

One on One with Larry Osborne: Preaching with Freshness

Have you heard any fresh preaching recently? We like things fresh. When the lettuce in our salad bags becomes old and brown, we throw it out rather than serve it up. Our favorite orange juice touts that it is “fresh squeezed” and “not from concentrate”. I have yet to see a sign that says, “Old Fish.” It is fresh fish or no fish at all!

Our preaching is another thing people want served “fresh”, not with the freezer burn of a by-gone era. Don’t misunderstand me. We all stand on the shoulders of great men and women of faith who walked before us. But our preaching is not to stop with what God said and did in their lives; it needs to have a ring of freshness as we reach for what God is doing in our own. While Spurgeon was an incredible man of God, reheating and serving one of his sermons to our people is like serving a freezer burned steak and a green baked potato to a valued dinner guest.

What does it take to up the freshness factor in preaching? Some preachers have a knack for keeping the sermon in touch with reality. Larry Osborne is one of them. At the October 2007 Great Lakes District Conference of the Evangelical Free Church I sat down with Larry and talked with him about freshness and creativity. Tilt your head our direction, eavesdrop on our conversation. I trust you will pick up a few ideas to keep it fresh; I know I did.

Larry, what are some of the ways you keep your messages from appearing routine?

To begin with, I keep good records of what I preach. What was the topic? What were the Bible passages I preached on? What are the Bible characters I covered? If I taught on something in the last seven years, I won’t use the same points or sound bites. Only a few key word pictures or illustrations that I want to drive home will be used a second time. It is very important that people don’t feel like we are going over the same ground again and again, especially in our applications.

When I approach a text, I ask first, “What does it say to me today?” I always try to start from a fresh point rather than from commentaries or my old notes. If I preached on something before, what God taught me then may be different from what he wants to teach me today. I am at a different point now than I was 10 years ago.

When it comes to creativity, I believe we must be creative in terms of who we are. We need to ask ourselves, how can I teach this in a way that is fun for *me*? How can I use stories and sound bites that fit me and not someone else? And when I preach I always try to talk *to* the people and not *at* the people.

Approaching the Bible from a constantly fresh perspective helps me get excited about what I’m teaching because it is fresh, it is real. It is something God is teaching me – and us today.

Do you intentionally craft what your audience will remember when they head for the parking lot? If so, how do you do that?

I work *really hard* on boiling my main points and principles down to a sound bite. The sound bite captures the essence of what I am teaching in a memorable way that people can take home. I also teach so people can take notes. The reason we do this at North Coast is because people remember what they write. Note sheets give me the opportunity to include things I can't in my preaching. I always have verses of scripture underneath each point so people can look them up on their own later. Some blanks to be filled in also cause people to interact with the message on a kinetic level. In addition, we use sermon-based small groups. At North Coast 80% of our congregation is involved in these. As the small groups talk through the message, the sermon is reinforced and applied in their lives.

While I work hard to have memorable sound bites, I certainly don't expect people to remember everything I say. I don't expect them to go home and rattle off the five points of a message. I think of a typical message as a cafeteria line – people walk through and take what fits the need of the moment. They don't remember everything on the menu. God often takes things I say and applies them to a life in a way I didn't expect. I want the Holy Spirit applying the Word to people's heart this way. My job is to take the scripture and to put within reach of the people. We shouldn't expect everyone to treat our messages like a thanksgiving meal, where they stuff themselves on everything we offer.

What are obstacles to communicating in our culture that you have creatively overcome?

We live in an information saturated society. People don't care about random Bible information. I've learned to make the "so what" of a passage the main points of the message. This means that my points are worded in a way that teaches how the Bible relates to us. I don't want to just teach biblical data. I view myself as teaching people how to live the Christian life with the Bible as my only authority. Those two pieces must be stitched together. People don't care about the three things the apostle Paul did, they care about what it means to them today.

With another friend waiting to talk with him and another presentation to give in ten minutes, I thanked Larry for the interview, gathered my notes and headed for lunch; something Larry had gone without in order to give the interview.

The preacher's job is to let the people know what God is teaching us today. Do I expect God to teach me something new from a well worn passage I know by heart? It is hard work to let the Holy Spirit talk from the text before turning to commentaries and notes. Yet, it is something we must do if we are to

preach to *our* audience, in *our* culture and in *our* day. It is the key to preaching with freshness



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