

One on One with Erwin Lutzer **Staying Power in the Pulpit**

Preaching is like an old four-barrel carburetor, it needs constant tinkering to be kept in tune. Some preachers, like master mechanics, have the knack for preaching finely tuned sermons in spite of a changing audience.

Have you ever wanted to sit down with one of those preachers? Have you ever dreamed of just 15 minutes of their undivided attention to listen to their heart? In October I had the opportunity to fulfill part of that dream when I interviewed some excellent preachers at the Great Lakes District Conference of the EFCA.

What follows is my interview with Dr. Erwin Lutzer, Pastor of Moody Church. In upcoming issues we will sit down with Colin Smith, Dr. Gary McIntosh and Dr. Larry Osborne. I hope you enjoy a few minutes of their undivided attention; just as I did.

So grab a refill on the Starbucks, kick up your feet and join me with Dr. Lutzer in the foyer of Naperville EFC as we pick up a few gems of wisdom to keep our preaching well tuned for the long haul

Erwin, you have pastored Moody for 28 years. How have you been able to stay effective for almost three decades?

That is a good question. There are two things I learned to stay relevant with today's audience.

First, over the years I became inclined to topical exposition rather than simply going through a book of the Bible. When I first came, I preached expository messages working chronologically through the scriptures. I still preach expository messages today but I often base them on a theme.

For example, in January I hope to preach a series of messages on living with delayed promises. In the series I will wrestle with the health and wealth preachers who expect all the blessings of our relationship with Christ to be part of our lives today, they believe heaven should be now. This series ties into a "cultural stream" of our society. Health and wealth preaching is a hot topic both in and out of the church so we have a natural interest for of our listeners. Each of the messages in this series will be an expository message based on a text of scripture.

This doesn't mean that I *never* preach through a book of the Bible. When I preach straight through a book, I tend to take it in larger chunks. For instance, it wouldn't work for me to preach a series of fifty messages from the book of Matthew.

The second thing I have learned over the years is to be much more sensitive to the congregation. For instance, when I first came to the church in 1980, I would preach about abortion. Today I still preach about it but in an entirely different way. I will refer to the fact there are many women listening to me who had an abortion. I will remind them of God's cleansing and forgiveness.

Another example would be preaching about homosexuality. I realize in my congregation there are individuals struggling with this sin. I will make a distinction between those with a radical homosexual agenda and those who are not radicals but strugglers wanting release from this sin.

To preach without sensitivity to the people in the congregation who are struggling with sin is... well... a very insensitive thing to do. After all these years of ministry I have come to see much more clearly that we live in a very broken world and I must speak with sensitivity and compassion to broken people.

Have you ever done anything with audience feedback?

I always like to get feedback from those who either agree or disagree but I never had a formal mechanism. One year I handed out 3x5 cards to the audience and asked them what they wanted me to preach on. Come to think of it; in the evening service I have done questions and answers on the things I said... if that is considered feedback; then I have received feedback, but not in the morning service.

How do you approach a message?

The decision of what to preach on happens in my heart through observation, reading the Word, and discussions with the pastoral staff. Some of the best ideas on how to shape a series come from the pastoral staff. If I was younger, one of the things I would do differently is spend more time interacting with them on what I preach.

When it comes to structuring a message, I have a simple method of outlining. All points are subsumed under a key word which is a plural noun. You have great parallelism this way. Incidentally, the key word does *not* have to come from the Bible. For instance, a key word could be “reasons”. A number of years ago I preached on seven “reasons” we should believe our Bible.

When I was beginning ministry at Edgewater Baptist, the idea of how to preach just blew past me. But 10 minutes over a cup of coffee with Lloyd Perry radically changed my approach. He taught me to organize things around key words. It is not just my preaching I do this way, but also my writing. Lloyd Perry had a list of 200 to 300 key words I used to work off of. I don't have to pull them out any more but they helped me learn to group my ideas and give form to them.

Remember, you have to be simple. Too many guys have too many ideas. You don't know where they are going. This is why I like the key word concept, it gives coherence. When I taught homiletics at Trinity I would tell the students that the most important thing to preaching, after being spirit filled, is the packaging. Think of a sermon as a piece of cloth, you begin with an intro, you lead them to where you want them to go, then you tie the ribbon at the end by referring to the introduction so it is a coherent piece of cloth. The key word keeps it sewn together, like one piece of fabric.

With those closing thoughts, Erwin and I parted company. How well did my last sermon hang together? Let's just say I needed more focus. Every one of us longs to preach sermons that purr like content cats enjoying the afternoon sun. The keyword concept unlocked sermonic unity for Erwin, maybe it will unlock it for you?

Sensitivity in the pulpit is another important piece of advice. Luke 4:22 tells us that our Jesus, our master teacher, was known as a gracious preacher,... a preacher sensitive to the people.

“And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.” Luke 4:22

A long term pastorate takes a gracious preacher; a preacher sensitive to the struggles of real people in the real world.

As I finished the last sips of my coffee cup I jotted down a few things to remember. I hope you also found gems of wisdom to help with your next sermon.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics of study are ancient rhetoric and preaching. Feel free to contact him at ktruck@gmail.com or visit his web at www.kurtrucksess.com

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