

What I hear you saying is that the role of the preacher has changed from being the team's star player to being a coach.

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This comment was made by a friend of mine who is not a pastor, during a conversation we were having about our vocations. The two of us had not seen one another since before the pandemic, and it was wonderful to share a meal and catch up on our lives. As I updated him on my sense of the changing nature of the Church and vocational ministry, the above quote was his response. In one sentence he captured something I believe is critical for every preacher to consider. And the impact, if true, is profound.

For much of the history of the Church in this country, there have been a great many assumptions that come from the legacy of Christendom. One of the most fundamental is best understood from the movie *Field of Dreams*, when Ray Kinsella is told "If you build it, they will come." For centuries, congregations in this country essentially knew that if they opened their doors with a clean building, good preaching, engaging music, and a viable children's ministry, people would come. We never had to tell people *why* they should come, only how we were different (and better) than the other denomination or congregation down the street.

In this understanding of Church, the preacher was often seen as the star player on the team. The entire team was important, for sure, but nobody received as much focus during the Sunday gatherings as the preachers. They were given more time and more authority than anyone else. If the Church was growing, then the preacher was celebrated. If not, the preacher was blamed. Preachers in the same town were compared to one another, and we often compared ourselves to one another in the exact same manner: "How many folks are worshiping with you all these days?" we ask at our denominational gatherings. The idea of the preacher being the star player would rarely be said aloud, and we ought to regret it ever came into being, but implicitly everyone in the congregation, staff, and leadership understood this was the case.

As we are all aware, however, things have been rapidly changing when it comes to the place and role of the Church in North America. No longer are large numbers of people, especially under the age of 40, waking up on Sunday morning and attending worship services at a local congregation. Our competition is no longer the church across town, but rather the gym, coffee shop, and youth soccer league. We have lost our privileged position within the American landscape. The change was captured by a friend of mine who is the Senior Pastor of a historic congregation in a southern city. For decades in her city, she said, the candidates for mayor all wanted to appear before her congregation during an election to be seen as a good and decent people that voters could trust in office. In the most recent election, however, a member of her congregation was running for mayor and did not want to be publicly associated with a church, fearing it could cost the election.

This change has taken place in a very short period of time, and churches have

largely not known how to respond. Nowhere has the resulting pressure been more intense than on the star player, the primary preaching pastor. If anyone is supposed to carry the team in tough times, it is your star player, the person who comes through when everyone else is in a slump. In trying to come up with a winning play, preachers have turned to all kinds of tricks: preaching in thematic series to be relevant, using visuals and multi-media to communicate more effectively, not wearing robes in order to be more relatable. Despite the heroic efforts of many preachers, however, the trends of decline and despair have only accelerated. Preachers feel more discouraged and burned out, and are considering leaving the ministry at record levels.

This is why my friend's comments at dinner proved so insightful to me. In our traditional model of Church, where people are coming on Sunday morning to hear the sermon, the star player can be the center of attention each week and make an impact. However, nobody cares how good the star players are when they are alone in the gym. It is not that their talent has diminished. It is not that they are no longer called. Rather the circumstances around them have been altered and, perhaps, they need to see themselves as coaches more than star players, coaches whose primary role is to encourage and equip the actual players to be effective and impactful in the game. And the game is not played on the church campus any longer. Rather the church campus is the locker room, and each week it serves to equip our players and send them back out to the playing field. For decades, missiologists like Lesslie Newbigin, David Bosch, and Darrell Guder have been writing about this sea change. The Church must not see itself as the destination, the point of things, but rather as a sending agency to love and witness to the society around it. The former president of Columbia Theological Seminary, Steve Hayner, said it this way, "The Church is the airport not the destination. Nobody flies to LAX for the airport, but without LAX, Los Angeles will not thrive."

In this new intersection of the Gospel and Culture, the preacher has a critically important role, but it is no longer to be the star player, but rather to be the coach. I played basketball in high school but was not very good and sat on the bench unless our team was winning or losing by 30 points. I was the "hustle player" who the crowd would cheer, for when I entered the game, it meant that the final results were no longer in doubt. Therefore, in sports, I don't know what it feels like to be a star player, but I have a pretty good idea of what makes an effective coach, because I was sitting near our coach for most of every game. I would suggest that there are three primary duties for a coach that might directly apply to how preachers think of themselves in our current context. They are as follows:

1. Develop a philosophy of ministry that is supported by and informs every sermon.
2. Offer specific plans that teach each member of the team how to succeed.
3. Set a culture of pursuing and encouraging the team.

I want to look at specifics for each of these examples that can inform the goal and practice of preaching a weekly sermon.

Develop a philosophy of ministry that is supported by and informs every sermon

First, I believe a sermon can no longer stand alone but must be one part of a clear, explicit, overall philosophy of ministry that can only be experienced when living in congregational community. Whenever new coaches are hired for a team, the most important question they are immediately asked is what style of play they will utilize. In basketball, for example, will the coach incorporate a man-to-man defense or a zone? Will the coach encourage players to shoot quickly and hope for a high scoring game, or deliberately use the clock to slow the game down and make it a defensive affair? Max Depree once said, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.” This is what the coach brings to the team. I believe that in a similar way, before a weekly sermon is preached, the preaching pastor must work with other staff and lay leaders to define a clear philosophy of ministry for the congregation that each individual sermon seeks to connect with. Many preachers were not trained for this, because as the star player, if we preached a great sermon, that would be “enough,” and the congregation would be glad they showed up on Sunday morning and plan to return again in the future. In that case, the sermon could stand alone and have a tremendous impact. It is critical to understand that this can no longer be the case, as modern technology allows good content to be found with the click of a button. You no longer have to wake up on Sunday morning, much less get dressed up, to find great content, as people can view a YouTube video on their couch and receive the exact same information and exegesis. Therefore, what a coach can uniquely offer is a sermon that is one part of an overall philosophy of formation for people to live in their life together.

Think about it in another way: coaches are not able to simply focus on one play or series at a time. Coaches understand that each play is part of a greater whole. Coaches can’t lose games but declare victory because a certain play worked well. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a long-standing issue in American Churches that serious biblical formation of individuals, to live a life of missional calling, has been inconsistent at best. We have reduced “Discipleship Departments” to 50 minutes Sunday School classes where people are given increasing amounts of academic information that resides between their ears. To be clear, I am a Presbyterian pastor, and therefore a love of academics and learning is part of my DNA. However, hearing a lecture once a week is not the primary way Jesus formed people, and it can’t be how we primarily form women and men either. This is why sermons should not exist as an entity to themselves. Rather the primary job of a pastor is the articulation, and alignment, of the congregation with an overall philosophy of formation. The sermon is one tool in our toolbox for the formation of people, but unless it is connected to something larger than itself, the impact of a single sermon is limited.

In my church, for example, we worked to craft an overall Vision Statement that is simple, easy to remember, and captures the values of what we believe God is calling us to do in the world. We say that Covenant Presbyterian Church is “encouraging one another to follow Jesus wherever we live, work, and play.” If a sermon does not specifically empower people to live out this vision, then it is not going to be very effective regardless of how much exegesis it contains or what poignant sermon illustration might make people misty eyed. And it is not just the sermon that has a specific purpose, but we need to be investing in forming people for their missional calling that is greater than what we have known in the past. Covenant is very explicit that

we are shaped to live out our vision by the building of three habits in our individual and communal life as a church. These habits are “solitude,” “community,” and “service,” and each of our people must practice each habit. They are each one leg of a three-legged stool for Covenant, and if any leg is removed, the stool cannot stand. Our Discipleship is about the encouragement of each of these three habits, and that is where our institutional willpower and resources are focused. Missional formation can’t be a department in the Church, but it must be the explicit work of the entire church. The sermon’s primary value lies in how it articulates and empowers people to live into this greater vision.

One of the objections that I sometimes hear to what I am saying is that these types of sermons will not be very friendly to visitors and newcomers. Again, in our traditional models of Church, where the preacher is star player, there was a sense that worship was the “front porch” for people to learn about and consider joining a congregation. While “seeker churches” were an extreme iteration of this thinking, most churches have traditionally seen Sunday morning as the time to engage new people and get them information about joining the Church. Therefore, a sermon that is more about coaching will not have the desired impact of appealing to visitors. Again, however, we need to remember that the context has dramatically changed around us and Sunday morning worship may now be the final step of integrating people into a congregation. Indeed, at Covenant, we have found that many of our new members have already participated in small groups and mission projects in the city long before setting foot on our campus. They have experienced the greater framework for formation that has been articulated, and therefore when a sermon points to the values we are called to embody in this world, we are putting words to what has already drawn them into our orbit. I continue to believe that the first thing a preacher must focus on is how each sermon is explicitly connected with a larger, and clear, philosophy of formation.

Offer specific plans that teach each member of the team how to succeed

Second, a preacher as coach model needs to give specific instructions for the players to succeed in a particular moment. A coach will not be successful who simply tells players to run around and try their best. Rather the preacher needs to know the gifts and passions of players and help them find specific ways to succeed. Among other things, a sermon should invite specific responses from the congregation, a specific question to consider, or a specific step to take. We don’t want to leave it up to the players to do whatever they want but rather offer clear expectations of how to move forward in the game.

I often think of this step as creating clear onramps into the life of the community. For example, we don’t simply encourage people to live in community (one of our three habits), but we have several times of the year when we specifically invite people to join our small group ministry and to discover a small community of people to pray with and walk with in life. On these Sundays the focus of the sermon is to push people towards this specific decision. And this is just one example. When approaching the idea of Stewardship, and pledging to our budget, we don’t just talk about what it means to be a good steward, but one year, during a sermon, we gave several congregants \$100 in cash and told them to use it over the course of the next seven days. The following Sunday, in the sermon, we heard how they spent the money and listened as they described the pressure of using the church’s money wisely since they knew they

were going to have to report back to the congregation. This allowed us to encourage everyone else to think about how to adopt a similar approach in their financial stewardship. The specific action enhances what it means to say it is not “our money” and to consider what biblical stewardship is really all about. Finally, we have talked often about the importance of being a congregation that shows grace to one another and others in the midst of the incredible political and moral divisions in our society. Once again it is not enough just to say it, but rather it is imperative to create specific action steps for people to live out this value. We have therefore hosted lectures and round table discussions to dive into our differences in ways that allow us to show grace and compassion to one another rather than simply existing on one side of the American political spectrum or the other. These conversations are risky and can get contentious, but if we don’t embody our teaching, our people will probably struggle to do the same on their own.

These are just some examples that I believe a preacher as coach needs to consider. Again, the ultimate goal is for our congregants to live out their faith seven days a week. They are sent to be witnesses to the love of God where they live, work, and play, and the preacher needs to put them in positions to effectively live this out. Sermon illustrations that focus on the institution and the work of the institution are not the work of the coach. That is the mindset of the laity supporting the star player and the team. Rather we exist to support and encourage the people in their daily lives. C.S. Lewis once described joy as “the presence of purpose,” and that is what I want for our people. The sermon must equip and encourage them with specific actions to live as God’s witnesses of love and grace outside of the walls of the Church.

Set a culture of pursuing and encouraging the team

Finally, a coach needs to be an active and encouraging presence in the lives of the players. It is a tremendous change, not just for our preachers, but for our laity to realize that they are the players that are called to bear fruit and impact the world. To understand you have a calling is joyous, but it can also be challenging and difficult. People may hear the call to live in community, join a small group, and find that the group will fail to mesh and eventually fall apart. People will seek to witness to the love of God by showing grace and forgiveness to their neighbors only to have this goodness taken advantage of. They will work for justice in our society and see places where desired change never materializes and is devoured by the status quo. Preachers need to be available for the people of God to process what they are learning and experiencing in the game of life. In the Gospels we see over and over again that Jesus sends the disciples as his witnesses throughout Galilee but is always waiting for their return and their processing of what took place on their journeys. We see that he celebrates with them in their successes and shapes them in their disappointments.

Among many implications for the modern preacher is the idea that we need to create margin in our calendars for our people to come back and reflect with us on their experiences. In doing so we can encourage them to continue on the journey, but we can also learn from them. Indeed, their journeys can shape us and our preaching as we go forward in the future. The fact is that as vocational clergy, the majority of us are not experts on what it means to be a Christian who is sent as a lawyer, accountant, or teacher. We should not assume our expertise in these areas but ought to learn from their experiences and insight in order to shape our sermons in the future.

When you stop and think about it, this will require a major adjustment for preachers in terms of how we think of our time outside of Sundays. In our traditional paradigm of Church, we were the ones who were usually pursued by the congregation. Everyone wants to be around the star player. They have people pulling at them for their time, attention, and input. Like you, there have been times when I felt like my calendar was dominated by certain people in the congregation seeking to find time with me. And those conversations were usually centered on the life of the church itself. They centered around our policies, attitudes toward the denomination, or plans for our youth ministry. A good coach, however, is not someone who only waits for players to come, but much more often the coach is the one pursuing the players. What would it mean if we built time into our calendar to pursue our people for lunches or coffees? And what if it was not only so that we could answer their questions about our congregations/denominations, but we might ask strategic questions to them? What are they learning about following Jesus as part of our congregation? What are their questions or struggles about living out their faith throughout the week? What does it mean to be a person of faith who is managing a team in their work setting? What are their hopes as Christians, and what are their questions about the intersection of faith and work? To listen to their reflections and see these discussions as a key component to our sermon preparation would make us far more effective coaches to the team.

We are in the midst of a tremendous change when it comes to what it means to be the Church in America. Our culture is rapidly changing, and the Church, as it has always done throughout history, must change with it in order to serve as effective witnesses to the love and grace of Jesus Christ in the world around us. Preachers will be key leaders to help discern the changing landscape and discern the path ahead. What my friend helped me to see is that the approach to preaching must be more like that of a coach than of the star player. This is a change, but it is a critical one that we all might consider.