

Daniel Overdorf. *One Year to Better Preaching: 52 Exercises to Hone Your Skills*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2013. 319 pages. \$17.99.

Daniel Overdorf teaches preaching at Johnson University in Knoxville, Tennessee. Overdorf writes the book for experienced preachers who have found their preaching slipping into a rut. He offers preachers a series of fifty-two exercises to practice on a weekly basis that will help sharpen their homiletic tools, enable them to gain new energy, and bring freshness to the task of preaching. Each exercise, he claims, should take about an hour or two of time during the course of any given week.

Each exercise chapter is brief, between four and six pages in length. Each consists of an introduction that lays out a concise description of the specific skill. This is followed by an exercise to strengthen this particular skill. An “I Tried It” section follows where usually two or three preachers briefly testify to how they completed the exercise and to what degree it was effective for them. Each exercise ends with a “Resources for Further Study” section. The exercises Overdorf focuses on include some of the following: Show Don’t Tell, Read the Text Well, Listen to a Storyteller, People Watch, Analyze a Movie, Pray for Your Listeners, Talk to an Artist, Preach in Dialogue, Pray Through Your Sermon, Explore the Original Context, Go to Work with a Church Member, Utilize the Five Senses, etc.

Overdorf makes several suggestions for how to use the book. One is simply to go through the exercises week by week in the sequence laid out in the book. The sequence of the exercises, however, seems quite random, skipping around from one skill to another with no apparent rhyme or reason. He argues, however, that this is a kind of cross-training process that balances the exercises. If this weekly routine is too difficult, then he suggests focusing on one or two exercises a month. A second suggestion for using the book is to put the exercises into broader categories. He does this for the reader in a nice eight-column chart. The categories include the following: Prayer and Preaching (three exercises), Bible Interpretation (five exercises), Understanding Listeners (nine exercises), Sermon Construction (eleven), Illustration and Application (fifteen, which is the largest category), Word Crafting (four), The Preaching Event (eight), and Sermon Evaluation (three). Still yet another suggestion is to collaborate with others and commit to working through the exercises with them.

The book serves as a great tool for experienced preachers who want to hone their preaching skills. Most of the exercise chapters begin with interesting analogies that identify the important role the exercise plays in the task of preaching. For example, in the exercise on Effective Delivery, Overdorf begins by relating the experience of watching a TV show on cake decorating and seeing the amazing cakes they make. The show, however, never describes how decorators deliver the cakes to their destination. Do they make it in one piece? This provides a segue into the importance of sermon delivery.

I take issue with a few of Overdorf’s perspectives. In the exercise entitled “Make a Bee-Line to the Cross,” he argues that, “Every passage of Scripture either (1) prepares humankind for Christ, (2) proclaims Christ, or (3) equips humankind to live in response to Christ” (270). Clearly his theology is christocentric when Scripture from beginning to end is theocentric. Preaching, however, must honor the theocentric perspective of Scripture.

In another chapter on “Minimize Notes” he concludes that “the further we move toward no notes, the more we connect with our listeners” (149). Plainly he encourages note-free preaching. The chart he includes moves from full manuscript as the least effective communication to no notes as the most effective communication (149). I have witnessed, however, some preachers using notes and delivering sermons from manuscripts connecting quite effectively with listeners.

I might take issue with a few other matters along the way as well. He advises against overusing personal material and then specifies the advice by saying, “One or two personal stories per sermon is [sic] plenty” (41). That seems like a lot of personal references. He recommends making notations in the sermon outline regarding voice inflection and physical movement (115-116). That comes across as too mechanical, especially for more experienced preachers. He offers good suggestions for how to responsibly encourage texting during worship as a means of crowd sourcing and engaging the audience. No suggestion, however, is given as to what to do with those who do not text.

Overall I give a strong recommendation to this book for its ability to deal in concrete ways and offer practical exercises to experienced preachers in order to help breathe new life into the task of preaching. This book is a good resource for professors of homiletics to consider using in conducting workshops for local preachers. In my context in Memphis, I am part of a group that reads and discusses one of the eight categories each month. It has worked well.

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