

MR. D'S NOTES ON PULPITS



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PULPITS I'VE FILLED

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AN INTRODUCTION

In traveling from church to church speaking, I have noticed that comments about the church's pulpit have been a great way to gain the interest of the congregation. It is also a very quick and warm ice breaker.

I have mentioned in numerous churches that I should write a book about all the pulpits I have stood behind. Since I have not seen a recent treatise on said subject, may I share a few thoughts about the pulpits I've filled.

Pulpits have been of interest to me for as long as I've been in the ministry. In my early college days the school called a new president - a very short president. When he came to the pulpit in chapel for the first time he was shocked at the pulpit's height - indeed, he could barely see over the top of it. I was sitting in the sound room to the side of the platform and his arms were raised to the limits to lay them on the side of the pulpit.

By his next chapel session the pulpit had been shortened to accommodate the president. It fit him quite nicely, but the six foot tall speakers that followed could barely reach their notes.

HOW DRY I AM

I trust that this first account doesn't set the stage for following items of consideration. When stepping to the pulpit I noticed two glasses of water setting ready for use.

As I slowly lifted both glasses into the view of the congregation, I said, "I see someone is expecting a very dry sermon."

Many that I have known in the ministry have felt that humor in the pulpit was not a thing to be desired. I must admit that for many years I was in agreement. While attending a small pastors' get together an old pastor mentioned how important it was to establish a contact with a new congregation when speaking to them for the first time.

I was not sure that his choice to use humor for this purpose was good, but after a number of years in the ministry, I must agree that humor is a great leveling tool for people. It touches all brands of human beings, and it is something that is quick and effective.

I am not succumbing to the out and out comics I have witnessed at the TV pulpit, but a little humor can go a long way to maintaining contact with the listener.

THE BRANCH

My first church was in the foothills southwest of Denver, CO. It was a very small pioneer work, meeting in a one room school house in a small area called Indian Park.

We gathered for my first Sunday and I stepped to my new, freshly built pulpit. It was beautiful to me and very fitting to our situation. The school was situated on a small tree covered hill in the foothills. The pulpit consisted of a log with two pieces of one by twelve nailed to the ends.

The pulpit worked well, except that as I leaned forward to make a point it leaned forward with me and I would have to pull it back after my point was made.

In later services, one of the roaming children decided to use it for a leaning post. It accommodated the child and did what it did best. I struggled for several minutes to hold the pulpit upright while concentrating on what I was saying.

It was at this pulpit that I decided to act a little flippant and took the end of my necktie and gave it a flip into the air. My point was quite well taken by the congregation, when the tie, one of those clip on types of the 60's, went flying through the air into the third row.

When we left that church the pulpit was still standing faithfully in the front of the little school house.

THE CROOKED CORNER

Pulpits are usually made of wood, indeed, I don't recall any other types. Of course we have metal lecterns or music stands which I don't usually fill - I tend to overflow these items of torture for the preacher - you know - you lay out your notes and there is no place for your Bible, or you lay out your Bible and lay your notes on top - until they slide off onto the floor!

When planting a church we had our beginnings in our home. We determined that any pulpit should have a removable top so that the rest of the unit could be laid down on its side and used for a coffee table during the week.

My father-in-law offered to help me build it. We went to his work area and I assisted with all the wood working experience I could muster. I held the boards while he cut them, held the boards while he glued them, and held the boards while he nailed them. He did get brave and allow me to cut one forty-five degree angle cut to fit the molding strip on the top. Yes, that was the only corner that did not fit!

Again, this pulpit served the Lord quite effectively over the months of ministry in that small pioneer work.

GREEN IS FOR GO - RED IS FOR BE QUIET

Believers don't usually relate worry, or concern, or anxiety to pulpits yet it is possible. I do not speak of the nerves of the inexperienced speaker, but of a fear of another nature.

I was told of a large pulpit in a church on the east coast which had a red light and a green light placed in the surface where only the speaker could see them.

The guest speakers were told that as long as the green light was on they could continue, but if the red light came on they only had five minutes to go before the pastor would approach and stop them. (The least they could have done was include a yellow light to tell you that you had ten minutes to go.)

I had related this and other pulpit stories to many congregations. My purpose in relating this to you is to give background to the panic I had when I stepped to a pulpit in Wyoming. There in the surface was a red light and a green light.

As I related the story of the pulpit in the east my panic was relieved by the smiles and shaking heads in the congregation.

They were assuring me that this was not the case in their church. One of the elders mentioned later that in the past the lights had been used to help the pastor coordinate his timing for radio broadcasts of the morning services.

While we are speaking of panic we might mention one other pulpit that sent my nerves into orbit. We had been invited to share with a small group in the morning worship services. As I approached the pulpit I noticed a large sign with large letters, "USE THE KING JAMES VERSION ONLY!" The adrenalin flow slowed as I recalled that I had brought my King James Bible with me, and that I had not planned to quote other translations that morning.

THE NEATEST

Over the years there have been many pulpits that look like Fibber McGee's closet. Stuffed with all sorts of useful and non-useful items. When I saw one of these specimens, I made a quick mental note to not kick, bump, pound, or in any other way disturb the sleeping avalanche.

With this in mind you can imagine my shock in mid-Nebraska when I stepped to the pulpit and noticed that there was only one pencil and one small screw laying on the shelves. (I won't waste our time discussing the possible reasons for a pencil and a screw being found in an otherwise empty pulpit.)

I immediately declared that the NEATEST-CLEANEST pulpit in the western United States. Realizing the possibility of others like it, I quickly amended that to "THIS IS THE CLEANEST PULPIT I'VE EVER USED!"

TAKE A LAP AROUND THE SANCTUARY

In one church in Nebraska they had the normal up front pulpit as well as a roll around one for smaller services. The "up front" one turned out to be just about two inches shorter than my bifocals. Each time I wanted to read my notes I had to imitate the hunchback of Notre Dame. I finally gave up and went by memory instead. (The sermon went well in spite of the difficulties.)

That evening they told me I could use either pulpit so I opted for the mobile unit. I told the congregation, that way I could guarantee them a moving message for the evening service.

WAKE UP

One of the first pulpits I was honored to use was in Oregon. It was built in two pieces. The top was removable to provide a flat surface for other uses.

I had been ministering in the church for some time and had not noticed that the top did not sit level on the lower part. One Sunday I was very emphatic on a point and I hit the corner of the top piece. CRASH! The top tipped and banged quite loudly, shocking all present including the preacher. A quick check of the solidness of a top is suggested for the avid pulpit pounders.

GETTING HIGH ON A SERMON

I must admit that I have never been in a church with a pulpit mounted up high above the congregation. I must also admit that it would be somewhat strange, if not nerve racking, to be that high up trying to concentrate on preaching and worrying about how solidly attached to the wall the unit may or may not be.

While speaking of worry, it may be well to mention a pulpit that was once pictured in a newspaper article. It appeared to be cup shaped and supported on a very small pedestal about four inches in diameter. I immediately wondered if that small pedestal would support a stately pastor that leaned forward over the edge to make a point. I've seen some sermons fall flat on their face, but never a preacher.

In western Nebraska there is a small Baptist church that has an unusually high platform where the pulpit is located. When I stepped into that pulpit I was reminded of my thoughts of those pulpits hanging on the wall.

Let me interject a new thought that should relate to our story somehow. When I was in college I had professors mention that

they had people in their congregations become sick and become unconscious in the middle of the service. I often wondered how in the world you would handle such a situation.

As the sermon was winding down on this warm Sunday morning as I spoke from the high platform, I noticed a man looking very strange. As time went on he sank lower in stature and paler in color. Finally he attempted to stand up, but couldn't. The ushers had noticed him so rushed forward to assist. My response was to continue on and allow the ushers to care for the situation. It worked out to be a good choice for the sermon was finished and there was little disturbance.

Need I suggest that ushers be trained to observe the congregation, and also be trained in how the pastor would like for them to react in similar situations?

In this same town, I was asked to minister in another church at a different time. There was nothing of particular interest in the pulpit itself, but as I ministered I was able to observe a middle aged man in the back corner of the church. He had fallen asleep early into the message, and he continued in heavenly bliss for the entire message.

You can imagine my shock when at the door he shook my hand quite heartily and said, "Good message brother, good message!"

TAKING A DIM VIEW OF THE MESSAGE

I had set up in a small church on the Oregon coast to present a lesson during which I used slides to illustrate each point. As the lesson began the pastor noticed I was using slides. What he did not notice was that I was using notes. He proceeded to shut off the lights. I was still able to make out the notes, though with much strain. Thinking all was well I continued along the prescribed course. Great concern grew when the pastor began pulling the window shades which left me in near darkness. I was very thankful that the slides illustrated my points very well, as I was able to finish the lesson using them to jog my memory as to the content of the lesson that I could no longer see.

DID I DO THAT?

Along with the pulpits filled, the one not filled might be worthy of mention. We had scheduled a Sunday in a church to preach the worship service and the evening service. As we settled into our seats before Sunday School the pastor turned to see who had come in. He gave us a smile and a wave and then turned to face the front. Almost immediately he did the proverbial double take with a shocked look on his face.

A little later he came to our class room and sheepishly stuck his head in the door and asked if he had scheduled us to speak. We did not speak that day, but enjoyed a good day's ministry in the church a few months later.

A lesson for each of us - to write things down, and to confirm speaking engagements a week or two before the fact.

NEAR MISS

At one time in our ministry we were on deputation for missionary service in Europe. I had contacted many pastors that I had never met personally. In the first hours of meeting a new pastor there was usually a time spent getting to know one another.

I arrived at a pastor's home on Saturday evening to stay overnight before speaking in the morning service. As the pastor and I talked he seemed to become perplexed about something. I had been talking about our ministry thus far with the mission, but had not said anything that would have caused him concern.

We talked for some time before he finally verbalized his confusion. He said, "Well, then have you been to the field before?" "No, we are just starting our deputation." Well, aren't you with mission brand x?" "No, I am with mission brand y." "Well, don't you live in Grants Pass?" "No, we live in Salem." "Well, I certainly got you mixed up with someone else!" "I thought you had been on the field for many years, and that you would be a real challenge to the congregation concerning missions."

I told him that I would be glad to just preach a message and leave so that he could schedule the other missionary. He said, "No, we will just challenge them with missions in a little different way than I had planned." We had a good time of fellowship, and I felt that the people were quite receptive even though I was the wrong man.

DROP OVER SOME TIME

We had been asked to speak in a medium sized church in a very small town in Central Wyoming. The congregation was quite friendly and warm, the platform was quite large, and I was quite familiar with my message. I felt a real ease to roam the platform as I preached.

I found myself standing at the front edge several times while making special points. I also noticed that as I approached the front of the platform, the congregation was noticing me approach the front of the platform. About that time I had lost my concentration and stepped to close to the edge of the platform. I nearly lost my balance, but was able to recover before having to step down to the floor. I immediately told the folks that I would refrain from coming so close.

Speaking of near misses, you remember that church with the two piece pulpit that I was able to wake up the congregation with? Well, we returned to that church many years later for a meeting and found that they had built a small platform out from the steps that led up the stage that they did not use. They had placed the pulpit about two steps up from the floor so that people in the back could see.

The platform was at least three foot square and quite confining for a platform wonderer like myself. No, I did not fall. Yes, it took great concentration to stay behind the pulpit.

SURPRISE!

After getting up at 3:30 A.M. and driving to northern Washington state to minister in both services, we were settling into Sunday School class for a good lesson by the pastor.

The pastor stood to teach the lesson and announced that anyone driving since 3:30 A.M. deserved to have every opportunity possible to speak and told the class that I would also teach the Sunday School class. The Lord was very gracious and the lesson developed well as my mind clamored for things to say. I never did thank that pastor for talking to the class about his fishing trip that week. It reminded me of a good fish story that I related to the class as I prepared my lesson.

As I have indicated previously I normally attempt to find something to say that is wise, humorous, and intelligent as I begin my time in a pulpit. On the way to this particular church I had been listening to the radio while the family slept as best they could - you know - five in a Chevette.

One of the announcers mentioned that it was national mother-in-law day, so I tucked this little bit of information away for that special note of interest at the pulpit. Later that early morning another announcer mentioned that it was national mule day.

Naturally, being the nice, gracious person that I am I announced to the congregation that it was national mother-in-law day. After the smiles and nods of affirmation ceased I informed them of the rest of my information. Weeellll, how could I do less than give them the whole story.

A similar "surprise you're the speaker" incident occurred in Central California at a missions conference. The missionaries had not been given instructions on what the schedule would be, nor what our responsibilities would be.

This, by the way is the pastor that called me Thursday evening to find out whether my wife would be coming with me to the conference starting the following Sunday morning. The same pastor that had not previously invited me to be part of the conference.

We all gathered together, questioning one another as each arrived, hoping for some information. We were given bulletins and it was noticed that a "missionary" was speaking the entire Sunday School hour to the entire church.

About five minutes before Sunday School the pastor appeared to introduce himself to us. Yes, the first question was, "Who is speaking in Sunday School?"

The young man did well for having no preparation! I'm so very thankful that it was he and not

me!

THE THREE POINT SERMON WITH ONLY ONE POINT

I was on an extended trip to the Midwest and was to speak in a little town in southeastern Nebraska. I drove into town and found my way to the main downtown area. It was built around a town square and many of the buildings were boarded up and many looked to be in bad disrepair. I could not imagine what was going on in this little town.

Later that day I was told that a futuristic war movie had just been shot in the town and that the downtown area had been "made up" for the movie.

During the morning message I was moving along quite well, when all of a sudden what sounded like a fire alarm went off. I was in quite a shock trying to determine what was going on. Finally a young woman reached over and shut the noise off. It was a baby heart monitor for their child. Talk about how to make a preacher skip a point or two - that one was worth several points!

Before leaving the "how to get the preacher to shorten his sermon by a point or two section," I might mention one of the first Sundays in that little church with the leaning pulpit.

I had barely started my sermon on hell, when a young hippie that was passing through raised his hand and blurted out, "Can I ask a question?" I replied that he certainly could. "Well do you really feel that a loving God could ever possibly send anyone to a place like you say hell is?"

In my time of explanation I found that I was out of time for my sermon. As I reflected on the morning, I was happy to note that most of what I had planned to say, had been said in a much more relaxed manner, and that the young man had gone away seriously considering the possibility of a literal hell.

THE OUTBACK

We arrived early one Sunday morning at a large church in Central Oregon. We took the time to look around the facilities. As time for Sunday School arrived I went to the men's room. Just before coming out I had the urge to cough in a big way.

As the coughing subsided my lower back went into a serious fit. I ended up on the floor for a couple of minutes. I finally struggled to my feet and out to the hall.

One of the deacons helped me into the sanctuary where I laid down on a pew. After taking some pain medication I was able to sit up, but with much difficulty.

It was decided that just before people entered the sanctuary, they would help me to a large chair on the platform, then I could just sit there during the service and preach sitting down.

The time came, and I was assisted to the chair. Everyone had left for a moment and a group of about ten people that had not come to Sunday School entered the back of the auditorium. Now, just picture the scene. They have arrived early to attend church - they have entered a sanctuary that is dimly lit - they look up on the platform and they see a large bald man sitting mostly erect, staring at them from one of those near throne sized chairs. I suspect that they came to Sunday School after that.

It was of interest to me as I was sitting there waiting for the service to start - one of the main points of my sermon was non-conformity - how fitting!

THE FLIES HAVE IT

While setting up my usual missionary equipment I noticed that there were a lot of dead flies laying on the floor. This did not surprise me as there were a lot of flies in the air very much alive.

I did not think a lot of the flies until I noticed that there were more dead flies than a few minutes before. Indeed, there were dead flies laying on the table where I had just previously brushed them away.

Within minutes I had noticed that there were dead flies on top of the equipment that I had just set up. As I was finishing up there were dead flies everywhere I looked. I had to lift the projector and dump them off of the slides.

While speaking from the pulpit I was brushing dead flies off of my Bible and notes. I hope I didn't include explanation points where they weren't planned in the message!

No one mentioned all the dead flies in the church, on the pews, on the tables, dozens and dozens of dead flies, so why in the world would I mention those dozens upon dozens of flies. Before leaving that evening I noticed that there were no LIVING flies in the air. I assumed that they had been one of those breeds that live only a brief time.

WHHOOOOPPSS!

When going into missions work, we went on deputation to raise prayer and financial support. We had been fortunate to schedule a number of meetings in western Oregon. The first meeting was in a church in Roseburg. The pastor had been kind enough to allow us to share our ministry with his people on a Sunday evening.

When we arrived, it was raining, as is quite normal for Oregon, and we all grabbed some equipment and ran into the church. As I was setting up the projector, screen, table and the other items, I noticed that the slide tray was missing. Hoping that it had just been missed in the rush to get in out of the rain, I asked the family where the slides were. The green color of one of our sons clued me into the fact that the slides were in Salem at the apartment.

God is gracious to his unprepared children. We told of our ministry and did the best we could without the assistance of slides. That dear pastor and his wife supported us for many, many years with their prayers, encouragement and financial help.

WHHOOOOPPSS II!

I had spoken to a pastor concerning a deputation meeting and was told that the church was over committed financially, but that we would be very welcome to come and fill the pulpit when he was on vacation. This was a welcome way to fill weekends when we did not have meetings scheduled. It allowed us to find prayer supporters as well as challenge folks with missions.

The deacons and I met for prayer before the service, a practice I would encourage all churches to continue and/or begin. One of the deacons was going to lead the song service so we stepped onto the platform.

I noticed that there was another man on the platform. I did not know who he was, but assumed that it would become evident soon.

Part way through the song time the deacon introduced the young man as the representative from the Brand x church. He stepped to the pulpit to speak to the people of the cooperation that they were showing in the coming evangelistic campaign in the area.

As he continued on I learned that the church I was speaking in, the local church representing liberalism, and one of the Charismatic churches had hired a Southern Baptist evangelist to come for an evangelistic campaign.

I wasn't sure just how to handle all of this, but progressed as planned. The service went well and we were invited to move to the long hall between the sanctuary and the front door to greet people. They placed the "OTHER" church representative in the hall and asked me to stand at the door.

My observation was that few if any greeted the other man, and almost all stopped to speak with me. I wondered just how cooperative the congregation really was. I suspect the cooperation was to be found in the pastor only.

This probably was a pulpit I shouldn't have filled, though the Lord seemed to be working in the people as His Word was being shared!

WRITE A MISSIONARY

While sharing our missionary ministry to a church in southern Oregon, I mentioned to the children in the congregation that they should write to missionaries. I told them that they could get to know the missionaries and that they would also gain some nice stamps from around the world.

After the service the church had planned a pot luck for us. While we were waiting in line for lunch one of the children came up to me and asked if I was sure that missionaries would write back. I told him that I would and that I thought most others would also.

Having set this conversation aside we returned home to the weeks work and planning for coming meetings. About Thursday we received a letter. Obviously by the handwriting it was from a child. I opened it knowing that someone wanted a stamp from the missionary.

The letter stated: "Dear Mr. Derickson, I'm fine. Send stamps." Naturally, I sent the young man a number of foreign stamps the next day.

Several weeks later, we received a second letter. "Dear Mr. Derickson, I'm fine. Thanks for the stamps. Send more stamps." Yep, I certainly did. I often wondered if that small act of sending a few stamps might have had an impact on a young life. We trust so.

APPLYING THE FACTS

While on deputation, we janitored for a large church to help with the income. I was asked to speak in the evening service one Sunday, so being as my nature is, I spoke on missions.

During the message I read a quote from a survey of a fundamental university student body. The survey was to determine how the students felt about the importance of different ministries within the fundamental church.

The students were to rank the different ministries of pastor, missionary, associate pastor, minister of music, Sunday School teacher, office workers, janitors and all the other jobs in a church, in order of their importance.

The survey revealed that with out fail the missionary was rated at the bottom, even below janitor. Since I was a missionary and since we had just taken on the janitor's job, I suggested that the survey might show that we were social climbers.

FORK IN THE ROAD

One last account before we leave. We were speaking in a small church in northern Wyoming, and were going to drop our son off at a camp in Montana after church.

It was a long way out of the way to return to the main highway north so I asked one of the deacons if it was possible to make it into Montana from the church the back way.

Of course you can, let me tell you how easy it is. You go north and bear right when you get to the forks in the road. There will be a couple of forks in the road and just take the right branch and you will end up in Montana.

As we progressed up the long dusty road we had about decided that we had missed the first fork. We had been driving for a long time and no fork in the road. Finally, a fork arose and we took the right branch, another fork in the road and the right branch, another fork and the right branch, another fork and the right branch, another fork - well you get the story.

After I don't know how many forks we ended up on a dead end road going up a mountain. We decided finally that something was wrong. My wife remembered something that one of the men had said about driving through his ranch yard.

We arrived back at the only buildings in a LONG way, and sure enough there was a little trail - you know one of those roads that is made up of two tire tracks and grass in the middle. Well, to end the story before your throat is completely full of dust, we drove up this trail for a little way and it turned into a nice gravel road that took us into Montana. (I won't bore you with the quality of the road to the camp - a long way on large sharp rocks that they call gravel in that state, on two bare tires - God must have had his hands around those tires on that trip!)

LET'S FIND SOMETHING OF VALUE

As I close these thoughts I am reminded that a pulpit is many things! It is utilitarian to the preacher, though its utility is questionable at times if it is too short, too tall, too small, or too shaky. It is an expression of its makers desire to combine purpose with beauty and utility. It, at times, is an expression of its congregation - some go to great lengths to choose just the right one. It may be clean or at times it may be a catch all. It is a place to store song books or a mounting place for the sound system. This is especially nice for the pastor with a sleepy audience - he can just reach down and turn up the volume. It is a place for children to hide, but most of all it is a place from which the Word of God is taught and proclaimed.

This work is not to deride the pulpit nor to raise the congregation's curiosity about what's under it. This work is to share a few of the fun experiences which God has blessed us with as we've moved from pulpit to pulpit over the years as we have been allowed to minister His Word.

One last pulpit which I would like to tell you about is one that was not overly messy, nor overly clean. It was not overly beautiful, nor overly plain. It was not overly comical, nor overly boring, but it most certainly was the pulpit which ministered to my heart the most.

We were asked to interim pastor a church in southeastern Wyoming for several months. Many neat things occurred while we were in that ministry, and little of it came through any efforts of our own.

The first morning, I was preaching on the woman's place in the home and/or in the work place. I began by telling the congregation of some of the things I was not going to tell them, and then listed some things that I was going to tell them. In short, I told the people that it is not wrong for a woman to work outside of the home. As I verbalized this thought a young woman in one of the

front rows gave her husband a good shot with her elbow in his side. They were smiling and agreeing with me all through the message.

After church she shared that she was a working mom and that she was encouraged to hear my stand on the subject. She also mentioned that she had not had a lot of Christian support for her work outside the home.

As we ministered in this church we saw several people come to know the Lord - not from our ministry - from the witnessing of the church people to those outside of the church. That is what church is all about! The congregation and leadership witnessing in the work-a-day world and bringing the converts into the church for training.

We saw a group of people that worked together to fulfill their mutual needs of spiritual growth and maturity. They were all involved in the church work, and many were involved in Bible studies etc. outside of the church as well.

We observed a praying church. They did not have an official prayer service all the time, but while we were there I gave a devotional on Wednesday evening followed by prayer. I kept track of the prayer requests and answers for several months and found that over ninety percent of the prayer requests were answered in the positive and many of them within days of the request being made.

We witnessed a real openness to the ministry of the Word. In all those weeks, I would observe that someone was especially attentive to the message, and often they would tell me that the Word had ministered to them very specifically that day.

We saw the congregation come together in planning of different functions, we saw the congregation grow, we saw the congregation mature - not by how I was doing my job, but merely by the power of the Holy Spirit working among His people through His Word.

May the pulpits of America continue to be used for the preaching of HIS MESSAGE, and for nothing else. I have heard of pulpits used for the telling of leisure travel abroad, for the singing of secular songs, for all sorts of things - LET US KEEP THEM FOR THE USE FOR WHICH THEY WERE DESIGNED - THE PREACHING OF THE WORD AND THE LEADING OF WORSHIP OF OUR GREAT GOD.