How Preachers Learn

Ask accomplished preachers how they learned to preach and you are likely to hear about mentors and models not classrooms and textbooks. People learn how to preach from people who preach.

Preachers, and especially teachers of preaching, are deeply aware of special people who have shaped the way they preach. David Buttrick, who wrote a complex and celebrated textbook on homiletics, salutes his father George and a mentor Paul Scherer. J.I. Packer acknowledges his debt to Martin Lloyd Jones during his student years in London. And the African American Pentecostal preacher Yvette Flinders lists a cadre of family members and local church preachers, all of whom “taught her” how to preach. Preaching is best learned from skilled preachers.

This essay is about learning to preach by watching others, reflecting on practice, trying and failing forward, talking though actions, and fostering educationally fruitful relationships. It is about using words and actions in the homiletic context in order to experience, and consequently learn to do, what is hardest (sometimes impossible) to say about preaching. This educational journey is called imitative practice.

Imitative practice is only one strand of homiletic learning. Many things contribute to the formation of a great preacher.

Preaching Endowments - Gifting

Like musicians, mathematicians and athletes, some preachers are uniquely “gifted”. What they learn seems to come easily and their early attempts to preach are met with encouragement and acclaim. Exactly what constitutes a preaching gift is impossible to say, but a broad consensus among hearers and a recurring responsiveness to what is preached are indicators. When a

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healthy congregation speaks enthusiastically about what they hear, responds practically and returns to hear more, the preacher who enjoys their favour is blessed.

Few are gifted in this way. What that means for the vast majority of preachers, as with most musicians and athletes, is sustained hard work. Those who want to preach well go into training. They do not look for quick routines or simple success solutions. They work. They do not assume too quickly that they are uniquely gifted. People want to encourage emerging preachers and we are all glad for that. The problem is, high praise for mediocre work can blind any communicator and it can seriously cripple the progress of an inexperienced preacher.

While gifted preachers are few, preachers with gifts are many. Virtually every person who aspires to preach has an edge of some kind. This is illustrated with a provisional list of various endowments: a pleasing speaking voice; a commanding presence; an engaging persona; strong word production; good story telling skills; extensive knowledge of the bible; genuine love for people; confidence in front of a crowd; strong memory; natural sense of humour; ability to put people at ease; clear thinking and problem solving; heart of an evangelist; ability to read people; and capacity to say things in a fresh way. Building on such strengths makes the journey of learning to preach enjoyable and rewarding.

A Preaching Impediment
There are some things that will make preaching hard. A major hindrance like severe stuttering or serious memory lapses will disqualify some individuals from a routine of weekly preaching. However, the history of preaching is replete with stories of people pushing through significant deficits to stand up and proclaim truth for God. Here are four examples. Jonathan Edwards’ aging eye site was so poor that he read his sermons holding the pages close to his face. These were some of his most impacting messages. Fred Craddock’s raspy, high pitched voice might have disqualified him before he ever began preaching had he accepted as true the negative verdict of others. Marva J. Dawn preaches from a wheel chair. Moses stuttered.

An Anointing for Preaching
Jesus earliest recorded sermon begins, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me …” (Luke 4:18). Every sermon and every preacher begins in the same place, relying upon divine enablement. The mystery and power of God’s breath in our preaching qualifies us uniquely. Sometimes it surprises us.
These acts of God cannot be ignored; neither can they be marketed or educationally exploited by anyone, ever! Revisit the story of Simeon for a confirmation of this point (Acts 8:9-25). This great spiritual power of preaching simply cannot be fussed over; it can only be requested (Acts 4:29), waited upon (Acts 1:4) and humbly celebrated when it is present (1 Cor. 2:4). Without it preaching is useless.

**A Cadre of Preaching Skills**

Some of what people know about how to preach can be explained during a half hour interview or put in a textbook or explained in a classroom lecture. The insights of thoughtful people on such things as: "rules" for making great speeches, handling biblical texts faithfully and developing consistent arguments, can be written down and studied by others with great profit. The study of rhetoric is a noble pursuit which has served preachers brilliantly since Augustine. Accomplished preachers are almost always grateful for what they have learned about preaching from great books, websites, DVDs and lectures. But so much of what they know can’t be explained in this way.⁴

**Imitative Practice – A Path towards Better Preaching**

Any preacher can become better if she or he will maximise endowments, minimise impediments, lean hard on the spiritual enablement offered by God and work to learn new skills. Imitative practice will help any student achieve these goals.

The concept “imitation” has some baggage. If we are to claim the educational power of this simple idea we must first clarify what we mean by “imitating” others. The raw expression may connote childishness, insincerity, phoniness, a cheap copy or in academic circles the misdeed of plagiarism. None of these traits are commendable.

Imitative practice is something different. It is closer to what Paul suggested in 1 Corinthians 4:16 when he said: “I urge you to imitate me”. Clearly he did not mean a mindless conformity but rather a thoughtful embrace of the lifestyle he was modelling. The goal of imitative practice is genuine learning and its success must be measured against the highest ethical and practical standards. The key to successful imitative practice is critical reflection.

To clarify what it means to learn by emulating others we will introduce the “Imitative Practice Square”.

Imitative Activity becomes significant for learning when the practitioner engages in **reflection** on that activity with a view to strengthening preaching practice. Without reflection, imitation remains naïve and can become dysfunctional.

It is a natural and universal phenomenon for humans to imitate others in the course of learning. Children copy parents, apprentices copy their mentors, athletes copy better athletes and student artists copy the masters. The degree of **intentionality** and the extent of reflection will vary and with these differences the educational value of imitation will also vary.

**Naïve Imitation (Quadrant #1)**

Without necessarily intending to (low intentionality) or thinking too much about it (low reflection) student preachers imitate the preachers they have heard since childhood. A presumed definition of preaching, an inherited theology of preaching and a tacit skill set for preaching may all be formed in this way. Thus most student preachers already possess a significant “knowledge” of homiletics before they take a class or read a book about preaching.
Some of this knowledge is good and some is not. Much of it is tacit and the student will have no words to describe it and possibly no conscious appreciation of what she or he knows or presumes. Some of what the student purports to know and can articulate will be judged by a more accomplished preacher as novice, unwarranted, inappropriate or even dangerous. Students know both more and less than they can say.

Blind spots can emerge. They occur when other people see a truth about a preacher that the preacher does not see himself or herself. When the fault is minor the impact on communication will be negligible, but when the thing discerned by others is of significance – a mannerism, mistake, odour, failure – the consequences for effective preaching may be great. Blind spots often occur as a result of naïve imitation. Feedback from trusted hearers is essential for minimising blind spots.

Naïve imitation is not an optional phase in the learning journey. All students copy models, but not all novice preachers engage in reflection. Failure to reflect and adjust practice accordingly can lead to underdeveloped preaching capacity. The practices inherited from others, much like clothes passed down from an older sibling, may or may not fit well. There may be a need for alterations.

Developmental Imitative Practice (Quadrant #2)
Self awareness is a wonderful servant of excellence in preaching. By reflecting on the sources of preaching know-how a student preacher can attend to inherited understandings and practices in a constructive manner. Naming the preachers who may have exerted an influence knowingly or unknowingly upon a student; rehearsing memories of their preaching activity, homiletic convictions and assumed knowledge; and then searching for echoes of these traits in his or her own preaching practice, often gives rise to moments of personal epiphany. Students are empowered by self-awareness.

Ill-fitting practices sustained in loyalty to a mentor but never genuinely embraced can now be examined, reinvented, owned afresh or dismissed as untenable. Blind spots can be identified and corrected. Valuable gifts from former uncelebrated teachers can be more fully appreciated.

The process of transforming naïve imitation (passive) into developmental imitative practice (proactive) requires a catalyst. Naïve imitation is, by definition, unavoidable in the early stages of learning and the behaviours, convictions and commitments thus inherited remain largely unconscious until something precipitates a review of these foundations. While this can and often
does occur spontaneously, the intervention of a preaching coach (or even self-coaching) can accelerate the process and multiply the gains. With a series of well placed questions and sufficient time to engage the issues in conversations, the “mere imitation” of a novice can quickly become the developmental imitative practice of an emerging professional.

**Developmental Imitative Practice Inquiry:**

- Who has shaped your preaching? When? How?
- What have you retained and owned from these influences? Why?
- What have you rejected or discontinued? Why?
- When was the last time you asked yourself these questions? When will you do it again?

While many significant gains can be made in the earliest years of learning to preach in this way, the most unexpected occurrences can function as catalysts many years into the preaching journey. Long buried memories of early homiletic influences can surface serendipitously and the choice to reflect and act on these recollections with the accumulated wisdom of the years can yield richly productive moments of developmental imitative practice well along the path. Humans are wired to imitate. Therefore the unconscious process of copying what we admire in others continues even in the most accomplished of preachers. We never fully abandon naïve imitation. And therefore we never out grow the need (opportunity) to probe our preaching practice for unacknowledged influences and knowledge sources. The preacher who is committed to maximising his or her homiletic gift will embrace the discipline of developmental imitative practice as a life lone learning habit.

**Dysfunctional Imitation (Quadrant #3)**

Not all imitation is naïve. Some preachers who imitate more accomplished or “successful” preachers knowingly (high intentionality) and uncritically (low reflection) fall into unhealthy and even destructive homiletic patterns. This sort of dysfunctional imitation can have numerous negative aspects. It can impose an artificial ceiling on a competent student whose strengths are unnoticed or undervalued in the false economy of comparisons with a particular model. It can produce many poor copies, each deficient in their own unique way, of a model preacher. It can demoralise preachers whose best efforts to become like someone else prove ineffective and counter-productive in ministry. And, it can impoverish a congregation.

Most authors who criticise imitative approaches to learning are in fact disparaging this sort of unreflective aping and not pedagogically significant acts of intentional emulation. Consider Phillips Brookes as an example of such criticism.
“Truth through personality is our description of real preaching”, declared Phillips Brooks in his 1877 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale. The insight is a good one. “The truth”, says Brooks and by this he means gospel truth, “must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him.” Working with this conduit metaphor, Brookes describes homiletic education as “nothing less than the kneading and tempering of a man’s whole nature till it becomes of such a consistency and quality as to be capable of transmission”.5 The whole world is the school that makes the preacher.

Brookes, along with many who think about how we learn to preach, was troubled by the idea of imitation. What could be worse than truth conveyed through a false or simulated personality? “If your ministry is to be good for anything, it must be your ministry, and not a feeble echo of any other man’s” he declared (88). “We must live the special life which God has marked out for us and which He has indicated in the special powers which we discover in ourselves. We are fit for no other life.” (114) For Brookes the chief evil of imitation is “the loss of a man’s own personal power” (128).

Fred Craddock echoes the same concern when he says: “Learning does not mean imitating … We learn from preachers poor, fair, good, and excellent, but not one of them is to be copied. David cannot fight in Saul’s armor.”6 This “mere imitating” which Craddock decries is an altogether dysfunctional behaviour having no educational value. Unreflective copying will not serve the homiletic enterprise. The sophists – whose ancient wisdom we are seeking to redeploy – came unstuck at exactly this place. The uncritical imitation of unworthy models in service to pedestrian objectives earned them the ire of the greatest thinkers of ancient times.7 The critique has endured and the language of imitation (“mere imitation” and “sophistry”) has been so humiliated that many have locked this door and tossed away the key.


Dysfunctional imitation produces bad copies. And the problem is not solved by simply multiplying the number of models from whom bits are taken. Clyde Fant parodies this strategy with reference to Mary Shelley’s classic:

> Dr. Frankenstein pieced together the parts from a number of cadavers to make a man, but instead he created a monster. But no more so than the preacher whose personality is a composite of the bits and pieces of others, some long dead and nearly decomposed. And then when that monster roars and stalks about, he should not be surprised when children will not play about his feet.⁸

If imitative practice is to avoid dysfunction what is required is good character, intelligent behaviour and the application of critical reflection. A helpful conceptual metaphor of dysfunctional imitation might be the work of a criminal who forges a signature in a bid to rob money from a bank account. Contrast this with a child who uses a sample of her mother’s handwriting to develop penmanship, or an adult who draws figures with the aid of a template in an effort to learn the skills of calligraphy. We would not call these latter examples forgers, nor would we decry their use of models. Instead we would call them students and celebrate the ingenuity of their imitative practice.

**Generative Imitative Practice (Quadrant #4)**

Intentional imitation need not become dysfunctional. The calculated (high intentionality) emulation of an accomplished communicator in a controlled and thoughtful way (high reflection) can produce or *generate* significant practical gains for homiletic learning. New things are learned when preachers, even accomplished preachers, attend to the preaching of others.

The goal of generative imitative practice is not to find something in a model preacher that can be replicated in an isomorphic manner when the student next preaches. The goal is rather to emulate that which speaks to the student’s experience, context and “personality” in a generative way – something which, when it is embodied and made personal, produces new preaching “capital” in his or her homiletic repertoire. Ironically this sort of constructive emulation, with its demand for a high level of critical reflection, tends to occur tacitly for the most accomplished preachers. Imitative practice is about making this process “visible” and accessible.

Generative imitative practice can be conceptualised in six moves.

1. **Noticing and Attending.** The student describes a discrete element of the model preacher’s practice which she wants to explore using imitative practice. This may have come to her attention as something unexpected, surprising or desirable. Where possible

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it is wise for students to identify how this element impacts or moves them.

2. *Exploring and Embodying*. She inhabits this element provisionally, experimentally and even playfully.

3. *Discriminating and Personalising*. She determines (in her preparation) a specific approach to emulating this element in her own preaching practice.

4. *Risking and Experiencing*. She trials (in her presentation) a personal expression of this element.

5. *Reflecting and Evaluating*. She reviews (after-preaching) what worked, what didn’t work and why. While this is a conscious act it may not require words.

6. *Growing and Improving*. She embeds what worked, dismisses what failed and adds to her homiletic repertoire.

While this description is artificial and idealised, something like this occurs when accomplished preachers listen to CDs, view DVDs, visit websites and attend live preaching events with a view to improving their own preaching practice. With little or no explicit mental focus they step unconsciously though this process, or something like it, and garner new insights, strategies and homiletic practices which noticeably enrich their subsequent preaching.

This conceptualisation of generative imitative practice provides a framework for practical pedagogical exercises which can enhance homiletic learning (See Appendix 1). Exploring the imitative learning process in this way can reduce the mystery for students and encourage educationally fruitful habits among emerging preachers.

**Imitate Who?**
Models tend to be people who “impress”. Preachers find other preachers who are able to do something that they want to do and they open their minds and habits to receive the “imprint” of these models. Often the process is entirely informal involving few intentional decisions and this leads to naïve imitation. But a more intentional and reflective ownership of our imitative behaviour can yield (generate) significant educational fruit. This intentionality begins with the choice of models.

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9 My inspiration for setting out the framework of generative imitative practice in this way comes from the work of Donald A. Schön who does a similar thing with the structure of reflection-in-action. *Donald A. Schön, Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Towards a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), 26-29.*
While any competent preacher can furnish a student with something worthy of attention, not every homiletic model will serve every student equally. This is partly because of the unique needs of individual students, but more significantly because of the variety of contexts in which preaching and learning to preach occur. Since all preaching and all learning experiences are “situated”, it is not possible to provide a universally acceptable list of exemplars or even to develop a unanimously agreed catalogue of homiletic ideals. Such lists and catalogues are products and servants of particular contexts. Decontextualised instruction is a myth.

A brief thought experiment attempting to construct a common list of first choice guest speakers for three random communities of practice will make the point – take for example an independent fundamentalist American suburban church; a liberation community based in South America and led by national workers; and a University congregation pastored by an outspoken Liberal lesbian theologian. Who are the commonly celebrated preachers? It would be a short list.

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The exercise illustrates the challenges inherent in preaching and learning in the real world of local churches and socially situated preaching models. Preachers must negotiate a healthy pastor-prophet tension in the local church and learners must negotiate a similar dynamic in relation to the models they chose and with respect to the impact their learning has upon their stance in their current community of practice (the group that are deciding if this preacher is any “good” or not). Every model preacher is socially situated and therefore somewhere on the tension continuum in relation to the student preacher and the student’s congregation. It is these social dynamics that will ultimately define “good” models, “good” preaching and “good” educational results.

**The preacher** must be aligned with his community but in tension with it at the same time. The voice of both pastor and prophet must be allowed to sound, but this tension is nuanced and often difficult to negotiate. The preacher and his sermons will be adjudicated “good” by the community in which he preaches if they are in *agreement* with the established norms (often tacit and unspoken) of that community and its leadership. He may continue to be valued, even loved, if his thinking and practice is *absorbed* into that of his community, but in doing so he is
likely to lose the capacity to **differentiate** himself from his hearers, and thus abandon the prophetic voice. On the other hand, the more he **opposes** his hearers and the more his words **isolate** him (as a result for instance of learning experiences with a particular preaching model), the less likely it is that his preaching will be judged “good”. Another community which values the theology, style, methods or approach he has adopted and with which he is now **identifying** may praise the changes in his preaching and celebrate his “progress”, but they are likely to dismiss the community from which he has come with pejorative catch-cries like uneducated, liberals, holy rollers, etc. This is the reality of situated homiletics.

**The learner** must embrace these tensions. Models will come from different contexts and create different experiences of identify and differentiation. Learning happens when a student negotiates this situatedness such that noticeable changes are integrated into the student’s practice of preaching. And this learning will make the student’s preaching “better” only in relation to a context – since all attempts to evaluate preaching are situated. When the learning shifts his practice in a direction that is more consistent with and more exemplary of the situated homiletic value system of the community to which he preaches, it will be judged “good”. If the student preacher changes substantially in a direction that “differentiates” him from the community in which he is preaching, he must either change the values system of this community (the slow work of the prophet whose preaching is rarely applauded) or find a new community in which to preach if he is to be adjudicated “good”.

While all attempts to evaluate and improve preaching are situated, it does not follow that all such attempts are equally valid. Acknowledging situatedness does not require that we abandon our particular uniqueness, only that we apply abundant humility in our dialogue with others (recognising always that we would be different people if we were in their situation) and that we exercise critical awareness in our choice of models. Every model is leading students somewhere – ask “Where?”

A particular and current dilemma of situatedness is the challenge for women preachers. There is a significant gender imbalance in the company of preachers and consequently too few female homiletic-models. The challenge for emerging women preachers is to compensate for this lacuna with strategies such as focused critical reflection and peer mentoring. The wider community of teachers of preachers has an opportunity to serve women by identifying and “lifting” into view potential models of women’s preaching. Those women who are limited to primarily male preaching models must negotiate the tensions of differentiation and identification (and notably isolation and absorption) at yet another level.
**Imitate What?**

Choosing an element of preaching practice to emulate is like selecting a pericope upon which to preach. It is a learned skill itself (a kind of learning to learn). So much of the preaching task interlocks that any attempt to isolate an element of practice for focused enquiry can misfire and yield less than desired results. Generative imitative practice, much like a science experiment, requires attention to the several variables that may impact the outcome.

A provisional list of elements that can be isolated for exploration using generative imitative practice includes: raw content (material that is simply quoted), reworked content, communication strategies, rhetorical devices, non-verbals, stylistic features, approaches to presentation support, and moments of preparation.

The issue of plagiarism surfaces here. The Latin root, *plagiare* meaning to kidnap, identifies the problem. It is always wrong to knowingly present someone else’s work as one’s own and this topic must be explored openly with students and boundaries carefully established. At the same time such cautions must not be permitted to undermine genuine learning, and it needs to be affirmed that the vast majority of students are able to negotiate this boundary with wisdom when it is made explicit.

An overlooked aspect of the preacher’s world with huge potential for imitative practice is sermon preparation. Most student preachers have listened to short talks from seasoned preachers on how they prepare sermons, but few have sat with a mentor or coach at intervals throughout the actual preparation of a sermon. Much of the preparation process is cognitive and internal, therefore it seems mysterious and inaccessible, but this is not the whole story. Shared preparation can provide unique opportunities for students. A student and a teacher can agree to preach on the same text and therefore to collaborate on research, to brainstorm together, to pool resources, to confer at intervals and to spend sermon preparation time together. As the relationship develops the pair will find it natural to employ the first three steps of the generative imitative practice construct and the coach will be positioned to offer invaluable support and counsel to the student (post-sermon follow up would allow for interaction on the last three steps as well).

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When the cycle of preparation has concluded an *attentive* student who has *noticed* something of potential personal value in the model preacher’s approach to sermon preparation may choose to *explore* and *embody* this element and thus begin to engage constructively and imitatively with the seasoned preachers practice. If he does not catch himself doing this the learning may become naïve (with all the attached risks until something triggers a healthier developmental imitative practice), but if he is aware of what he is doing, the activity may well become generative if he follows through and if it yields something he values.

A practical consideration for students is to explore elements of homiletic practice that pique interest. Occasionally a coach or mentor may assign an element of practice for attention by a student, but learning rarely occurs when this practical student exigency is ignored. Little children imitate the things that serve or amuse them and thus they learn and grow. Little changes in this regard through the years of adulthood.

**Imitating with Help**

An effective way to heighten critical reflection and maximise homiletic learning is to involve others. Consider four categories of collegial support.

*Models.* Models are preachers who other preachers chose to emulate. They may be living or dead, close or distant, locally admired or internationally famous. They may be pastors, TV personalities, widely celebrated authors, or distant historic figures. And, they may be good models or bad models depending on who is assessing them and why.

*Mentors.* Models become mentors when the get personally involved in a student’s homiletic learning journey. A mentor is an accessible preacher whom a student aspires to emulate in some regard. The engagement is personal and present tense.

*Critical Friends.* Family members, ministry colleagues and sympathetic parishioners can all serve in this capacity. Critical Friends are the mirrors in the homiletic change room of our ministries. They reflect things back to us. They see the preacher dressed in the finest of sermonic form and they see him or her between changes – vulnerable, uncertain, often nursing a sagging self image. Their best work occurs in the complicated collision of “friendship” and “criticism”. Critical Friends are not models, normally because they do not preach, but they contribute significantly to homiletic learning as they offer constructive criticism from a posture of love and support for the preacher.
Coaches. Mentors (and less often critical friends) with whom a student preacher establishes a mutual commitment and enters a structured programme of homiletic learning, take a role that is best described as coach. Good coaches are like mirrors from a Disney story, they talk back with deeper understanding. When asked “who’s the fairest preacher of them all?” they are less likely to flatter. Preaching coaches need not be the best of models. Much like coaches in sport they will excel when they are capable (if amateur) educators, motivators, physiologists and just plain good friends.

Conclusion
Learning to preach is the work of a life time. It requires preachers to maximise endowments, minimise impediments, lean hard on the spiritual enablement offered by God and work to learn new skills. By attending to the preaching practice of others and seeking to transform natural imitative behaviour into something that is educationally rigorous, preachers can achieve at least some of these goals and enhance the homiletic journey becoming life long students of preaching. Naïve imitation needs constantly to be unpacked and dysfunctional imitation to be denounced. This will require sustained critical reflection which will, in turn, yield the significant fruit of developmental and generative imitative practice; that being the strange but confident hope that my next sermon is going to be the best one yet.

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Appendix 1

Imitative Practice worksheet

Choose an element of preaching practice and …

1. **Describe it.** Describe a discrete element of this preacher’s practice which you want to explore using imitative practice. Where possible identify how this element impacts or moves you (noticing and attending)*.

2. **Inhabit it.** Get “inside” this element provisionally, experimentally and even playfully (exploring and embodying).

3. **Emulate it.** While preparing your sermon, determine a specific approach to emulating this element in your preaching practice (discriminating and personalising).

4. **Trial it.** When you preach your sermon, trail a personal expression of this element. (risking and experiencing)

5. **Review it.** After you have preached, review what worked, what didn’t work and why (reflecting and evaluating)

6. **Embed it.** Embed what works, dismiss what fails and add to your homiletic repertoire (growing and improving)

* Make use of a coach, mentor or critical friend throughout

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