

Preparing a Preaching Program

Preparing a long term preaching program is hard work. Is it worth all the effort? And where do you start? David Thurston investigates...

One of the biggest trials a preacher faces is deciding what to preach on next! The success or otherwise of one Sunday quickly evaporates as we're confronted with yet another Sunday and yet another Sermon. What will it be this time?

One way to overcome this stress is to develop a preaching program. It takes work, but it's worth it. You'll need to develop two phases - first, what books of the Bible (or perhaps topics) will you deal with? And secondly - how will you present the material itself?

The first stage requires knowing your people and knowing the Bible. Of course God knows your people better than you do, and He wrote His Word for them, so as long as you stick to that you can't go too far wrong. However in saying that, different books or letters have different emphases that may well correspond to issues that are alive in the minds and hearts of the congregation. The Old Testament needs to be balanced with the New, gospels with the letters, poetry with history. God has given us a rich and varied way of understanding his mind as it moves from promise to fulfilment in Jesus.

One of the patterns I've tried to hold to is to preach through the OT in its historical order. These would be interspersed with forays and excursions into the New Testament. One great advantage this gives is I don't have to give too much thought to what I am preaching on next in the OT. If I've just finished preaching three sermons on Leviticus I know in a couple of months time Deuteronomy will be on the blocks ready to start. It is a discipline that requires me to deal with material I might not otherwise choose, and personally to come to grips with God's big story as it unfolds.

This is incredibly helpful when it comes to preaching on the New Testament. I'll frequently do a short series using the Psalms in between two major books and even break a major book into two or three sections that might run over two years.

At times I'll also choose to do a particular topical series - for instance, a five week overview of the Bible, five weeks on major texts explaining the cross, or a series on temptation. These are infrequent but they add spice to the diet.

Now for stage two. You've decided what you'll be dishing up. But how are you going to serve it? Preparing a preaching program in advance is hard work - and like cooking, the preparation time takes a lot longer than the eating! What I try to have at the end of the preparation process is:

1. The book of the Bible I am to preach on divided into appropriate units or sections.
2. A sentence that summarises the big idea of each sermon.
3. The Title of the Sermon
4. The Bible Readings

Here's an example from a series on Galatians called "ONLY ONE WAY"

ONLY ONE WAY

Week 1 - Galatians 1:1-12

"No Other Gospel"

Bible Reading: Gal 1:1-12

There is only one genuine gospel although there are many counterfeits. Only the gospel brings life the counterfeits bring death and God's judgement.

Week 2 - Gal 1:11-2:10

"The Real Thing: Paul's Gospel"

Reading: Gal 1:11-2:10

Paul's Gospel has been given to him by God Himself, so it must not be changed.

Week 3 - Gal 2:11-21

"God's People, Law and Gospel"

Reading: Gal 2:11-21

The gospel about God's Son creates a new people of God with full membership rights because the membership fees are already paid by Christ. We cannot pay them by the Law. This truth must be defended.

Week 4 - Gal 3:1-14

"Go Back You're Going the Wrong Way"

Reading: Gal 3:1-14

The Gospel is all you need to become right with God and stay right with God. You are born by faith live by faith and die by faith. You must not start by faith and end with law.

Arriving at this stage of preparation means a great amount of work. By now, I have had to have read commentaries and articles, trying to understand the book and divide it up appropriately. You might be asking "Is all this work worth it, and when can I do it? It is worth it! And if I can convince you of that, the "When" factor won't seem so large. Here are some advantages:

You've already done three hours work on each sermon, so it takes less time during the year. You're also saving the time you used to spend wondering what you'll preach on!

This level of preparation is required if you want to effectively involve a greater number of people in the Sunday meetings. ie with this material given to appropriately gifted people others can be give plenty of time to prepare Kid's Talks, or fill in when you're on holidays, or recommend songs for the meeting, or pray with the text in mind, or train people to read the Bible and organise that intelligently in advance.

It means you can publish a term preaching program and people can read what you'll be preaching on as preparation before Sunday.

This gives some scope for your Bible Study groups to do the same material because they know it in advance.

Some may say preparing so far in advance loses some spontaneity. I haven't found this to be a problem. In fact it's amazing how often the preaching corresponds to issues in the paper or the congregations life.

When to prepare the program

At the end of one year and the beginning of another is the best time for me to start thinking about what I'll be preaching on. I plan to start the program proper in February and so most of January is devoted to the study of books and ideas and breaking up passages and coming

up with sentences and titles. But it may mean that if you know that next year you'll be dealing with Joshua then you'll be reading Woudstra in the NIOTC and Daniel L Hawk "Every Promised Fulfilled" the year before with a note book, so you are ready for January. Why not start work now on a first term preaching program for 1996?

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