

Writing for the Ear

Rev. Kurt Onken

I've never considered myself to be a writer. Sure, I've been writing sermons every week now for over eleven years. But with early training in the performing and visual arts, I've always considered myself to be more of a musician and an artist. My tools of the trade were the piano and the violin, reading dots on a staff with little flags attached. Or they were pencils, pen and ink, and paint and brushes, making marks and strokes on paper and canvas.

I don't know why it took me so long to realize it, but it finally dawned on me that as a pastor, I really am a writer. Pastors have to be wordsmiths. They deal with words and their meanings as they seek to proclaim the timeless truth of the Gospel.

Now, this doesn't mean that all pastors are going to be producing theological tomes, journal articles, or novels and screenplays. Sermons may be all they will consistently write throughout their ministry (not counting the occasional church newsletter article). Nevertheless, pastors are still writers.

Lately, I've also been more conscious of writing for the ear rather than the eye. In other words, writing something that will be spoken and heard is different than writing something that will be read and processed in the head. When you read, you may be able mentally to process a very long sentence similar to some of St. Paul's lengthy passages in his Epistles, where he goes on and on to make a theological point, his thoughts separated in the text by conjunctions and commas and semi-colons and parentheses (although none of those are present in the original Greek; they are placed there by translators for ease of reading and comprehension). In case you didn't notice, that last sentence was a very long one. I imagine you handled it very well as you read along. Listening to that long sentence in a Sunday sermon, however, could be problematic. It would be very easy to drift off in the middle and start thinking about what you are going to have for lunch after the service is over. Therefore, one key to writing for the ear is to use shorter sentences.

Also, it's important to have a clear theme with an outline that makes sense. One thought should logically follow upon another. When the sermon goes off on

tangent after tangent, the hearers will leave wondering, “What in the world was that preacher trying to say?”

Another key to writing for the ear is to use simple words. Don’t try to impress everyone with your extensive vocabulary. You’ll just sound pretentious and you will only confuse your hearers. Certainly, words like *justification* must be used. But it’s important to unpack theological terms for the listeners. Otherwise, they will start to tune out.

There are other literary devices that can be used when writing for the ear. You may be familiar with them if you’ve ever studied poetry. Repetition is the repeating of a word or a phrase. Alliteration is the repetition of a sound, in particular the first consonant of a word. Rhyming can also be used, but sparingly. After all, you’re not Dr. Seuss and you’re not preaching about green eggs and ham or a cat in a hat.

Writing is a craft. Writing a sermon is too. Pastors ought to take steps periodically to evaluate their skills and improve their craft. But a well-crafted sermon is not going to improve the power of the Word of God. The Word of God is what works. Read Isaiah 55:10–11. On the other hand, it’s important for the preacher not to get in the way of the Gospel by preparing sermons that are hard to listen to.

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