

The 'I' in sermons: Breaking old rules

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

I am never quite sure what postmodernity is, but I was struck by Pamela Fickenscher's delightful essay on postmodern ministry ([Off-road ministry](#)) and especially by her observations about preaching: "While many traditions have taught preachers to leave the 'I' out of their sermons, postmodern audiences are hungry for the messenger and the message to draw closer together. Personal experience is granted more authority than academic learning or even scriptures themselves."

I was taught to avoid the personal pronoun in sermons, and never to use personal illustrations. "They come on Sunday to hear about God, not you," the homileticians declared, frowning on those emotional storytellers whose tales of spiritual adventure made the preacher into a religious superstar. Some of those stories were so good that skeptical observers couldn't help wondering if they were fabricated. And of course, some ministers were simply show-offy: "In my recent book . . ."

So a generation of us eschewed the personal pronoun, never told a personal story, never even ventured an "I believe . . ." Sermons were carefully researched and written essays, relying on the most recent biblical scholarship, bristling with quotations and citations from academia.

Mine were too until I met James Forbes. I heard him preach at a conference and was stunned. I signed up for a preaching workshop of his and have never forgotten it.

He began by gently observing that most mainline sermons sounded about as compelling as a CEO's annual report to the stockholders. He shocked us with the simple observation that preaching is essentially testimony, a familiar practice in his Pentecostal tradition.

"So," Forbes said, "let's start this workshop with 'testimony time.' Each of you stand up and say how and where the Holy Spirit is working in your life." I started looking for the door, wondering what I had gotten myself into. It was an uncomfortable assignment for many of us, but we did it: stood up and said how the Spirit was moving in our lives. We made our testimony. Forbes concluded the evening by

returning to his theme of preaching as testimony, “If you don’t believe it enough to say so, and if your people can’t see that you believe it, how in the world do you expect them to believe it?”

I’m still wary of sermons becoming more about the preacher and the preacher’s experience than about God, but I am more and more convinced that behind and beneath the preaching vocation is the call to testimony.