

LONG TERM

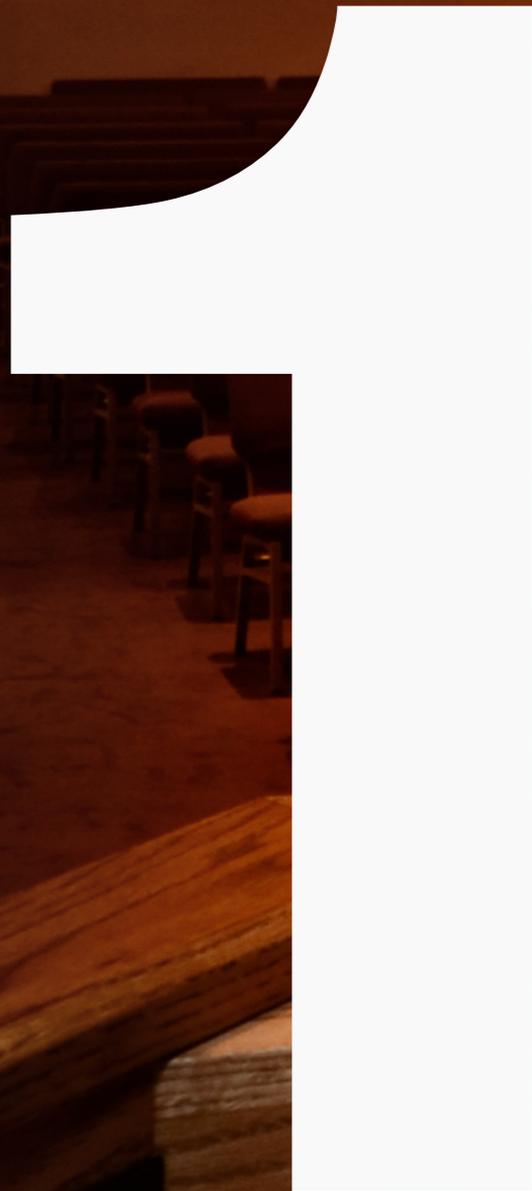
Sermon Planning

How To Prepare A Year's Worth of Sermons

Pastor Scott Wendal

One of the Most Difficult Jobs I Do Every Year

It's a privilege and a challenge to preach to the same people week after week.



Without a doubt, one of the most difficult things I do every year as a pastor is spending two weeks in November preparing a preaching schedule for the following year. Without a doubt one of the most important things I do every year is an annual preaching schedule. The quality of the messages is greatly impacted by that advance planning. I have had a couple of pastors ask me, “How can God lead you what to preach 10 months from now?” Answer – “God can lead me in long-term sermon preparation in the same way He can lead me to preach next Sunday’s sermon!” Long-term sermon planning does not hinder being flexible or sensitive when national disasters or church family crisis arise. Long-term sermon planning is work – hard work! It takes a great deal of prayer, concentration, and meditation. Yet, a settled peace will come to your heart and God’s power to your pulpit as you allow Him to lead and guide this effort.

Feeding the Flock Every Week

In the British Weekly called the “Glass Window” this provocative letter was published:

“It seems ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I have been attending church quite regularly for 30 years and I have probably heard 3,000 of them. To my consternation, I discovered I cannot remember a single sermon. I wonder if a minister's time might be more profitable spent on something else?”

For weeks a storm of editorial responses ensued... finally ended by this letter:

“I have been married for 30 years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals--mostly my wife's cooking. Suddenly I have discovered I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet,... I have the distinct impression that without them, I would have starved to death long ago. I received nourishment from every single meal.”

The Rev. Dr. Robert South, while preaching one day in 1689, looked up from his notes to observe that his entire congregation was fast asleep--including the King! Appropriately mortified by this discovery, he interrupted his sermon to call out, "Lord Lauderdale, rouse yourself. You snore so loudly that you will wake the King."

It’s a privilege and a challenge to preach to the same people week after week. I have preached in the same church for almost 27 years. That’s 27 Christmas and Easter messages; 27 Mother’s Day and Father’s Day messages, and many of those people have been in our church over 2 decades. Yet, everyone expects (rightly so) something fresh each week. One pastor wrote, “church members expect pastors to preach the finest sermons in town, and when one weekend’s message is completed, it’s time to start work on the next one. It’s like giving birth on Sunday; then on Monday finding out you’re pregnant again!”

Three times Jesus Christ told Peter, “Feed my Sheep” (John 21:15-17). The Lord is still calling pastors, missionaries, and Sunday school teachers to “feed His Sheep.” If we do not sit down and do some praying and planning, the sheep are going to go hungry.

Declaring the Whole Counsel of God

During the first five years of pastoring in PA, I had a dilemma of how to spend my time.



Paul told the pastors from Ephesus, “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). For three and one-half years Paul systematically taught the Scriptures in Ephesus. In Acts 20, Paul calls for a meeting of the pastors from Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. In 200,9 my wife and I had the privilege to tour Miletus. As we stood in that theatre that held 18,000 people, our tour guide explained how this was the place where tens of thousands of Christians had lost their lives. I felt that this stage had been sanctified by the blood of the martyrs - martyrs who were descendants of the pastors who Paul was speaking to here in Acts 20. As the group wandered around to take pictures, I found a quiet spot to pray and thank God for these faithful men and women who gave their lives for Jesus Christ. I asked the Lord for the same grace and endurance and fortitude NOT to quit all the days of my life. God gave them grace to give an all-out effort to die for the Lord. May God give us the same grace to give all our effort to live for the Lord for decades, if God wills it.

Without a doubt, one of the greatest challenges I face every week is preparing 3 or 4 sermons in a week. I am unable to prepare a sermon “fast.” I am unable to preach from a brief outline. If you can, God bless you. I wish I could, but I can’t. I basically prepare a manuscript sermon. That takes time! The biggest thing that helps my pulpit ministry is “Long-term Sermon Planning.”

Paul did not have a wife and children. We do. And he told us who are married, in Ephesians, I Timothy, & I Corinthians, that we must take time to lead our wives and children as spiritual leaders of our home. If we fail to do this, we can actually be disqualified from ministry.

During the first five years of pastoring in PA, I had a dilemma of how to spend my time. I was teaching and preaching 4 times a week. It takes me anywhere from 4-10 hours to prepare a message. You do the math, that leaves little time for much else – bookkeeping, visitation, bulletin, tracts, counseling, etc.

Here was my dilemma – if I didn’t go visiting and follow up on every possible contact, I would have no one to preach to on Sundays. If I didn’t spend time preparing, I wouldn’t have anyone return after his first visit.

My biggest struggle to this day is time management – balancing the time between family and ministry.

Peter commands pastors, “Feed the flock of God” (I Peter 5:2). I believe a healthy combination of topical and expository sermons can be both balanced and Biblical. What is the result? Spiritually healthy sheep will reproduce themselves! One third of our congregation

in Valley Forge is made up of former Catholics. The most common comment they make after a month or two is “I have learned more of the Bible in one month or two, than I have learned my entire life.” Of course, the difference is now they have the Holy Spirit of God leading them into all truth as they hear the Word of God both taught and preached.

Expository Preaching or Topical Preaching? ... YES!

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I find it interesting that many ministerial students are being taught “how to preach” by men who have “never preached” more than a Bible class or seminary chapel. As we study the Scriptures, we discover that most of the recorded sermons in the New Testament were topical sermons. Even some of the most famous authors of today who are known for their expository preaching also depart from that schedule to preach topical series. We do a great disservice to God’s people to not preach topical series such as the gifts of the Spirit, stewardship and giving, marriage, parenting, addictions, social issues, etc.

May our long-term sermon preparation reflect both expository and topical preaching.

1. Expository Preaching

*“So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”
Nehemiah 8:8*

“Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.” I Timothy 4:13

2. Topical Preaching

Most of the recorded sermons in the Bible are topical.

A. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount • Matthew 5-7

B. Peter’s message on Pentecost • Acts 2

C. Stephen’s message before his Persecutors • Acts 7

(Stephen preached through the OT in one chapter and ended at the cross)

D. Paul’s famous sermon on Mars’ Hill, Acts 17

3. Planning your Preaching Year

- A. Plan a combination of Expository and Topical Messages for the year
- B. Take a calendar and put in all Special Days and Holidays
- C. Plan your calendar with the Lord's Supper (for example, every two months)
- D. Create a digital file and/or file drawer folder on your computer and in your desk for each series
 - 1. Turn that junk mail into sermon illustrations.
 - 2. Publicly give credit to the source/church member.
 - 3. Check out junk email through snopes.com and urbanlegends.com.
 - 4. Review the topics and sermon titles of the expository messages.
like a magnet your mind will see insights and illustrations.

I heard news commentator Paul Harvey tell the story of the man who was president for a day. I did not use the illustration until I preached an expository series through the book of Hebrews. When I preached on Hebrews 10:25, out came this illustration.

“Anybody know the name of the man who was president for a day? President James Polk spent his last day as president on March 3, 1849, and at midnight, Polk was out of office. But his successor, General Zachary Taylor, a staunch church-goer, refused to be sworn in on March 4, 1849 because it was a Sunday. Taylor said, “Going to church was a higher priority than becoming president of the United States.” He postponed his inauguration until Monday, March 5. So for one day, US Senator David Atchison of Missouri, was “president pro tempore” of the United States. Can you think of anything more important than becoming president of the United States? Zachary Taylor could – it was going to church.”

I have waited more than 10 years to tell you this story about the man who became president for a day. “

It was unforgettable. The point was well made – “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together....”

E. Create a file for future holidays

I just preached my 26th Christmas message. Don't feel guilty for finding sermon starters and ideas from others (www.sermoncentral.com, etc). Paul also read widely. In fact on two occasions you will find him quoting the unsaved poets of his day to illustrate Biblical truth (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12). If the apostle Paul, on occasion, was reading literature from unsaved writers, then quoting it and incorporating it as a part of Holy Scripture, then I find no reason not to read and allow the Lord to use those thoughts to help my congregation.

1. Sermon Seeds File – from Bible reading, other messages, etc.
2. Future Holiday File

F. Mentor laymen to teach and delegate teaching Sunday school

For ten years I taught and preached four times a week – Sunday school, Sunday AM, Sunday PM and our mid-week services. In my tenth year of preaching as a pastor, I lost my wife to cancer. After a year's battle with cancer, I was exhausted in every way. I asked 10 laymen to teach their favorite Psalm in Sunday school. For ten weeks those laymen ministered to me in the most wonderful way. After that I began sharing the SS hour regularly - until now, with double services, I rarely teach during the SS hour.

My mistake – I should have invited those men to use their teaching gifts sooner.

The Benefits of Long Term Sermon Planning

*And whatsoever ye do, do
it heartily, as to the Lord,
and not unto men.
Colossians 3:23*

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1. A Quality Pulpit Ministry

“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.” Colossians 3:23

2. A More Organized Pulpit Ministry

“Let all things be done decently and in order.” I Corinthians 14:40

3. Crock Pot Messages vs. Micro Wave Messages

Sunday afternoons about 1pm we arrive home; there is normally a delicious aroma permeating the house upon stepping inside. You see my wife plans ahead. On Saturday night she gets something frozen out of the freezer and lets it thaw all night. On Sunday morning she is up early and she prepares a roast with potatoes and carrots or chicken simmering in some kind of delicious cream sauce. When we arrive home at 1pm, I am starving. When we return home after a long morning of services, I am ready to eat. But once we get a “wiff” of the flavor in the air, we can’t wait.

In contrast, when I lost my wife to cancer, I was a single dad with two boys. After receiving many meals from the church family, I was finally on my own. Well, not completely. Two pastors’ wives would make me 15 entrees and freeze them. My job was simply thaw and cook. Saturday night I was busy getting my small sons bathed and reviewing my notes. The last thing on my mind was Sunday dinner. So after double services, I would arrive home with the boys, starving. “Go change your clothes,” I instructed as I would pull something out of the freezer and throw it in the microwave.” Unless you really are a microwave expert, the food comes out either cold, burnt, or tough.

I would sit down with my boys and we would eat the partially frozen entrée. My oldest son, Matt, asked me one day, “Dad, do you think we should have some vegetables?” “Yeah, great idea.” I’d get some corn or green beans and throw them in the microwave. We would eat in courses. We ate to survive, not for enjoyment.

After Jodie and I were married, she made her first Sunday dinner. Jeremy, who was 7, looked at her and said, “This is the best meal I have ever had in my life.” Planning makes a difference.

Now, when my children have friends over, they walk in the door and look at their friends and say, “Can you smell that? Doesn’t that smell good?” My children’s friends are asking Jodie to give recipes to their moms. At school lunch they swap stories of which food they like the best when they come to visit.

When you spend quality time on sermon preparation, God’s people will have the same attitude. “I have my family coming for a baptism or baby dedication. You are preaching, aren’t you? Or do we have guest preacher scheduled?” They are wanting a crockpot message.

I have often had people say to me things like...

“Did my friend tell you about me? Is that why you preached that?”

“Did my husband or wife call you this week?”

“How did you know my son or daughter needed that today?”

“That was perfect for what they are going through.”

I preached a prophecy series in the fall of 2009. The week before I was to speak on the antichrist, Thursday, Nov. 19th, 2009, the European Union elected to have its very first president, Herman Von Rompoy. Though not the antichrist, this is the position that will one day be held by the antichrist. I could not have timed it more perfectly. But I am not timing it, God is.

Appendix

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Below is a quote from an article that challenged me to set up folders for long-term sermon planning. Every November I take two weeks and concentrate on developing the sermon series for the following year. I set up three or four file folders for the upcoming series (Sunday AM; Sunday PM; SS; and Wednesday nights). I develop titles for those sermons. If it is expository, I choose the verses and sermon titles for the entire book. If it is a topical series, I list the titles for each message.

Having this preliminary planning done allows me to add thoughts, articles, news items, illustrations, etc.

What is the most common time management mistake Christian leaders make?

Not planning for tomorrow. The leader is so busy doing things he doesn't take any time to think about the future. Seldom does he realize that many of his problems can be solved by taking just 5 percent of his time to start working on the future.

Ted Engstrom:

One thing I'd do as a young pastor would be to keep an appointment book based on twenty-one increments of the week: morning, afternoon, and evening, seven days a week. Thinking in terms of those twenty-one units rather than every thirty minutes helps avoid being frustrated with the inevitable interruptions.

Ed Dayton:

The idea of having twenty-one units also helps you see how much work you're doing. Some pastors may be working twenty out of the twenty-one; that's obviously too much. Eighteen out of twenty-one is too much.

- Leadership Magazine "TIME", Spring, 1982.

Plan out a large number of sermons in advance. It doesn't matter whether you preach them in a sequence or not, but why not outline fifty sermons? Set up fifty file folders with subjects and rough outlines; then you've got a place to put ideas when they come to you.