Preaching to the UN-Convenced

Vince Antonucci
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Dedications

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**Gateway Leaders:** Gateway Leaders started out of Gateway Church in Austin, Texas, and the heart of John Burke, who planted Gateway. I’ve had the honor of being associated with Gateway Leaders from their inception. I’ve been trained by them, done training for them, and been supported by them. Gateway Leaders is all about mobilizing people to start, grow and multiply churches out of the culture. Their **Church Planter Cultivate** is one of the best resources available for training church planters to start churches that truly reach lost people.
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And I’d like to thank [Exponential](https://www.exponentialnetwork.com) for putting out this series of eBooks for church planters, and for inviting me to be a part of it. One of the highlights of my year is being a part of the Exponential Conference – a can’t miss event for church planters!
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“John is a man who not only knows Jesus, but knows that Jesus really saves and redeems broken people and makes them trophies of his grace.”
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“As the pastor of Gateway Church, John Burke is an expert in bringing messy people to the Master—I read everything he writes on the topic!”
- Vince Antonucci

John Burke is the author of No Perfect People Allowed and Soul Revolution, and the lead pastor of Gateway Church in Austin, Texas, which he and his wife founded in 1998. Since then, Gateway has grown to over 4,500, made up mostly of unchurched people who began actively following Christ at Gateway.

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Introduction
Dallas and Ann Stamper are a married couple that live in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Ann was marginally unchurched. She had grown up attending most Sundays with her parents, but hadn’t been in years. But once she had her first child, she felt like the family should start going. But there was a problem—her husband.

Dallas was completely unchurched. He was vehemently opposed to God, to church and to Christians. He was also addicted to alcohol and pornography.

Every year or two, Ann would convince him to go to a church she had heard about, each time hoping he might like it. Dallas had a kind of game about it. It was a game he knew he would win. He had created a list of unacceptable things churches do. And if the church they visited did any of them, they wouldn’t go back. He knew every church did all of these things, and so he would never have to attend any church more than once.

On the way to the church, Dallas would restate his list to Ann. He would say, “If everyone’s dressed up, I’ll feel dumb for not being dressed up, so I won’t go back. If anyone greets me at the door, I’m not going back. If they make me turn and say ‘hi’ to the people sitting around me, I’m not going back. If they ask me for money, I’m not going back.”

I don’t know about you, but Dallas is the kind of guy I want to reach. He’s the kind of person we are called to reach. Jesus told us to “seek and save the lost,” (Luke 19:10), not the Christians from the church down the street. And Dallas was lost. He needed Jesus. But the truth is that most churches will never reach someone like Dallas. And people like Dallas just about never get reached.

There are reasons for that. One of them is how we preach. If Dallas showed up at your church, there would be certain things you would need to do in your message, and others things you couldn’t do if you were going to have any chance of him not thinking it’s stupid, and of having him come back, and of having him someday actually give his life to Jesus.

I’ve started two churches, the most recent in the heart of Sin City, and in both 70 percent of the people who have come were unchurched non-Christians when they first showed up. We’ve seen hundreds and hundreds of people who were very far from God come to Jesus. And I want to share with you some principles that we’ve found to be critical in preaching to the unconvinced.

So let’s think about preaching to the unconvinced.
**Principle 1: Bust Stereotypes.**

If we’re going to lead people who are far from God to Jesus, we *must* bust their stereotypes of Christians, church and pastors. This begins with understanding those stereotypes. Do you know what an unchurched non-Christian thinks of you, a pastor? Most assume you are out of touch, judgmental and homophobic. You have a political agenda. You believe in fairy tales—like the world was created in seven days, Adam and Eve, a talking donkey, and people walking on water. And you’re just out to convert them and get their money.

Because you are what you are, you don’t think of yourself that way. But how do you view Islamic extremists? Or Mormon bishops? Or atheists? Or Scientologists?

The problem is perception. And we need to build a bridge from ourselves to this unconvinced person, a bridge that will allow them to walk towards Jesus. So how do you do that? You have to bust their stereotypes. Below are some ways we can do that:

**Be yourself.** Do you realize that when you walk up to preach an unchurched, unconvinced person is not thinking, *Oh good, here’s the dispenser of Bible truth!* Nor are they thinking, *I just hope this guy is a good expositor of the Word.* No. They’re asking themselves, *Who is this guy? Do I like this guy? Could I hang out with him?*

If the answer is “no,” it doesn’t matter if you’re the dispenser of Scripture and a good expositor of the Word. They are not going to listen. And they won’t come back.

But if the answer is “yes,” you may have many opportunities to teach them the Word.

So you have to be yourself. So many pastors sound like, well, pastors. They have that generic pastor voice and they use generic pastor words and phrases: “Glory!” “Can I get an amen?” “Hallelujah!” I realize you may not be that extreme, but you still may not teach like you talk. Preach in your everyday voice. It makes you seem like a normal, real person, like someone I could hang out with and get to know.

**Use humor.** Now if you’re not the least bit funny, if your idea of being goofy is reading the *Wall Street Journal*, then you probably shouldn’t try to be funny. It will be obvious that you’re just trying—and trying too hard. But if you can use humor naturally, it can be a powerful tool for busting stereotypes. Again, humor shows that you’re a real person I could hang out with.
By the way, the most important time to add humor is in the beginning of the sermon because the unconvinced still have their arms crossed, trying to figure out if you’re someone they like and should listen to.

For instance, if I’m doing a message on marriage, I’ll start with a funny marriage story, preferably a personal story that embarrasses me and makes me seem very normal. Or I may start the message with a joke: “Have you ever noticed the difference between the cards they make for couples who are dating versus the cards they make for married couples? For dating couples, it says, ‘Our love is a fire … may it never be extinguished.’ But a married couple’s card says, ‘I know I never tell you… but that doesn’t mean I don’t love you.’”

Another opportunity to infuse humor is reading a Bible passage. At times, the Bible sounds funny to our modern ears. I don’t think it’s sacrilegious to let it be funny. And when you do, it definitely makes you seem more normal.

Here are a few recent examples:

In one message, I was reading 2 Cor. 11:23-25: “I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned …” at which point I said, “Not that kind of stoned. C’mon people, really?”

Another time I was reading from Judges 16: “So Delilah said to Samson, ‘Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued.’ Samson answered her, ‘If anyone ties me with seven fresh thongs … ’” And I said, “Th-th-th-th-thongs. Go ahead. You can giggle. It’s funny. But it wasn’t that kind of thong.”

Or in a sermon on marriage, I read 1 Peter 3:3-4: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair …” and I threw in, “Because we all know how sexy braided hair is. Grrrr!”

**Be authentic.** Again, let me reiterate, an unconvinced person wants to know who you really are. You think they want you to help them with their lives, and that may be true, but first they have to know who you are. And, really, from their perspective, they can get help for their lives anywhere. Barnes and Nobles is filled with books and magazines offering practical help for your life.

But they can’t get authenticity and vulnerability. One time I was speaking about how difficult it is for some to have close relationships with other
people. For some of us, we’re relationally broken due to things that have happened to us in our past, and we’ve learned not to trust. I got vulnerable and told a few stories about my abusive father. I shared how one of my earliest childhood memories is of a night when I was about four. I was in bed but heard my parents yelling downstairs. I ran down, afraid of what my father might do to my mother, and grabbed my father by the legs, trying to push him away from her. Instead of doing anything to her, he picked up her most prized possession, something her mother had left her when she died, broke it and stormed out of the house. My mom and I sat on the living room floor just crying together, holding her broken heirloom.

The day I told that story, Ed happened to be at church. Once or twice a year, Ed’s wife, Jacquelyn, would drag her very unconvinced husband to church. As they left the building that day, Ed said to her, “Ok, I’ll come with you every week.” Jacquelyn was shocked and asked why. “I didn’t know Vince’s father was like that,” he said. “He understands me. I can listen to him now.” Turns out Ed’s father was also abusive. He started coming every week, and eventually gave his life to Christ, got baptized and became a small group leader. My willingness to be vulnerable and transparent broke through his cynicism.

But authenticity is not just about sharing your past; it’s also about sharing your current struggles. We need to be vulnerable enough to do that, as well. At one point, I decided to lose some weight. My best friend at the time was a recent NFL player, and he committed to helping me with an eating plan and exercise program. I started losing weight and one day my friend said, “Vince, you look great. What’s your weight down to now?” It just so happened that I had weighed myself that morning, so I knew exactly what it was. The answer I gave was one pound less than reality. I lied to him. I don’t know why. I didn’t plan to.

A week later, I was writing a sermon about how we tend to play God and that one of the "playing God" symptoms is needing to control people’s impression of you. You’re not really God, and you can’t let them know that, so you lie to protect your image. As I wrote I thought, how can I make this real for people? Do I have any stories about this? Oh no. Oh no. I didn’t want to share the story. I knew I would look bad. But that’s who I was. And if I didn’t share it, I wouldn’t be honest. And if I didn’t share the negative parts of my life, the person who walked on stage each Sunday morning wouldn’t be me, but a projection of myself.

So I decided to share the story. I wondered how many people our church would lose because of it. I could picture people thinking, you know, I don’t expect a preacher to be perfect, but I do have a certain standard they should meet. And lying to your best friend’s face falls under that standard.
But it turns out we didn’t lose people. In fact, it actually turned out to be one of my more powerful preaching moments. People thanked me for admitting it. They said, “I do things like that too! I thought it was just me. But I never would have admitted it. I’m going to confess a lie I told my friend. Thanks so much. You really helped me today.”

Being authentic busts people’s stereotypes.
**Principle 2: Your Assumptions Create Your Crowd.**

In preaching, you need to be extremely careful about the assumptions you make because your assumptions create your crowd.

I’ll explain. The way you speak, the words you choose, will determine whom you get at your church, and ultimately who will stay at your church. So we need to think through our sermons carefully and ask, “What do my words assume? What background is necessary on the part of the hearers for them to get it?” Let’s think through a few examples.

You’re preaching a sermon and you just made yet another amazing point. To back your point up you say, “Ephesians 4:14 says, ‘Then we will …’”

**Question:** What is an Ephesian? Who is Ephesians? Do you assume if you say, “Ephesians 4:12 says …” everyone will know it’s from the Bible? Well, if you assume that, guess what? It will be true for your church. Because a new person who comes, and is unchurched, and continually hears things like, “Ephesians 4:12 says …” is going to start thinking, *Okay, this is obviously not for me. I don’t know what Ephesians is. Apparently, everyone else does. This is like a club for people who know what Ephesians is, and I don’t. I’m just not like these people. I’m not one of them. I guess I shouldn’t come back.*

You can’t say, “Ephesians 4:12 says …”

So what should you have done? It’s a very simple fix. You just say, “The Bible says in Ephesians 4:12 …” And people who don’t know the names of the books of the Bible still won’t know what Ephesians is, but they’ll understand that it’s something in the Bible. And they’ll feel comfortable in your church because even though they don’t know the Bible, they know that you know they’re there, and that they’re welcome.

Another example: You’re preaching one Sunday when you say, “You know how sometimes when you’re praying, and your mind will start to wander …”

**What did you just do?** You assumed that everyone in the room prays. But how do I feel if I don’t pray? *This isn’t a place for me. This is a place for people who already pray, for people who already know God. I don’t think I belong here.*

So what should you have done? You could say, “Sometimes when I pray, my mind starts to wander.” The unconvinced won’t be surprised that you, a pastor, prays. And you won’t make them feel like they’re the only one in the room who doesn’t pray. But what I would probably do in this situation is say, “You know how sometimes when you pray, your mind will start to wander. And, by the way, I realize that we have a lot of people here who don’t pray,
because you’re not even sure you believe in God yet. And I’m honored that you’ve chosen to explore faith here with us. And if someday you do come to a place of faith, you’ll know what I mean when I say that you’re going to have times when your mind wanders as you’re praying.” By doing that, not only did I avoid ostracizing unbelievers, I let them know that I knew they were there, that our church is a place for believers and non-believers.

Or what if you’re doing a sermon out of Numbers 22 and read verses 28-30: “Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?’ Balaam answered the donkey, ‘you have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.’ The donkey said to Balaam, ‘Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?’ “No,” he said.”

And, after reading that, you say, “You see, the problem with Balaam is that …”

What did you just do? You assumed that we all believe in talking donkeys. And what is the unconvinced person thinking? I guess people who go here think donkeys can talk. Wow! Well, I definitely don’t fit in here.

So what should you have done? You read the passage and then you could say something like, “This story just got really weird! Now just to be clear—the Bible does not believe in talking animals. This is the only time in the Bible where an animal talks. And it’s because God’s doing something special here, it’s an exception, because He wants to make a point with Balaam. And, really, if there is a God, He can do anything, including making an animal talk.”

Another example: Let’s say you’re doing a message about doubts at Christmas time. And you talk about the doubts Joseph must have experienced going into the original Christmas. You try to bring that home by saying, “Maybe you’re experiencing some doubts right now because you’ve been praying forever, asking God for something over and over, but with no answer. And the doubts have started to creep in.”

What did you just do? You assumed that we’re all Christians, we all believe, we all pray. To the non-Christians in the room, your application is irrelevant. You’re not talking about their struggle. They’ll feel left out and likely won’t come back.

So what should you have done? You could have added a second application, one that applies for the unconvinced. It might be, “Maybe some of you here today have doubts about this entire Christmas story. A virgin gets pregnant?! Because she is somehow mysteriously impregnated by an invisible Holy
Ghost? And the baby turns out to be God Himself, in the flesh, and a diaper?!
It all seems kind of absurd. And maybe you're struggling with doubts about
whether you can believe this story.”

Do you see what that does? It lets the unchurched know that our church is a
place, a safe place, not just for people who believe, but also for people who
don’t believe. It lets them know you know they’re there, and you understand
their issues, and that will help them to come back. And it lets people know
that this is a safe place where they can bring their unconvincing friends.
Principle 3: Creatively Use Their Culture.

Now I assume this is obvious, but the principle of creatively using their culture is straight out of the Bible. Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 9:19-22, “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak, I became weak to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”

I think Paul’s idea here is that yes, we’re going to be different from non-Christians—different in our character, in the way we do relationships, in the way we think. But we do have some things in common. So let’s use what we have in common to build bridges to people who are far from God.

We see Paul do this in Acts 17, when he goes into the city of Athens. And before he speaks to the people there, he studies their culture. When he finally does speak, he brings up the statue they have dedicated to “an unknown God.” And he quotes their poets. Paul uses their pop culture as a tool to lead them to his God.

We also see Jesus creatively use the culture of the people he was trying to reach. Jesus had spent all eternity in Heaven, and he could have used stories and metaphors from Heaven that people couldn’t relate to. But he didn’t. He talked about farming. He told stories of shepherds and sheep. His metaphors included a woman putting yeast into dough and weeds in a garden. He used everyday stories from the culture of the people He was addressing.

We need to do the same. We need to creatively use the culture of the people we’re trying to reach to build a bridge from us to them.

Another way of thinking about this is with farming. If you have soft soil, you can plant seeds and just wait for the fruit. But if you have hard ground and try to plant seeds, it just won’t work. You have to plow the ground, breaking up the soil, so the seed can go deep and eventually take root and produce fruit. In the same way, if you’re only reaching Christians, just throw the Word of God out there and wait for fruit. But if you’re trying to reach the unconvinced, they probably have a very hard heart. How do we plow it and break it up, so that the seed of God’s Word can go deep and take root and produce fruit?

At our church, we use some secular music before and during our services, and we’ll do Top 10 lists or show movie clips on the topic we’re studying.
It’s also why we try to base the themes for our series on cultural ideas. For example, every year we do a series in the fall based on recent movies that have come out, exploring spiritual themes in them. Those sermons are on the same themes we’d teach on anyway. We just use pop culture as our introduction to it, and as our inroad to the unchurched.

Perhaps you’d never do a series on movies. That’s fine. You can still creatively use their culture to brand or name your series. We also do series on books of the Bible and people in the Bible, but we still try to connect them to culture to make them more accessible to non-Christians. When we taught a series on Galatians, we called it, “Losing My Religion.” Our series on the book of Philippians was called, “Life In 140” and centered around Paul’s very tweet-worthy (the limit on a Twitter post is 140 characters) statement in 1:21, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” We did a series through the life of Elijah and called it, “E! True H-wood Stories: Elijah.”

And it’s not just the titles of the series or sermons; it’s also what you do within the sermon. We need to find and use illustrations from popular culture today. Which, by the way, would not include stories from World War 2, World War 1 or the Civil War. Unless you’re targeting 60-, 80- or 170-year-old unchurched people.

Even just alluding to pop culture can be powerful. When you describe the woman in Luke 21 who gave her last two coins as, “coming straight from the Thrift Shop, with only 20 cents in her pocket,” it goes a long way in busting stereotypes and making the unconvinced feel like they can relate to you.

Remember Dallas and Ann Stamper I talked about at the beginning of this chapter? Dallas and Ann live in Virginia Beach, where I started a church back in 1998. About two years later, Ann heard about our church, and she told Dallas she wanted the family to try it. He rolled his eyes. She nagged. He agreed to go, once. And on the way, he reiterated his list. “If everyone’s dressed up, I won’t go back. If anyone greets me at the door, I won’t go back. If they make me turn and say “hi” to people, I won’t go back. If they ask me for money, I won’t go back.”

So Dallas and his family show up, and we don’t break any of his rules. He’s stunned. But, Dallas thinks as he’s sitting in the service, I’m still not coming back. This is better than any other church, but I still have no interest in going to any church. I’ll just make up some reason for my wife for why I won’t go back.

At the end of the service, we make a couple announcements—that we were having a big Super Bowl Party (it turns out Dallas loves football) and what we were talking about the following week. We were in the middle of a
“What Would Jesus Say to…?” series, and the next week we would be asking, “What would Jesus say to Creed?” At that time, Creed was the biggest band in the country and happened to be Dallas’ favorite band. So he told his wife, “Alright, I’m going back one more time, but just because I want to hear what they think Jesus would say to Creed.”

Do you see what happened? Creatively using Dallas’ culture got him interested in coming back to hear more.
Principle 4: Anticipate Objections.

I view a sermon as a conversation. We don’t have people in the congregation actually comment and ask questions out loud during the message, but that doesn’t mean they’re not commenting and asking questions. They just don’t feel the liberty to share them. And I would be irresponsible to not think through the comments and questions they’re likely to be asking, and to try to answer them in my message.

For instance, let’s say you’re preaching, as I was recently, from 1 Samuel 15. And you’re about to tell the story where God commands Saul and the Israelites to destroy the Amalekites, completely removing them from the face of the earth. To kill men, women, children, camels, dogs, sheep, cows. What is the unchurched person thinking? Most likely, Seriously? This is the God you want me to believe in? This is a God of love? That thinking presents a major stumbling block, and so you have to respond to that objection. Here’s what I said:

“A little background: The Amalekites were evil. They had been an evil presence in the world throughout their entire history. They were so evil that God decides they’ve lost their right to live. They need to be removed. Now I know that sounds really harsh. And I guess maybe it is. But there’s a lot of background here, and God in His wisdom knows what’s best. And you may be asking, ‘This is the God of love you guys talk about? How is this love?’ But maybe it is love. Couldn’t this be love, or at least the most loving option available? Think about it this way: What if you could go back before the Nazis started annihilating millions and millions of innocent people, or even while they were doing it, and wipe the Nazis off the face of the earth? Don’t you think that might be the most loving thing you could do? Yes, you’d be killing people, but in doing so you’d be saving many more innocent people? Isn’t it possible that was the decision God had to make? Well, regardless, God in His wisdom, and in His love, knows what’s best, and here He decides what’s best is to remove the Amalekites.”

Now that may not completely satisfy the unchurched person, but it might. And at least I anticipated and tried to answer the objection. At least they know that I see the issues in the story. They know I see what they see.

Another example: You’re teaching that God says sex is only for two people who are married and committed to each other for life. Do you know how stupid that sounds to an unchurched person? So what do you do? Recently I tried to address the objection I knew people were thinking. First, I taught that God tells us to reserve sex for marriage. Then I said:

“Maybe God’s original design and intention for sex is something different and much better than what we’ve come to view sex as. In the Bible, God
describes two people having sex as becoming ‘one flesh.’ The idea is that these two people have left all others, and now this sexual union creates a beautiful and powerful expression of oneness that bonds them together with a kind of relational super glue. It allows a husband and wife to do something together that they don’t do with anyone else. Right? Because I can talk to other people, play games with other people, I can have someone else cook for me, I can pay someone to do my laundry, I can take out my neighbor’s garbage, I can do anything else with anyone else—but not sex. That’s just for my wife and me. It’s this incredible, beautiful relational super glue that God gave as a gift for a husband and wife to experience together and with no one else, so it would bond them together with a powerful intimacy unlike anything they’d have with others. And God says that’s just for a husband and wife, just for two people who are exclusively committed to each other for a lifetime.

“But many ignore God’s dating rules and follow the world’s, and they take this relational super glue and apply it to dating relationships, which are outside of the context of a committed marriage. So what happens there? Well, let me show you. Let’s say that this is a single guy, and this is a single girl. [I held up two pieces of clear tape.] They haven’t met yet, and they don’t know it, but someday they’re going to get married. But this dude is young and looking to have some fun, so he sleeps with his girlfriend … and has sex with a girl he meets at a party … and then this other babe. [Each time I stuck the tape onto the shirt or sweater of a lady, then pulled it off.] And this girl [I hold up the other, still clean, piece of tape] has a boyfriend who tells her everyone is doing it, and so she says fine … and then she feels like it’s already too late to go back so she sleeps with her next boyfriend as well … and then in college she has too much to drink one night and has sex with a friend. [Each time I stuck the tape on the shirt or sweater or hairy arm of a guy, then pulled it off.] What’s happened to each of them? [I held up the now filthy pieces of tape.] And, when they finally meet and get married, what’s happened to their ability to really connect and have intimacy? [I showed that the two dirty pieces of tape would not stick well to each other.]

“See, the glue of sex does for a non-married couple what it does for the married couple. It seals those two people together. Unfortunately, this glue wasn’t meant to be separated, but dating relationships tend to break up. Which means a little piece of you goes with the other person. And it causes pain. And someday when you get married, there’s all this sexual baggage and memories and comparisons and that causes pain. And all of that is pain that God wants to spare you from.

“God’s rules for dating are to keep sex out and reserve it for marriage, so it can be this incredible, powerful, wonderful, fulfilling, intimacy-creating bond that you have, just with your spouse. See, if you have two people who follow God’s rules for dating [I showed two new pieces of clean tape], they
go into marriage feeling clean and they’re able to experience the fullness of intimacy God intends for them. *I stuck the two pieces of tape together easily, and tried to pull them apart, but they would not come apart.*

“God’s rules for dating may sound antiquated to you, old-fashioned, but does that mean they’re wrong? In fact, let me just throw in this little fact. Do you know that in the past few years some major studies have been done on the sex lives of Americans, and to the shock of the researchers they found that the most satisfied group of people in America, sexually, were … married conservative Christian couples? Not single people, not porn stars, not swingers, but conservative Christian married couples. Apparently, if the van with the Jesus fish on the back is a rockin’, don’t come a knockin.’”

The unconvinced may not become completely convinced through that line of thinking and illustration but, at the very least, I gave them something to think about. And I showed them that there might be more to waiting for sex till marriage then just an old, conservative, out-of-date fuddy duddy opinion.

If we’re going to preach effectively to the unchurched, we must anticipate objections.
Principle 5: Watch Your Tone.

If you’re going to preach to non-Christians and lead them to become disciples of Jesus, you must watch your tone. One of the issues here is to beware of boldness. I realize that sounds odd. We want to be bold. The Bible calls us to be bold. And many Christians love to be bold. But we need to beware of boldness in preaching.

Think about it this way. Let’s say you have a friend who starts selling Amway, and asks if you’ll come over for dessert and an Amway presentation. You roll your eyes, but agree to do it. You don’t believe in Amway. You’re cynical about Amway. You’re not planning on saying “yes” to becoming an Amway salesperson. But you show up because your friend asked you to. Let’s imagine two different sales pitches from your friend.

Sales pitch No. 1: Your friend starts pacing around the kitchen, exclaiming with great passion that Amway is the best. He wonders how it’s possible that anyone could not see how great Amway is. He tells you that he’s gotten rich from selling Amway. He slams his fist on the table a few times. He sometimes rhymes, “Today is the day for Amway! If you keep tryin’, your sales will be risin’!” He gets a bit intimidating at times, “This may be your last chance to become an Amway rep! What if you died tonight and didn’t have Amway in your heart?”

Sales pitch No. 2: Your friend calmly but with confidence lays out the reasons being an Amway salesperson may not be what you think. He explains that the products are great. And you don’t necessarily have to sell to your family and friends. But if you’re friends and family do choose to buy Amway products from you, they’ll save hundreds per year off their grocery bills. He informs you that there isn’t a minimum amount you have to sell each month, so there’s virtually no pressure. And you get a 20 percent commission.

Which of those two sales pitches might get you thinking? Obviously, the second one.

So why do we think preaching the Bible with great boldness is better? Because we believe the Bible. In fact, someone who loves Amway would find the first sales pitch more appealing. They’d be totally excited by it. People at an Amway rally would love the first guy. But not people who are cynical about Amway. They would be turned off by the boldness.

And the same is true in church.

I realize that many of the pastors we look to and listen to today are very bold, and that many of their churches are growing, but are they growing through
reaching non-Christians? Or are they bringing in Christians from all the other churches in town?

I don’t think many unchurched people are drawn in through boldness. They find it weird and intimidating. So beware of boldness. You must watch your tone.

The tone you want, by the way, is love. The best thing you can do in preaching to the unchurched is to let them know that God loves them and that you love them.

One of the best things I have going for me that over the years has allowed us to reach hundreds and hundreds of truly unconvinced, unchurched unChristians is that I don’t make people feel judged. I make sure they feel loved. And the love of God is the most powerful force in the universe. See, I don’t think you have to dumb down or water down your sermons for the unconvinced. They want substance; they’re open to truth. They just don’t want to hear it from a jerk.

How do you teach the Bible to people who don't believe the Bible and may not be very interested in what the Bible has to say? You tell stories. Stories are powerful. It’s why we love to watch movies and TV, and read novels. When you teach propositional truth, you set me up to debate with you. I’m going to have objections. When you tell me a story, you set me up to find myself in the story. I can't help it. Jesus knew this. It’s why He always taught with a story. Matt. 13:34: “Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable.”

So tell stories.

When you tell stories, put in lots of detail. Details make the story come alive. Don’t tell me that Jimmy went to his grandmother’s house. Tell me that:

Jimmy’s mother drove him down the oak tree-lined street he had been down so many times before. But again he was excited, because he was going to see Grandma. Almost before it stopped in the driveway, Jimmy jumped out of the car, and turned to wave at his mother’s smiling face. After getting the wave back she gave him every Friday night, he turned towards the huge white house. The paint was fraying on the grey stairs leading up to the porch, and the stairs were just a little too far apart for Jimmy’s small legs to take in easy strides. Finally, Jimmy arrived at the screen door. Grandma’s wooden door always seemed to be open, letting Jimmy know that he was expected. Every week Jimmy would stop before going in, because there was something special waiting for him even on this side of the screen door. The smell. The amazing smells of whatever delicious food Grandma was making him. After inhaling the smell, Jimmy would run into the house, a smile from ear-to-ear, shouting, “Grandma, I’m here!”

You give me detail like that, and I feel like I’m there. Telling me, “Jimmy went to his Grandmother’s house” makes me feel like I’m in a church building listening to a pastor tell me that some kid named Jimmy went to his grandmother’s house.

I always practice stories before I tell them in a sermon. Each time you tell the story, you’ll better feel the flow of it and find the humor in it. I try to practice telling the story throughout the course of my daily life, just whenever I have the chance. For instance, as I write this, our Christmas Eve service is about a month away. I’m opening my message with a story about a time this summer when I was trying to make chimichurri sauce, pushed the parsley further down into the blender with my hand, and nearly chopped my finger off. Any time I have an opportunity, I’m telling people the story and each time I do I can tell it better.
We need to tell stories, stories, and more stories.

The difficult part, as someone who speaks every week, is having enough stories to always have a story. Two things I've found that help me. First, I watch my life. As things happen, I'm always thinking, *would this be an interesting story? Would this be funny to other people? What truth does this illustrate?* If I didn't actively think this way, I think I'd miss a lot of good material. For example, when I almost lost a finger in my blender, I screamed and cried like a little girl. (That’s actually insulting to little girls.) But as soon as I overcame the initial shock and regained my composure, I started thinking, *how can I use this story? What are the elements of what happened to me? Is the story about disappointment—because I was so excited about making chimichurri and almost ended up losing a digit? Can I use it to illustrate how bad things often hit us when we're happy and unaware? Or is the funniest part my kid’s reaction as they came running into the kitchen?* And if you want to have stories, you need to be an observer of your life.

Second, I watch movies and TV shows, listen to other sermons and read books and magazines. I read *Entertainment Weekly, Time, ESPN* and *Fast Company*. And as I do, again, I'm looking for interesting or funny or beautiful or compelling stories that can illustrate truth.

Other people probably have better systems for filing stories (like Evernote), but one thing that has worked for me is to have files for each of my future messages. When I come across a story, I type it into the document for that future message. Then, later, when I open up the file up to write the sermon, it's like I've left myself a present. (And then I'm so happy with myself I usually tip myself a couple bucks.) Because you have to tell stories.

What’s most powerful is when, like Jesus, you’re able to connect your story (and your entire message) to the bigger story. *That’s* what people are looking for. Why does an unchurched non-Christian show up at church? Well, they’re hoping there is a God. They’re hoping He might still love them and have a place for them. They’re hoping maybe life has purpose, and that maybe they’re not as alone as they feel. They want something bigger and better than what they’ve experienced. So we need to show them the epic story of God, and how to connect to it and find their place in it.

What’s most powerful is when you connect it all to the hero. Stories typically have heroes, because people love heroes. And we have the ultimate hero. And that leads me to my last point.
Principle 7: Give Them the Hero.

People (all people, church people, unchurched people, every type of people) want a hero. That’s why they watch movies and TV shows. They’re looking for a hero. And we have the ultimate hero.

Yes, your sermon needs to include you—you need to let them know who you are. It’s great to make it clever and creatively use their culture. And it’s wise to intelligently anticipate and respond to their likely objections. But don’t make yourself or your creativity or your intellect the hero; make Jesus the hero. Because He is what unchurched people are looking for and really need.

Think about your preaching. Maybe even go back and skim through your last 10 or 20 sermons. Do you present Jesus as the hero people are looking for? Yes, He was a servant. And a teacher of truth. And He offered love. And He was a suffering savior. And, yes, we need to make sure people know all of that. But Jesus was also a hero, the ultimate hero. So give them the hero.

Are These Seven Principles Working?

After preaching weekly to the unconvinced for 18 years, I’m convinced these principles work. They have allowed me to teach Christians and to reach non-Christians in the same messages.

So I encourage you to use them, and also to develop a way of determining whether they are working. And that begs a question about your preaching: Where is your feedback coming from?

Several years ago, I heard John Ortberg speak to some pastors. He began by drawing concentric circles. In the center circle he wrote, “Your core.” Then in a circle around that, “Regular Attenders,” and “Occasional Attenders” in the circle around that. Finally, he put “The Unchurched In Your Community” in the last circle on the outside.

Where is your feedback coming from? I’m pretty sure I can answer that for you. Your feedback comes from your core. You may also get a little feedback from your regular attenders. If you preach a great sermon for them, they will tell you. If you preach something that doesn’t hit them just right, you’ll get complaints like, “I’m just not getting fed.”

But Jesus has called us to seek and save the lost. To reach out to the outer circle, the unchurched in your community. The problem is that they will not say a word to you about your message. If they don’t like your sermon, the way they provide feedback is by not showing up the next week. You never see them again. And you may have no idea they were there in the first place.
Here’s the real issue with that: If the core of your church (your feedback source) doesn’t like what you do, they may walk out. If they do, they’ll walk to another church. But if unchurched people walk out, they probably won’t go to another church.

So I would encourage you to prayerfully take with a grain of salt the feedback you get from your core, and to seek ways to get feedback from unconvincing lost people. How could you do that? You’re smart. Figure something out. Perhaps you could pay some lost people to come and give you feedback? Do something. Because Jesus has called us to seek and save the lost, and one of the ways we can do that is through our church services, and through our preaching.

The Reward

Remember Dallas and Ann? They showed up at our church, and though we didn’t break any of Dallas’ rules, he still wasn’t going to come back. But we mentioned a Super Bowl Party and said that the following week we’d try to answer the question, “What would Jesus say to Creed?” so Dallas decided to come back for that service. He did. And he came back the next week. And the next. And then he came back again. He came back every week. And he ended up finding the hero he had been looking for his entire life. So he decided to follow Jesus. And Dallas really followed Jesus. He eventually started bringing dinner to homeless people on the beach every Sunday. And then clothes, and shoes, and tents. Then he started bringing other people with him. Nurses to help the homeless, hair stylists to cut their hair, counselors to talk with them. This ministry to the homeless grew and grew.

Finally, Dallas quit his six-figure job so he could lead the homeless ministry full time, and he did it at no pay.

That’s what we’re looking for, right? That’s why we do what we do. And to do that, to partner with God in leading that kind of thing to happen, we need to use these principles in preaching to the unconvincing. Stories like Dallas’, they make it all worth it.

You can choose to focus on Christians, preach to Christians, just try to grow your Christians, but any church can do that. When you really engage in Jesus’ mission of seeking and saving the lost, of making disciples by baptizing new believers you led to Him, it is so worth it.

To Learn More…

Check out the companion eBook, *Sermons for the Unconvinced*, where you’ll find annotated sermons providing examples of how the principles from this book play out in real-life messages from Verve Church, where unconvincing people are becoming convinced about Jesus all the time.
About the Author

Vince Antonucci became a Christian out of a completely non-Christian background, which has led him to start two churches for people who don't like church. He was the founding pastor of Forefront Church in Virginia Beach, Va., a church where 72 percent of the people who attend were previously unchurched non-Christians. He then moved to Las Vegas where he started a new church, Verve, in the heart of Sin City, just off the Vegas Strip. You can follow him at vinceantonucci.com and @vinceantonucci. Vince is the author of I Became a Christian and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt (2008), Guerrilla Lovers (2010) and Renegade (2013). He loves spending time with his best friends: his wife, Jennifer, and kids Dawson and Marissa.

Join the Movement

Vince Antonucci and Verve Church are focused on reaching radically lost people and leading them to become radical followers of Jesus. Every year, we offer a conference for church leaders who want to focus on that as well. We invite you to join us at their next Vault Conference. It will be a shot of adrenaline for you, and will equip you to become far more effective in living out Jesus’ mission of seeking and saving the lost.

We are also launching a church planting movement called Splagna.

We are looking for church planters who have Christ like compassion for those who are without God and without a local church—and have the guts to do something about it. We want to find, inspire, equip and resource church planters who will go to the places Jesus would have gone, but that Christians today tend to avoid. The kind of places where sin may abound, but where God’s light will burn bright and grace will abound all the more. The kind of places where it may seem impossible to start a thriving church, but where some fools for Christ have the compassion and guts to go because they follow Jesus—places where the god of logic will be slayed, and where the God who says nothing is impossible will be worshipped. If that sounds like you, we’d love to hear from you!