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## **UX Preaching**

*22 Universal Experience (UX) Principles to radically change the way you preach.*

*By Anthony Delgado*

*Sample: 9,000 Words*

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## *Introduction*

I changed my mind. He called me wishy-washy. But I don't want to believe anything I don't, well, believe. So, yes, I changed my mind.

I'm not a wishy-washy person, but I'm not afraid to admit when I'm wrong. I have to be okay with being misunderstood as a professional communicator. It's part of the trade. You're going to communicate things you shouldn't, and people will perceive things you didn't mean.

I'm a graphic designer, a high school digital design teacher, and most importantly, a teaching pastor. I preach nearly every Sunday and teach the Bible midweek. My goal is to change beliefs into biblical beliefs. If I can't do that for myself, I suppose I need a new calling.

*Where does belief come from?*

I hope this book, although thin and accessible, will answer that question on theological and practical levels. I contend that **Universal Experience (UX)** principles developed in tactile design fields—arts, engineering, technology—*apply broadly to all communication and are effective in auditory settings*. You can use UX principles to move people towards belief in the same way a well-designed iPhone app intuitively moves you through its application.

Communication is essential for belief, and audible communication has traditionally been the primary mode of communicating the message of Jesus. The Apostle Paul said hearing the words of Jesus results in belief.<sup>1</sup> He was concerned people would believe the Gospel, and for Paul, that meant speech. So far, so good. Belief comes from hearing.

*But, what about people who hear and don't believe?*

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 10:5-21.

Paul asked and answered that question as well. *Maybe they didn't understand what they heard?* A clear message that results in understanding seems essential to Paul.<sup>2</sup> Still, a clear message was not enough for Israel. God hardened hearts in Israel, preserving only a few people who would hear, *understand*, and believe. In other words, God is sovereignly working through the spoken word to give understanding so people *can* believe. Even in this case, not all will believe. Many will not.

Like Paul, I believe God is sovereign. But I also think God is at work through human communication faculties since *understanding* is essential for belief. I want to learn to communicate better to help others understand the message of Jesus. More than anything, I want people to follow the Jesus of the Bible and love what God loves.

It pains me to spend hours preparing week after week to see people undergo little or no transformation. Their affections aren't stirred with greater love. I assume you have experienced this since you're reading a book to better your communication skills. To speak the words of Christ in the scriptures ought to result in greater love for God and humankind, a greater understanding of God's temporal and eternal purposes, and a greater thirst for lasting, life-changing truth.

*I've seen words do this.*

Words changed me as a young adult. After years of attending church and a period of boredom with living out the life of God (I always loved the philosophy of God), I returned to the church under a new preacher. I found a new hunger for the meat of the scriptures that I never had before. It was a dynamic, life-changing transformation.

Here's the thing: *For so many years, I had no idea how the transformation happened.*

God's sovereignty seems the obvious answer. But I can't precisely reproduce intangible realities like God's sovereignty in the temporal sphere using words. There has to be more. I think Paul felt the same as he adapted his communication method to the Greco-Roman world's beliefs, values, and communication strategies. And Paul was quite effective! That's the kind of experience you and I want—to be the tool of God's sovereign call, not just to *sprinkle* truth to see what hits, but to *baptize* our hearers in the heart and mind of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 10:16-17, "They have not obeyed the Gospel...Belief comes from hearing...the words of Christ." Paul referenced Isaiah's exasperation over the disobedience of Israel, noting that, although they understood about the Lord, they did not obey him. Paul reasons, this is not necessarily because they did not understand, but they did not obey what they came to know. cf. Romans 10:8 where Paul notes, that belief is a faculty of the heart (or subconscious) rather than a faculty of the rational mind. Further, Romans 10:5-8, righteousness from faith is superior to righteousness from law because it stems from the subconscious (or heart); Romans 10:19, "Did Israel not understand?" Paul equated the Israelite's apostasy with a lack of comprehension; Romans 11:2, "Do you know what the scripture says?" Paul appealed to the scriptures as a common source of knowledge intended to be understood by all; Romans 11:8, "God gave them a spirit of stupor" to hinder understanding; Romans 11: 25, "I do not want you to be unknowing..." Paul is concerned about head-knowledge.

You might ask, *Don't God's words have power on their own? Why do I need to be convincing?*

Indeed, The Apostle Paul said he did not speak to the Corinthians using persuasive arguments. Instead, he relied on the power of the Spirit of God.<sup>3</sup> But let's not presume beyond quality exegesis. Paul was repeatedly concerned about his speech's clarity—a concept developed later in the book. Paul was against drawing crowds with a new philosophy, a common tactic for philosophers of his day. Paul was concerned to display God's Spirit's power rather than his own wisdom and intellect. My observation is that many today who claim to simply speak God's Word are, in actuality, putting their exegetical intellect on display and clouding the simple message of the Gospel. In this book, I propose a way to simply proclaim the profound message of God's scriptures, a venture I believe accords very well with Paul's philosophy of preaching.

That's enough of that, for now.

I'm more concerned to ask, *What if, after hearing, people walk away changed?*

When we *'turn over a new leaf,'* we usually have decided to do some new things and stop doing some old things. We think we will have a better life if we can just do better. That's an excellent place to start. But, belief digs deeper than conscious cognitive function. Belief is a matter of the heart. I describe belief as subconscious habitual knowing—deep-seated (subconscious), yet easily accessible (habitual), conviction (knowing).

When we speak, people should hear, understand, and retain the knowledge. But, for life-change to occur, they must be affected such that they will subconsciously recall their understanding to form a habit of knowing. The subconscious habit will help people live the principles rather than just know them. It is how they learn to love what God loves, not just *try-real-hard* to do what God says to do. That was the difference between my faith as a teenager and my faith as an adult. Decades of Sunday School knowledge came alive in passionate love for Jesus when it hit my heart—and it was game-changing. But, it wasn't the words alone. The words were effective because of why they were spoken, how they were used, and what they were expected to do. The words were designed.

*No one gets to the heart like a designer.*

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:4.

Design is a creative faculty, but properly speaking, design is *not* art. Art can be design, and design can be *artistic*. But, design is communication—perhaps a byproduct of intelligent design. A designer is someone who plans *something* for a specific purpose. To design is to *plan* with an agenda in mind. A design is a sensory depiction of what the designer wants to communicate. Public speakers are designers because designs have a communicatory agenda, or else they are artists, mere storytellers, not homileticians. The message is a design which the communicator intends for an intentional communicatory purpose.

I applied design principles to my preaching, teaching, and public speaking for years. But not on purpose. I'm a synthetic thinker, so everything I learned about visual design connected dots in my subconscious, affecting my audible designs. It was only recently, however, as I was preparing to teach a unit on Universal Experience (UX), that I realized how much Universal Design had influenced the way I communicate audibly.

Universal Design is a set of principles that support an ideal universality in the function of all *things*, but especially media applications. The idea is that designs *of all kinds* should strive to be usable, useful, and understandable *for all people*. That means designs should have ease, equity, and flexibility in mind. Further, they should be intuitive and straightforward.

**UX**, short for **User Experience**, is *the study of interactions between producers and consumers*. If your company designs a new widget and I buy a widget from you, UX is the quality of my interaction with the widget when I put it to use. If you are a graphic designer and I come across an advertisement you made on the internet, UX refers to the quality of my interaction with the ad, whether I clicked the ad to see more or followed some other call-to-action. If I listen to one of your messages, UX refers to the quality of my interaction with your words.

*How do you gauge the quality of an audible interaction?*

In seminary, my preaching professors graded us on how well we understood and applied exegetical principles in our messages (exposition). Some day I'll write another book to address the expositional questions. Exposition is an interaction between the preacher and the scriptures. This book is about the quality of interaction between the preacher and the hearer. (I'm assuming you understand the Bible as a prerequisite to preaching.)

As I listen to you preach, *How am I affected by your words? How do they engage me? How do your words challenge my false beliefs and prepare me to form new beliefs?*

These are questions of experience. God intelligently designed universal principles of experience to sovereignly direct the shifting of beliefs. I believe the study of UX has opened up pathways for us to intentionally develop shifts in beliefs rather than wait for them to line up on their own coincidentally.

Consider this example. There is an aesthetic quality to a widget's design that affects my experience as the user. To me, an iPhone has an aesthetic quality that makes it more intuitive to use than an Android. Similarly, there is an aesthetic quality to an advertisement that will affect my experience when I view it. There's a law firm in my area with billboards all over the city that dawn a silly picture of the lawyer. I see it and mimic the face to my kids every time we pass it, and we all laugh. But, I doubt, if I were to need a lawyer, I would call them. I might want someone more serious for serious affairs—the billboard's aesthetic affects the user's experience. Likewise, a message's aesthetic quality will affect its experience when heard. That aesthetic quality goes far deeper than the tone of voice, body language, and word choice—although all of that matters.

In his book, *Laws of UX*, author Jon Yablonski argues that psychology is the key to understanding how users behave and interact with digital interfaces.<sup>4</sup> He further argues that human perception is the blueprint for creating compelling designs. I completely agree. A designer who doesn't care what the user thinks is no designer. Like preaching and most public speaking, all design is a form of communication that asks how the consumer will be affected and conforms to that pattern.

I'm reminded of the age-old debate between liberal and conservative hermeneutics in biblical studies. The debate's counterpart in literature is formalism versus postmodernism. The liberal or postmodern interpretation of a text allows the reader's insights and perspectives to interpret the text to have a unique *personal experience*. The conservative or formalist hermeneutic uses cues from the text and historical situation to develop the *author's intent*. Postmodern liberalism allows the *reader* to drive the meaning. Conservative formalism enables the *author* to drive the meaning.

If the author is a postmodernist, then they write in such a way as to encourage a dynamic interpretation, unique to every individual. But, if the author is a formalist, they don't intend for you to alter, adapt, or reject their philosophies, often making literary and historical allusions to concrete facts. The formalist wants you to believe and apply the author's philosophy to your particular context, not to develop your own unique philosophy like the postmodern.

The question is, *If God wrote the Bible, is he a postmodernist or formalist?*

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Yablonski, *Laws of UX* (O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2020).

You won't have to read this book much further to see that I believe God is a formalist author. God intends for humans to derive objective truths from the Bible (albeit truths that will be applied in somewhat unique ways to each person's day-to-day life). We've all preached a message and learned afterward that many people (a) walked away with a different understanding than we presented, (b) rejected the message because we don't all have to agree, or (c) they didn't understand enough to believe anything. We use the excuse that God has to bear fruit in the individual by His Spirit. *Maybe he wanted them to learn something else at that moment? Shall I counsel or criticize the Almighty?* But, this is no more than an excuse for poor communication. If you speak the truth, the Spirit of God will never obscure the truth in your words to move people away from the truth, even if it pushes them towards some other truth.<sup>5</sup>

Yablonski presents twenty Laws of UX, which you can review on his website.<sup>6</sup> The catch is, few of them are stately design principles. Most come from philosophy, psychology, and other soft-sciences. Some come from engineering, and one even from a theologian of the High Middle Ages. I added two more classical principles and reformulated them into the 22 UX Communication principles you'll encounter in this book. You can refer to the Appendix for reference and compare them with the UX Design laws.

*How will I use these principles in my communication strategy?*

I didn't set up the book's chapters according to their function. If so, I would have 22 chapters, each detailing another UX Communication principle. Instead, I chose to outline the book according to the design laws' purpose as I recognized patterns in how the principles work together to accomplish particular objectives in design.

Since I began researching this book, I have been more intentional in applying the UX Communication principles to my preaching. I've discovered quite a few harmful communication habits I am working to undo. Some principles were easy to apply as I was already tracking with the concepts—you'll undoubtedly find the same to be true for you. And others, I am still learning to apply effectively.

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<sup>5</sup> An objection to this statement is often made on the grounds of Isaiah's vision (Isaiah 6). When Isaiah volunteered to preach to Israel, the Lord told him to say, "Hear but don't understand; see but don't perceive" (v. 9). Isaiah was commanded to make their hearts dull, ears heavy, and eyes blind, so that they will not believe with their consciousness (mind) or have conviction in their subconscious (heart) (v. 10). For some, this means there are times when God gives understanding and others where he obscures the message.

A close read demonstrates a contrary conclusion. Isaiah was told to 'make' them to not believe or understand. The production of disbelief was Isaiah's work not God's. The lack of understanding was according to human faculty not divine origin. It would be foolish for a modern preacher to claim God may be obscuring their message on these grounds as that would mean, in the context of Isaiah, that the preacher's local church was undergoing divine punishment, the message being intentionally obscured by the preacher to prevent repentance.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Yablonski, "Laws of UX," <https://lawsofux.com>.

I fear that many preachers are set in ineffective communication patterns but are unwilling to better themselves as communicators. As already mentioned, you may defer to the sovereignty of God or Paul's explanation that God changes hearts through hearing. I would remind you that even Paul was concerned with effective communication, clarity for understanding, and personally facilitating spiritual maturity in the church's life in his day.

My hope for you is that you will hear and understand this book's principles. I pray that you agree with the need for effective communication. Like a new missionary gazes into the hearts, minds, and cultural values of his new mission field, I charge you to gaze into the hearts, minds, and cultural values of your listeners. In-so-doing, I ask God to sanction your words with the power of his Spirit to make the old-man new, to raise dead souls to life, to give intellectual sight to the intellectually blind, to make zealous the nominal and lethargic members of your church, and to demonstrate the life-changing power of our risen Lord Jesus in new, exciting, and fantastic ways.

*Let's get to work.*

### *Profound Simplicity*

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is considered one of the greatest novels ever written. Google it. It's on nearly every list. To better himself, a friend of mine set to the task of reading *Anna Karenina*, but I don't think he finished. At a daunting 864 pages, I am confident that the effort outweighs the benefit. It's a cost-benefit analysis for me. I just don't have the time to read a book like that. And I'm not alone.

Public speaking is no different. If I want to communicate profound principles to my listeners, I need to simplify my communication process without sacrificing the complexity that makes the message profound. TED does this well. Countless preachers are giving twenty-minute messages influenced by the TED Talk fad. The one thing many talks are missing in TED and churches is profundity.

I've listened to Simon Sinek's famous TED Talk, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action,"<sup>7</sup> more times than I can count. It's one of the profound ones. To understand his *why* principle better, I got the book he developed from the talk, *Start with Why*.<sup>8</sup> I was disappointed to find that the 438-minute audiobook provided very little, conceptually, that Simon didn't communicate in the eighteen-minute TED Talk. The profundity of the book was severely disproportionate to the TED Talk.

Steve Krug said communicators should, "Get rid of half the words on each page, then get rid of half what's left."<sup>9</sup> That's not a rule. It's supposed to make you think about how much you *need* to say versus what you *can* say. Most preaching books are 200-400 pages. If the average preaching book is 300 pages, the book you're consuming now should be significantly shorter and equally beneficial.

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<sup>7</sup> Simon Sinek, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action," TedX Pugit Sound, Newcastle, Washington, September 16, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Sinek, *Start with Why*. (London: Portfolio, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Steve Krug, *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* (California: New Riders Pub., 2006).

In his famous study on human memory, Professor of Psychology George A. Miller concluded that the average human could only hold seven things in their mind at any given time—plus or minus two. Miller’s conclusion is appropriately called *Miller’s Law*.

Where everyone is different, many can only balance five thoughts in their active memory at a time. To be inclusive, let’s focus on that groups of people. Our five-thought-thinkers are coming into churches, desperate to hear how Jesus radically can redevelop them to image God. Still, every point in the message competes with the five thoughts that already consume them.

I’ve often said, “It’s hard to say something profound in less than fifty minutes, and the Bible is profound.” Today I think that was an excuse for lazy preparation. Still, I’m often critical of TED-style sermons because they usually fail to say anything profound. They’ve learned to say less—which might be progress—but leave listeners with a shallow or incomplete version of the truth.

If our listeners are supposed to listen, hear, and engage, our ten-point messages will never compete with the five thoughts in their active memory. We need to focus on one simple and yet profound reality, pushing the grocery lists and ailing grandmothers to the side for just a moment so that we can effectively confront the validity of the human condition with the life-changing power of Jesus.

For this reason, I propose our first UX Communication Law, the Law of Minimal Data. Under this law, communicators should minimize the amount of information provided for listeners to understand a concept so they can understand it by the constraints of Miller’s Law. The **Law of Minimal Data** *reminds communicators to minimize the amount of data in a message to increase the listener's receptivity.*

#### THE BEAUTY OF SIMPLICITY

In the middle of our small-group study on the book of Revelation, a life-long elderly Christian woman told me, “You taught me to read the Bible again.” She was almost in tears.

This is why.

Thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian Friar William of Occam focused his life’s work on the defense of divine miracles. Defending the supernatural is an area of apologetics that continues to be necessary inside and outside the church today. William argued that we should not needlessly multiply *things*. Occam’s Razor is used normatively in the soft sciences and philosophy to prioritize theories. Occam’s Razor is so named because it is used to sheer off excess fluff, leaving the barren truth exposed to be consumed by all. The UX Communication law, the Law of Precise Argumentation, utilizes Occam’s Razor to encourage us to say no more than is required to not detract from our main point. **The Law of Precise Argumentation** *is an expositional tool used to formulate theological conclusions based on the most rational and apparent datasets.*

Jesus was concerned that the religious leaders of his day multiplied words in public prayer to draw attention to themselves (and thus away from God).<sup>10</sup> I estimate that *some* preachers today do the same, but *most* follow their tradition without giving much thought to how beneficial their preaching style is. Preachers have traditionally preached long messages as if the practice guarantees you have communicated something profound and life-changing. It does not. Biblical literacy levels among Western Christians are evidence.

When there are competing theories, the theory that flows most simply from the text is most likely correct. We are drawn to the interpretation with the fewest steps, assumptions, or complexities. We should also communicate as precisely as possible for the same reasons.

For example, William of Occam applied his Razor to the topic of divine action. He observed that divine action is explicit in the Bible and should nullify critical theories that argue otherwise. “Cut the fluff,” William might say, “If you believe the Bible, then miracles are real.”

Modern theology has become so complicated that it has birthed an elitist group of theological experts—scholars, clergymen, and self-proclaimed internet theologians—who weave endless looms of theological meanderings, leaving their listeners in awe of their massive intellect. Their five-thought listeners have no hope of understanding the argument’s depth and are left to follow blindly. The teacher says the Bible requires faith—you don’t have to understand it; you just have to believe it (read, ‘believe me,’ a philosophical concept called anti-intellectualism).

Subtext: *Leave the thinking to the experts.*

As a result, biblical literacy is at an all-time low. One Pew Research study showed that over half of American Christians rarely read the Bible.<sup>11</sup> Another Lifeway Research study showed that only 20% had ever read the whole thing.<sup>12</sup>

*Why? Isn't our faith the historic faith of the Apostles and Prophets who wrote the Bible?*

Although 86% of pastors in protestant traditions and many clergymen in other traditions give out free Bibles to encourage their congregations to read them, contemporary Christians have delegated the task of biblical learning to the professionals.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 23:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, already mentioned.

<sup>11</sup> Pew Research Center, “Frequency of reading scripture,” <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-reading-scripture/>

<sup>12</sup> Lifeway Research, “Lifeway Research: Americans Are Fond of the Bible, Don’t Actually Read It,” <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/04/25/lifeway-research-americans-are-fond-of-the-bible-dont-actually-read-it/>

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* Note: Another form of anti-intellectualism occurs when people believe they can read the Bible and understand it as it is written, in their English translation, without any context or training to understand the ancient world. The Bible was written for us, but not to us, and not in our context. So, we need more than to simply read. We need teachers. But, we need teachers who can teach us to read the Bible accurately.

I realize that every tradition and church has a different view on the professionalism of their religious leaders. But, we all have them to some degree. And all of us so-called professionals need to take out Occam's Razor to slice and dice our teaching to make it accessible to the everyday five-thought Christians in our assemblies. They will see the truth for themselves in the scriptures and grow in confidence to read and understand it. The way you teach will teach them to read the Bible again. The Law of Precise Argumentation will help your hearers to see the truth flow from the text.

In other words, cut the proverbial bologna and make your point.

But don't cut too much!

#### THE NEED FOR COMPLEXITY

The one-point-sermon has been a fad in contemporary churches for more than a few years. It's not a new idea. There's a difference between a sermon and a homily in some traditions. A homily is a ten-to-fifteen-minute talk on a single biblical principle, and a sermon is an extended exposition of a passage of scripture. Some historical church traditions practice only the homily. Others practice only the sermon. Some practice both a homily and an extended sermon, depending on the setting. Since the Reformation, Protestant churches have mostly rejected the homily idea, emphasizing comprehensive exposition as the only acceptable means for preaching God's Word.

There is something to behold in both methods. The homily is about communication. The sermon is about exposing the truth of the scriptures. The homily follows the topic. The expository sermon follows the text.

Here's the rub: the biblical authors weaved an intricate pattern of suppositions and ideas together to make a point. Expository preachers have to develop all of the suppositions, most of which were common knowledge for the original audience. The expository preacher can then get to the implications and applications the listeners need for Christian living today. On the other hand, the homiletical preacher can dodge many suppositions and get straight to the point. The downside is that the hearers won't have the full context for how the speaker derived the point from the biblical text.

Five-thought listeners can't hold all of the expository preacher's notes in their head all at once, so they don't get much more than the main point (if that). Most of the actual exposition is lost. Hopefully, the hearers of both get the main point. At least the homily saves some time.

*What if we want our hearers to understand the point and the text?*

The Law of Prägnanz can help. The Gestaltists are a German group of psychologists who study groups and grouping (gestalt, meaning ‘group’ in German). The Law of Prägnanz is the fundamental law of Gestalt Psychology from which the Gestaltists derive many other principles. The Gestaltists observed that when individuals perceive the world around them, they intuitively eliminate unfamiliarity. Thus, individuals understand the world as a simplified whole. Rather than study every aspect of the world to see the world as it is, the human brain simplifies the picture to what it can understand, filtering out what it cannot synthesize as irrelevant information.

When you go shopping, you see dozens, if not hundreds, of people. In a full day of shopping, you may run into five people that you know from various places in your life. You return home to your family and exclaim, “You’ll never believe who I ran into at the store!” Never once have you returned home to spin a tail of all the people you observed but never met or engaged. You don’t speculate about their lives or follow them around, trying to derive meaning (we call that stalking, and it’s illegal). You don’t even recall seeing them by the time you get to the car. Forgetting all the faces, you distill the entire engagement down to the five individuals you know. You do so without considering it at all. That is the Law of Prägnanz.

In public speaking, we place so many *ideas* before our hearers that they have never *met* before. They have no context or prior knowledge, and thus their minds attempt to simplify the complex world into a coherent whole. The brain filters out much of what the speaker says, clinging tightly to *the few simple truths* they can hold in their minds. They push aside the five competing thoughts they began with and wait for you to get to your belabored point. Speakers use notes, books, computers, and other technologies to organize the talk, but we demand our listeners hold it all in five one-point buckets in their active memory. It hardly seems fair.

*What if, in saying less, they could understand more?*

Prägnanz means *pithiness* and refers to the economy or frugality of words. People will perceive and interpret ambiguous and complex images in the simplest form possible. They will take your many *lines* of reasoning and form them into *shapes* they recognize. (You are doing this right now.) This formation strategy is your brain’s default mode because it requires the least cognitive effort.

If you have ever felt that your hearers did not understand your point and walked away with the wrong application, this is why. They formed the lines of thought into shapes they could recognize, not into the shape you thought you were drawing. It might be similar but rarely accurate. The UX Communication Law, the **Law of Simple Language**, encourages us to *use simple language and illustrations as much as possible without being vague or patronizing*. In UX Communication, it’s best to use simple language and illustrations as much as possible without introducing ambiguity so that the hearer can intuitively follow the logic.

When we apply the law to our preaching, we draw more precise lines with closer contact points so that listeners can make more apparent connections. Then the shape they form in their mind is a nearer representation of the shape we presented.

As communicators, we care about how the brain interprets speech because the interpretation is what our hearers will believe—we want them to have the conviction we tried to communicate, not something else.<sup>14</sup> And we want them to remember it on Tuesday and next week. You can teach a complex idea if you teach complex concepts frugally, using the simplest forms and shortest paths. In a sense, you can have the homily and the sermon.

#### THE ART OF SIMPLE COMPLEXITY

My wife and I were at Costco recently, perusing this and that and picking up a few groceries. I always have corn tortillas in the house. We may purchase flour tortillas for wraps, burritos, and larger quesadillas as a treat. We try to keep our carb and gluten intakes lower than the average American, but we still enjoy them occasionally.

We happened across an aisle with various tortilla alternatives. Dreaming that larger tortillas could become a common household item, we put the cheese-based tortillas in the cart. Only moments later, we replaced them with cauliflower tortillas—a decision I wholeheartedly regret to this day.

Much like a flour tortilla, the deceptively named *cauli-flour* tortilla is a mix of various ingredients, pressed out into a flatbread, precooked, and packaged for your convenience. However, it tastes nothing like a tortilla. It doesn't even feel like a tortilla, and it ruined my burrito!

Ontologically, tortillas require plain, white flour. Flour is composed of specific proteins and compounds necessary to make a flour tortilla. You can add spinach or sun-dried tomatoes to fancy it up if that's your thing. But you can't cut the flour. When you do, it becomes something else, entirely.

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<sup>14</sup> Often churchgoers and pastors say things like *What did you get out of the message today?* or sounding more spiritual, *What did God reveal to you today?* as if God has a hidden message for each listener that may be more important than the message itself. This might be a strategy for gauging their congregation's comprehension. But, what people hear is often not at all what the preacher intended. That should be a huge red flag for the communicator. If you're okay with the variance, that is by definition, postmodern liberalism.

I believe God will use whatever truth is present in the text to disciple his people. But as a speaker, you should be very concerned if the UX is so bad that your people don't even hear what you say. You should be bothered if your audience comprehends a different message than you intended. If they make *extra* connections that are biblical, that is fantastic and a sign of growth in spiritual maturity. But, they better get your main point first.

Larry Tesler was a Xerox employee in the '80s. He recognized that a Xerox machine's function was equally important as the way a user would interact with it. Tesler believed that the engineers should make the machines easier to use, so users don't have to study a lengthy user-manual. He shifted liabilities onto the designer so the user could increase production. Similarly, I would shift liability for understanding from the hearer to the speaker in what I call the **Law of Necessary Complexity**. This law challenges us to *maintain necessary complexities by not oversimplifying the message with vague or reductionistic doctrines or applications*. In UX Communication, communicators know not to sacrifice their big idea to produce a clearer or more concise meaning.

We've already unpacked the need to simplify the message. Tesler agreed but theorized there will always be a measure of complexity in a system that you can't abandon. In UX Design, this is called Tesler's Law. If a machine becomes too easy to use, it won't perform any significant purpose. *What good is a copy machine that has been simplified to the point it can only make one type of copy?* When simplicity becomes reductionism, it comes off as condescending and loses flavor, value, and purpose. Humans are complex creatures who love complexity. Ironically, we need simplicity to learn, but we need complexity to grow.

*Complexity is not the opposite of simplicity, but it can be its enemy.*

In communication, we require a certain amount of complexity to say anything worth hearing. Too many three-points-and-a-prayer preachers fail to effectively instruct their congregations because they truncate the Bible's story and its theological motifs from the message. They leave behind a subpar homily of humanistic principles, which is not the purpose of biblical preaching whatsoever.

We can apply the Law of Necessary Complexity to our preaching by maintaining a traditional exegetical foundation like you would prepare for a conventional expository sermon. I don't intend this book to be a seminary class where I teach you how to exegete a text and transmit theologically consistent ideals. You do, you. However, I want to encourage you to handle your exegetical work in a new way to communicate complexity in the simplest forms.

The Law of Precise Argumentation teaches us to narrow the scope of our theological development to its simplest form. The Law of Simple Language encourages us to use precise and straightforward grammar and words. The Law of Necessary Complexity creates balance to ensure you don't oversimplify.

My final thought for this chapter is to ask, *How do I simply and precisely communicate complex truths?* The story of the Bible is immense. *How can I provide enough context?* Systematic theologies are developed across the whole of scripture and by countless historical theologians. *How can I prove the complex doctrines simply and coherently?*

This isn't a new struggle for preachers. Preachers are, after all, theologians. We have years, most of us decades, of theological development, undergirded by countless hours of biblical exploration. I want you to realize how long it has taken you to gain understanding so that you will come to the conviction that your hearers will need more time to learn than you can provide them in a single message.

I don't intend to answer my above questions in this chapter, just to ask them. We will explore more UX Communication Laws that will answer the questions more fully in future chapters. In this way, you will teach complex truths using simple methods. Your notes will be thinner. The pressure will be lighter. The conditions for learning and inspiration will be set on high so that your preaching effectiveness will be greater. Your messages won't be condescendingly simplistic; neither will your content be out of reach. The UX principles we've considered through this chapter may not help you make Anna Karenina into a TED Talk. But they will help you increase comprehension and retention while saying less. This is the art of profound simplicity in preaching.

#### EXERCISE

Locate the manuscript or transcript for the last talk or sermon you wrote. If you don't have one, I highly recommend hiring someone to transcribe one for you. There are also free transcription tools that may help with this exercise, although they won't get every word right. Or, after reading the following questions, give the message a fresh listen, answering the questions on the spot and estimating word counts as best you can.

1. How many words was the talk?
2. How many minutes was the talk?
3. What was the single big idea of the talk?
4. How many points were in the talk?
5. How necessary do you feel each point's details were to developing the big idea? Why?
6. If I asked you to give the same talk at a conference next week, but in half the time, what would you cut out with Occam's Razor?
7. How much are you asking your listeners to hold in their minds at once? Trace one line of thought through the talk, counting the individual pieces of data they will need to store in their active memory to understand your point. Recall from the chapter that your hearers can only hold onto five single ideas at a time
8. How many layers of complexity are in the talk? If you had to choose one line of thought to develop to make a single point, what line of thinking would that be?
9. When the listener doesn't understand the speaker or understands the wrong thing, it's usually a flaw in the communicator's design. How will this reality shape the way you craft future talks?
10. As a communicator, is your trend too much complexity or too much simplicity? What is one thing you can implement immediately into your communication strategy to move towards profound simplicity?



## *Appendix A*

This Appendix is a concise list of the 22 UX Design Laws addressed in the book, presented alongside the complimentary UX Communication Laws I proposed for Public Speaking and Preaching. Each UX Design Law and UX Communication Law is given with its explanation to illustrate the law's applicability despite the technicality of the subject matter.

### *1.*

#### **UX Design Law: Aesthetic Usability Effect**

Users perceive aesthetically pleasing designs as more functional, easier to use, or more pleasant to use. The perceived usefulness is more motivational than actual benefit. That is, what a user expects trumps what the user needs.

In UX Design, this means consumers appreciate products, not based on their actual usefulness, so much as the aesthetics of the product and marketing, even when the product is inferior in function.

#### **UX Communication Law: Law of Aesthetic Representation**

Evaluate your aesthetic perception according to all five senses, including how audiences perceive you and your organization before and during the message.

In UX Communication, this means audiences appreciate messages, not based on the value of the message contents, so much as the aesthetics of the presentation and the presenter.

### *2.*

#### **UX Design Law: Doherty Threshold**

Productivity increases dramatically when a computer and its operator interact at speeds above 400 milliseconds per interaction. Slower computers result in distractions, lack of focus, and decreased productivity. Faster computing allows users and operators to interact at roughly the same rate.

In UX Design, applications should rapidly and regularly provide engagements to hold the user's attention.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Listener Engagement**

Maintain engagement at all times, at all costs.

In UX Communication, speakers must maintain engagement at all times, and the message must continually progress to hold the listener's attention.

3.

**UX Design Law: *Fitts' Law***

The size of a target and its distance affect the time required to hit the target. A larger target is easier to hit. Likewise, the target is easier to hit if it is closer. An individual action must be obvious enough to observe and comfortable enough to grasp.

In UX Design, an element's function must be obvious based on its characteristics. The process itself must be easy enough to execute to maintain productivity.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Clarity and Attainability**

Speak clearly, concisely, and thoroughly.

In UX Communication, a speaker must place the target within reach by clearly defining the boundaries of the concept the speaker is trying to convey. The speaker should simplify the idea as much as possible without redefining it to make the concept easy to grasp.

4.

**UX Design Law: *Hick's Law***

The number and complexity of choices affect the amount of time it takes to decide. Increased options and complexity result in a higher cognitive load and a longer time to make decisions. Therefore, decisions should have minimal options.

In UX Design, the designer should minimize options on an interface to increase productivity.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Minimal Application**

Focus on one or a few specific applications.

In UX Communication, the speaker should minimize applications to increase one or a few applications' effectiveness.

5.

**UX Design Law: Jakob's Law**

Users spend most of their time with other applications. Therefore, your application needs to meet the expectations of their reality. Expectations are difficult to change. Therefore, a UX approach requires discernment to apply your application to the user's expectations to be sensitive to the user's prior experience.

In UX Design, a design should follow standard formats when present to stay in line with the user's expectations and follow patterns present in similar applications to make processes intuitive to learn.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Cultural Communication**

Use the language and communication patterns of your audience.

In UX Communication, a message should follow language and communication patterns present in the broader culture, so much as they can handle the content.

6.

**UX Design Law: Law of Common Region**

Elements tend to be perceived in groups if they share an area with a clearly defined boundary. Elements in proximity are perceived to have an ideological tie.

In UX Design, a user will perceive elements grouped in an identifiable design space as holding a similar purpose in the overall design.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Audible Cues**

Use audible cues to create clear boundaries for ideas and arguments that are difficult to grasp.

In UX Communication, listeners will perceive statements made in proximity to be related even if the content is not intrinsically linked.

7.

**UX Design Law: Law of Prägnanz**

People will perceive and interpret ambiguous or complex images in the simplest form possible because the most straightforward interpretation requires the least cognitive effort. Therefore, a designer will convey complex ideas best using the simplest forms possible.

In UX Design, it's best to use the plainest images and iconography possible without introducing ambiguity so the user can intuitively follow processes.

**UX Communication Law: *Law of Simple Language***

Use simple language and illustrations as much as possible without being vague or patronizing.

In UX Communication, it's best to use simple language and illustrations as much as possible without introducing ambiguity so that the hearer can intuitively follow the logic.

8.

**UX Design Law: Law of Proximity**

Designers group together objects near or proximate to each other because objects in proximity tend to ideologically similar and share a purpose.

In UX Design, designers make an intentional effort to identify design space boundaries to make the purpose and ideological similarity apparent.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Concept Grouping**

Keep the implication and application of a concept in proximity to the concept's development.

In UX Communication, communicators intentionally craft ideologically similar concepts into the narrative's same movement.

9.

**UX Design Law: Law of Similarity**

The human eye tends to perceive similar design elements as a complete picture, shape, or group, even if those elements are separated. Similarity and repetition create an ideological tie between elements, even when they are not nearby.

In UX Design, designers utilize the Law of Similarity to draw the users' attention across design spaces through repetition, similarity, and progression.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Complex Narrative**

Layer the historic, meta, and contemporary narratives and line up concepts (cf. Law 8) to move listeners through a single complex storyline.

In UX Communication, communicators can craft complex narratives to draw listeners' attention forward using repetition, similarity, and progression.

10.

**UX Design Law: Law of Uniform Connectedness**

Users perceive visually connected elements as more related than elements with no connection. Sensory connections create ideological connections.

In UX Design, designers create relationships between otherwise distinct functions and concepts through visual connection.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Repetition and Similarity**

Use repetition, similarity, and audible cues to create connection points between ideas that may not otherwise intuitively fit together.

In UX Communication, communicators create relationships between otherwise distinct ideas by creating audible connection points.

11.

**UX Design Law: *Miller's Law***

The average person can only keep seven (plus or minus two) items in their working memory. A designer can never expect a user to hold more than five things in their active memory at a time, even though some people can handle up to nine.

In UX Design, designers minimize user interface data to increase ease of use and intuitive function.

**UX Communication Law: *Law of Minimal Data***

Minimize the amount of information you need to provide for listeners to understand a concept.

In UX Communication, communicators minimize the amount of data required to understand a concept to increase listeners' receptivity.

12.

**UX Design Law: *Occam's Razor***

When comparing hypotheses of equal predictability, the one with the fewest assumptions is likely the most accurate or useful. The simplest solution or explanation is often, if not always, correct or best.

In UX Design, designers are careful to add design elements with the most straightforward procedures or pathways of communication.

### **UX Communication Law: Law of Precise Argumentation**

Avoid overly complex theological or philosophical concepts, focusing on precise and concise arguments or explanations to support your thesis.

In UX Communication, communicators are careful to use the most precise and concise arguments and explanations to increase the perception of accuracy and the probability that the understanding is correct.

*13.*

### **UX Design Law: Pareto Principle**

Roughly 80% of effects come from 20% of causes. There are a few primary variables that affect the majority of outcomes.

In UX Design, designers will focus user attention on the variables they believe will produce the most significant effects.

### **UX Communication Law: Law of Mass Changeability**

Focus on topics, ideas, and arguments that will produce the most heart and mind change in most listeners.

UX communicators focus on topics, ideas, and arguments that will optimize heart and mind change for most listeners.

*14.*

### **UX Design Law: Parkinson's Law**

Tasks inflate until you spend all of the available time. Smaller units of time and space require you to prioritize using time and space to be more efficient and productive.

In UX Design, designers choose appropriate elements for a canvas to scale the content to the product specifications.

### **UX Communication Law: Law of Content Scalability**

Scale your message content to present a volume of information appropriate for your time-slot.

In UX Communication, communicators choose information and structure for their message based on the amount of time they can speak.

*15.*

### UX Design Law: *Peak-End Rule*

People judge experiences by how they felt at the peak and ends rather than the average experience. The beginning, end, and peak moments of an experience are more memorable and valuable to the individual than the rest.

In UX Design, designers spend more time on the first elements and the last elements the user will experience, and the climactic or most functional piece.

### UX Communication Law: *Law of Peak Engagement*

Spend more time crafting your message's introduction, conclusion, and climax.

In UX Communication, communicators spend more time crafting their introduction and conclusions and the message's pivotal moment.

16.

### UX Design Law: *Postel's Law*

Be liberal in what you accept and conservative in what you output.

In UX Design, designers anticipate user needs and misconceptions in the way they input data but try to produce standardized forms in what they output.

### **UX Communication Law:** Law of Empathetic Communication

Anticipate variance in the ways people hear and communicate, but produce a message that speaks to all despite different communication styles.

In UX Communication, communicators anticipate user needs and misconceptions when crafting a message. Still, communicators don't require listeners to do the same, producing standardized forms of clear communication in the way they speak.

17.

### **UX Design Law:** Serial Position Effect

Users have a propensity to remember the first and last items in a series better than others. Position essential information in the extremities of a dataset.

In UX Design, designers position the most critical information and functions as the first things a user will see or experience and the last to increase data retention.

### **UX Communication Law:** Law of Critical Information

Introduce the ‘Big Idea’ in the message’s introduction and restate the application in the conclusion.

In UX Communication, communicators will provide the big idea in the introduction and the takeaway or application in the message's conclusion.

18.

**UX Design Law: *Tesler’s Law***

There is a certain amount of complexity for any system that designers cannot reduce without changing the nature of the message or design. Users can misconstrue simplicity as minimalism. Therefore complexity cannot be oversimplified to diminish the value of a design.

In UX Design, designers know not to sacrifice the message or usefulness of a design to produce a simpler product.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Necessary Complexity**

Maintain necessary complexities by not oversimplifying the message with vague or reductionistic beliefs and applications.

In UX Communication, communicators know not to sacrifice depth of meaning to produce a clearer or more concise message.

19.

**UX Design Law: The Isolation Effect (Von Restorff Effect)**

When multiple similar objects are present, the different one is most likely to be remembered. Designers offset objects or ideas that follow the same pattern with a single dissimilar item, which aids recollection or draws attention.

In UX Design, designers use variants in predictable patterns to draw users' attention to essential elements such as a call-to-action.

**UX Communication Law: Law of Accenting Variants**

Increase engagement of critical information and concepts by varying word choices, vocal inflection, and body language.

In UX Communication, communicators will use audible and textual variants to increase engagement during significant moments in the message.

20.

### **UX Design Law: Zeigarnik Effect**

People remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks. Unfinished tasks or vague ideas restrict the users' ability to think effectively because of the cognitive payload of incomplete tasks.

In UX Design, designers complete datasets and communication pathways to increase the usability and perceptibility of products and designs.

### **UX Communication Law: Law of Stream of Thought**

Maintain a single stream of thought from the beginning to the end of the message to increase applicability and receptibility.

In UX Communication, communicators maintain a concise stream of thought to increase applicability and response to the message.

21.

### **UX Design Law: Butterfly Effect**

A small change to initial conditions in a deterministic nonlinear system can produce significant differences in later development stages. Further changes, however insignificant, often affect later development stages in even more dramatic ways.

UX designers are aware of seemingly insignificant design elements that affect the overall perception to produce dramatic effects at the end of a user's experience.

### **UX Communication Law: Law of Compounded Inconsistencies**

Maintain an awareness of minor inconsistencies in the data's presentation that may compound, causing confusion later on.

UX communicators are aware of seemingly insignificant statements or abnormalities in their communication content or style that result in misunderstanding or affect the user's receptivity, leaving them unconvinced or unmotivated at the end of the message.

NOTE: The Butterfly Effect stands in a degree of contrast to the Pareto Principle that challenges communicators to focus on the 20% of causes that produce 80% of effects. These are not conflicting ideas as the Butterfly Effect is responsible for the impact of the 80% of causes passively introduced by the design process. For example, you may not consider every mood that may be triggered when generating a color scheme (The Butterfly Effect). Still, suppose you are trying to anger your audience by exploiting a political foible. In that case, you may intentionally use the color red to highlight particular elements or calls to action in your design (The Pareto Principle).

**UX Design Law: Eisenhower Principle**

Urgent tasks tend to be less critical, whereas ultimate tasks tend to be less urgent. The essential things in life tend to be more abstract and take longer to accomplish, conveying a lack of production; however, the contrary is often the reality.

In UX Design, designers should prioritize their time around their long-term goals for their users, not allowing their time to be consumed by insignificant changes to usability and perceived function.

**UX Communication Law: *Law of Ultimacy***

Choose to speak on ultimate topics that produce long-lasting life-change rather than trivial subjects that might be more immediately applicable or merely interesting.

In UX Communication, communicators should leverage their speaking time to produce convictions that produce long-lasting life-change, not insignificant changes that distract the listener from ultimate realities.

NOTE: Although the Eisenhower Principle is not in any list of UX Design Laws that I am aware of, it is of primary importance for UX Communicators who choose their topics and the direction of their messages. Customer demands often constrain design projects for other types of designers. However, communicators usually have the freedom to evaluate their projects' ultimacy and are encouraged to do so.