

Preaching in a New Key

Crafting Expository Sermons in Post-Christian Communities

by Mark R. Glanville

Eight Practices and Eight Licks for Crafting Expository Sermons

Honing the Craft: Eight Practices

Here are eight core practices for preparing meaningful sermons. You might consider sticking them up in your writing space.



FIRST PRACTICE: *preach the text.*

Preach the text, knowing that the Bible outdoes our own imagination and wisdom every time. Commit to being guided by the text in your writing. Do not be led down long rabbit trails or tempted by sweet illustrations that do not really fit with the through line.



SECOND PRACTICE: *write it out in full.*

Write out your first fifty sermons in full (I still write out most of my sermons in full). In delivery, you do not have to read from your script word for word. Writing out your sermon gives you the opportunity to hone your presentation, finding balance and seeking the very best ways of saying what you want to say.



THIRD PRACTICE: *talk it out.*

Talk out your ideas with another person or two. As you talk, fresh clarity will emerge.



FOURTH PRACTICE: *ask, "Why will people be listening at this point in the sermon?"*

As you write, ask this question for every part of your sermon: "Why will people be listening right now?" There are lots of ways to get people's attention. Here are some of the many possible attention grabbers: the content is inherently interesting; a story captures attention; the passage connects with life experience; there is flow and momentum; you drop some knowledge; you use a pithy phrase; you add some humor. With experience, you will grow an intuition for the narrative flow of a sermon, with its fluctuating energy levels. This is key.



FIFTH PRACTICE: *get people's eyes on the passage.*

In every sermon, I ask people to look at the passage more than once. I get explicit about it: "Take out your Bible or phone." To maximize engagement with the text, I sometimes ask a question about the passage for people to answer out loud.



SIXTH PRACTICE: *keep the length tight.*

I recommend that you preach for twenty to twenty-five minutes. This comes to around three thousand words in written form. Why so short? Because there is more to worship than preaching. Worship includes Scripture reading, songs of praise, prayers of confession, prayers of thanksgiving, the Eucharist, creeds, and then some. Preaching for longer than twenty-five minutes gives the impression that other elements of worship are merely the candles on the cake (or altar).



SEVENTH PRACTICE: *edit.*

The key to good writing is editing and pruning. Editing is the process of taking up your sermon script a second, third, and fourth time and improving it. "I can't write, but I can rewrite," a great teacher of writing reflected. No one writes a quality first draft. Edit and edit again. In a seminal book on writing, William Zinsser coaches us, "Learn to enjoy this tidying process. I don't like to write (I like to have written). But I love to rewrite."



EIGHTH PRACTICE: *prune.*

A rose bush thrives when it is pruned almost beyond recognition, and so it is with a sermon. There are roses in your sermon, and yet in the first draft they cannot be seen for the tangle of branches. Pruning, cutting unnecessary content, is the only way for your roses to be seen and enjoyed. Pruning turns your long and wandering sermon into something focused and memorable. You need to be ruthless with your word count, pruning until you are within your limit. As you prune, the through line is your guide. It is difficult to prune the same day as you write. But the next day, you can take up those cutters and snip away.



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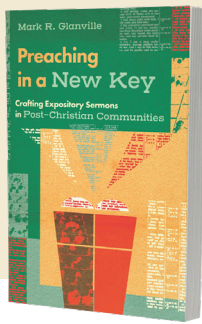
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Hone the Craft: Eight Licks

Having observed eight core practices for writing, let us shift the focus to content. There are eight “licks” that are super helpful for sermons that are calibrated to post-Christian neighborhoods. For jazz, blues, and pop musicians, a lick is a short musical phrase that every musician knows, inserted within a solo. A musical lick is clear, catchy, and contained. You might consider trying to get all eight of these licks into your next sermon. None of them are essential, but together they create a memorable and effective performance. Again, this would make a nice list to pin up in your writing space. Be brief with these licks: licks, not symphonies. Including them will help you to connect with a variety of listeners and to find the magic of sermon improvisation. In most sermons, try to include

🎵 **A SMARTS LICK:** something for people who like to learn. People love to learn, beyond what you imagine. Even in their doubts, people love to receive new information that helps them to understand their faith and Scripture.

🎵 **A HEART LICK:** something for our emotions, to get us through the week. Remember that there is a broken heart on every pew. (I have noticed that professional psychologists are often gifted preachers.)

🎵 **A BIBLE LICK:** something to help me to understand Scripture: How does the big story of the Bible fit together?

🎵 **A CONTEXT LICK:** explain the context of the passage in a way that illuminates the passage. For example, you might tease out the ancient historical context (e.g., the world of empires and kings) or the ancient social context (e.g., daily life in the time of the Bible).

🎵 **A PARTICIPATORY LICK:** a moment of active participation from the congregation (see chapter twelve).

🎵 **A PRACTICAL LICK:** something concrete that people can do in response to the passage.

🎵 **A JESUS LICK:** speak about Jesus.

🎵 **AN IMPLICATIONS LICK, OR THREE:** “land the plane” (show the implications of the passage for our shared life) two or three times during your sermon. The conclusion of your sermon will be one of those times.

Oftentimes these licks will double up. For example, a note about farming practices in first-century Palestine would work both as a context lick and a smarts lick.

We have considered eight practices and eight licks. After a while, incorporating them into your preaching will become intuitive. Do not forget, the preaching sketchpad (in chapter seven) is your guide for sermonwriting that holds it all together



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