

Michael Brown: I Preached My First Sermon 50 Years Ago

Monday, August 21, marked 50 years since I preached my first sermon at the age of 18. Today, thousands of messages later, preaching is still one of my greatest joys, not to mention a holy and sacred privilege.

Barely 18 months earlier, I had been shooting heroin, speed and cocaine, using large quantities of LSD and mescaline, drinking heavily, and smoking pot day and night. Now, my greatest delight was to spend time in prayer, worship and study of the Word, then to share the Word with others. As the prophet Jeremiah said more than 2,500 years ago, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts” (Jer. 15:16, NASB 1995).

The fact is, I had developed an insatiable hunger for God’s Word, having read the Bible cover to cover almost five times from the time of my radical conversion in late 1971 to the time of my first message in August 1973. And for a six-month stretch, without fail, I memorized 20 verses a day, meditating on them and declaring them out loud as I walked and drove and worked.

As the psalmist wrote, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11, ESV).

And as the Lord told Joshua after the death of Moses, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Josh. 1:8).

Or to quote from Proverbs, “My son, be attentive to my words;

incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh" (Prov. 4:20–22).

Or to hear it from Jesus, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7).

Or to quote Paul, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3:16).

How wonderful is God's Word!

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As for that first message I preached 50 years ago, there's an interesting backstory.

My two best friends and fellow band members came to faith shortly before me (in fact, the first time I attended a church service, which was in August 1971, I went there with the express purpose of pulling my friends out). And our pastor believed all three of us were called to preach.

So it was that the bass player, Jon, would preach first, on Aug. 7; followed by the guitar player, Kerry, on Aug. 14; then me, the drummer, on Aug. 21. (This was basically the order in which we came to faith.)

The church where we were born again was a little Italian Pentecostal congregation in Queens, New York, and there was an unwritten tradition in the church. If you were anointed by God to preach—meaning, God's Spirit would graciously enable you to bring the message—you would not need notes.

That's how our pastor preached (normally about three messages per week), and without anyone telling us, that's how we were expected to preach. Talk about adding a little extra pressure!

Jon went first, following the custom of having no notes, depending on the Spirit to give him the words on the spots. (We also applied, out of context, these words of Jesus to His disciples: "When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." See Matt. 10:19–20.)

Afterwards, we jokingly titled his message, "Random Thoughts on Christianity." (What makes this all the more ironic is that Jon is a tremendously organized and systematic thinker. Preparing an outline and detailed notes for a talk is perfect for him.)

The next week, Kerry took his turn. He was bringing a great message for about five minutes when the reality of the situation hit him: He was standing behind the pulpit speaking to about 40-50 people. He ended the message there, and the pastor took it the rest of the way.

Kerry, who is with the Lord now, was also a very clearheaded thinker, and had he been able to outline his message, he would have done well.

Again, no one told us we couldn't use notes. It was just an unwritten tradition.

When it came time for me to speak, either because I had recently memorized about 4,000 verses or because of the way God wired me, the words came pouring out. It was probably about 40 minutes of content in 20 minutes, and a large portion of the message was quotation of Scripture.

✖ My main text consisted of the Lord's words of commission to Saul of Tarsus (Paul), as recounted to King Agrippa: "To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me" (Acts 26:18, KJV). And because the verse logically divided into a number of points, the outline came automatically.

I still remember that sense of divine favor I felt in preaching—a holy wind in my sails—and I relish it when preaching to this day.

As for that unwritten tradition of not needing notes to preach, it has served me well over the decades, sometimes having to speak as many as 25 times in a week or to lecture multiples hours each day. How gracious of the Lord to have me cut my teeth in that "no notes, no preparation" church environment! Your whole life is the preparation. And the message flows out naturally.

Of course, I do believe having notes can be very important, and it's also very helpful for others to follow along. So, notes or no notes is fine with me.

But I honestly feel embarrassed at how little I know the Word after all these decades, feeling a fresh call to dig in even deeper in the years ahead. Oh, to feast on the Word and to preach its wonderful treasures to everyone who will hear! {eoa}

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