an employee, worry over a child’s schooling or the security of the world post-September 11. The learner is highly motivated to engage the proposition proposed when the preacher speaks to the concerns that are on the hearts of the hearers and does so from a theological perspective. These same preachers actively look for opportunities to address problems as they surface in the text.

When preachers speak to the crises that hold learners hostage, the learners are motivated to engage the sermon’s content. Identifying common themes that constitute inner crises will help the preacher identify issues the sermons should address. The internal conflict of people in the pew may include an unsatisfied longing, unresolved rationality, moral dilemmas, relational alienation and an impending fear of human mortality.

“Less-assumptive” preaching won’t assume that the listener is interested. After a busy week and a relational conflict at home the listener needs the preacher to create the “crisis” that demands the listener’s attention.

Assume-Less about Listener Literacy

Every preacher should force themselves to ask, “Do I care more about being helpful or sounding smart?” Too often the preacher assumes more about the biblical and theological literacy of the sermon listener than is justified. Just because many know who killed Goliath doesn’t mean everyone does. “Turn in your Bible to...” without qualification is another reminder that “this isn’t the church for a guy like me.”

Instead, assume that a listener may be opening the Bible for the first time. Assume that the listener doesn’t know who killed Goliath. Assume that the story-hearer can’t believe this Biblical account more than a story on par with a Dr. Seuss’ children’s fable.

“Less-assumptive” preaching won’t assume that the listener is theologically and biblically literate. They put divine revelation on the bottom shelf so that everyone can reach it.

Assume-Less about Listener “Buy-In”

Recently I was preaching on the eighth commandment, 'No Lying.' I was encouraging the hearers to tell the truth, to let their yes, be yes and their no, be no. I suggested that lying hurts trust. Trust is essential for relational intimacy and we all desire relational connection. Makes sense so far, doesn't it? I'm preaching reasonable truth. The problem is that the hearers are hearing a subconscious voice saying, “Good advice, even biblical, but you don't live with my spouse. I can't tell her the truth; she'd blow a gasket. You don't know how angry she gets and I can't live with that.”

Honor your parents. Again, a true and biblical proposition, but what does it look like when my parents are elderly, were jerks in the past, and are demanding in the present? I can’t help but hear the sermon hearer say, 'What does this mean? I can't obey this.' 'My situation is certainly an exception.'

If that happens, no matter how true my preaching is, I have failed to address the part of the hearer that carries the greater weight as to whether Christian formation will happen. The less-assumptive communicator will ASSUME-LESS, and PERSUADE-MORE, while engaging the listener’s rationale and emotional barriers. Doing so, we continue the instructions of our Lord Jesus when he appointed Paul “to open their eyes, turn them from darkness, so that they may receive... a place among those who are sanctified by faith.” (Acts 26:18, NIV)

“Less-assumptive” preaching works hard to engage the hearer’s hurdles that keep them from “buying” the sermon’s content and making its application to life beyond the weekend. “Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22)

Last week, I observed a friend bring a 24 year old young man named Justin home to answer his spiritual questions. She and her husband stayed up late cooperating with God and hoping to persuade him to say yes to the implications of the gospel. Then, they invited him to attend their local

Community Church the following Sunday. I bet they were hoping that this Sunday their pastor was preparing a “less-assumptive” sermon. I bet Justin hopes their church is “A Church For A Guy Like Me.”

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