

Encouragement

By Paul Prange

As I was listening to the conversation for this issue, it occurred to me how much value there is in planning sermons over a period of time rather than just week to week. As a church musician, I appreciate knowing what my pastor will preach on in advance so I have some time to prep the best organ music or have the choir practice music that really builds on the sermon in a given service. But even more, as a preacher myself, if I know some of the details of my sermons from week to week, I can avoid repetition, especially in seasons like End Times moving into Advent. And there is a pretty good opportunity for me to see the progression of thought in most series of texts, bridging the perceived gap between pericopic preaching and topical preaching. When I see the progression of thought, especially as it points to Jesus, I can help my listeners see that progression of thought as well, to their spiritual benefit.

The revised *Planning Christian Worship* gives thematic overviews for the seasons in Year A (available at the Worship Connect site).

I believe the conventional wisdom that time put into worship planning is never wasted. I hope that reading this issue encourages you to put in that time.

The Use of the Pericope

Pastor C: What do you guys think of topical preaching?

Pastor B: Do you mean preaching on a series of topics over a series of weeks rather than following the pericope?

C: That's what I'm talking about.

B: Besides midweek services in Advent and Lent, it's doable in the summer, but not during the festival part of the church year.

Pastor A: I have never felt good about it.

C: Have you ever tried it?

A: I don't even like it for those midweek services, although it seems to be unavoidable if you are in a rotation with other guys in your circuit for Lent.

C: I think it really works at almost any time in the church year. In fact, I think people really appreciate it during a season like Epiphany. It seems to help them remember that the Sundays are connected in some way.

A: That is the whole point of the pericope, that there is a progression.

B: That's why I stick with the pericope for my Sunday sermon texts during the festival part of the church year. I see a great deal of value in going through the life of Christ each year.

A: But you make an exception in the summer?

B: In my first year in the ministry, one of the veterans in my circuit said that his people really appreciated a summer series on a book of the Bible or a key person in the Old Testament. He gave us copies of his series of every summer, I used them, and I got the same positive feedback from my people.

A: You really wouldn't have to depart from the pericope to do that, especially with the continuous readings from some of the epistles.

C: So you could do that for a year or two with the epistles, maybe, but finally, it's hard to make that work every year and get practical topical series that people are interested in.

A: I have a hard time believing that people come to worship because they are interested in the topic of the sermon. Do you think people actually know what the topic is before they get to church?

C: We advertise our sermon series topics pretty heavily. We suggest to our members that they invite people just to hear a sermon on a certain topic.

B: And it does something? I have to admit that even though I print my summer sermon series topics in the church newsletter, I don't see much of a boost in attendance because of them.

A: I'm sure our attendance patterns are based on factors other than the topics of my sermons.

C: Do your sermon topics have any continuity from week to week?

A: Yes, because I preach on the pericope. Our senior homiletics prof at the Seminary advised us to preach on the pericopic gospel readings for our first year in the ministry, and I did. Then the next year I used the epistle readings for the texts, and in the third year I used the Old Testament texts.

B: If I stay away from the Old Testament texts for an extended period, my Hebrew is pretty weak when I go back to them.

A: You do have to find other ways to keep your Hebrew in your personal devotional life.

B: Did you keep up with the rotation after the first three years?

A: You bet. I've used the ILCW three-year series for eight years, and in one more year I will have preached on all of the texts.

C: I come back to the continuity question.

A: I contend that there is a lot of continuity in the pericope from week to week, and if you are aware of it, you can take advantage of it, not just in your sermon themes, but in developing ideas more deeply.

B: I use the pericope, but I look at each Sunday as pretty much freestanding. We announce

the theme of the service based on what is common in the three readings. Each Monday I check all three readings, and I pick one of them to preach on.

C: How do you choose which one?

B: To be honest, it's whatever one looks the easiest to me for developing the theme that is common to all three.

C: Sometimes I have a hard time seeing the common theme. Of course, when I choose the readings in my topical series, I can always make sure they have a very clear common theme.

A: I just trust that the guys who put together the pericopes are smarter than I am when it comes to arranging for our people to hear the whole counsel of God over the course of the years.



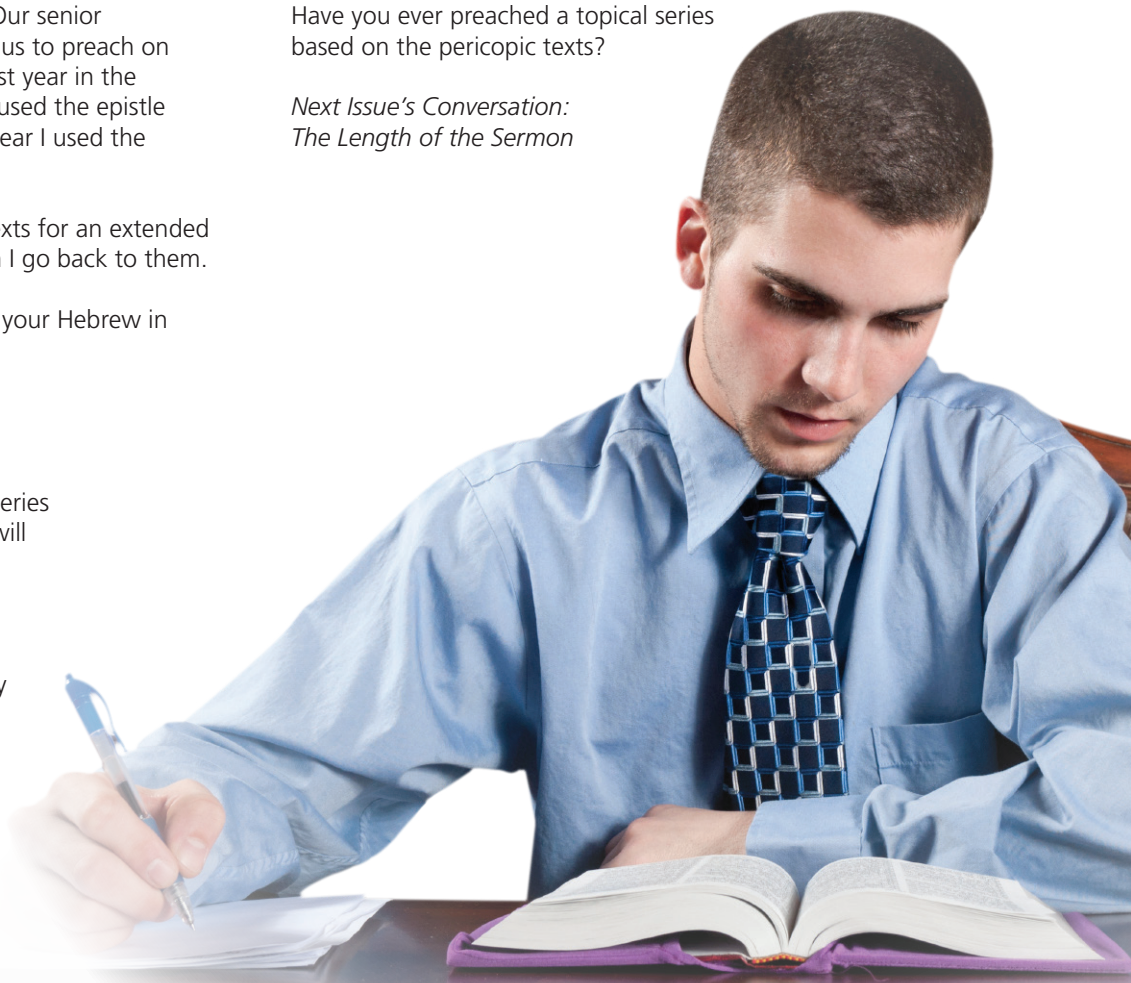
If you are discussing this conversation with others, you may use these questions:

Which pastor's use of the pericope comes closest to your own practice?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of each practice?

Have you ever preached a topical series based on the pericopic texts?

*Next Issue's Conversation:
The Length of the Sermon*



Edited excerpt from joemckeeper.com, a perspective from outside of our fellowship. Thanks to Pastor Ed Schuppe for bringing it to our attention.

When Sermons Become Heavy Burdens: A Dozen Warning Signs

By Joe McKeever

On Facebook, I asked the question, “How do preachers burden their hearers and undermine their own effectiveness?”

Since a large percentage of my “FB friends” are in the ministry and almost everyone else goes to church, the answers poured in.

Pastors preach too long, tell too many personal stories, get too deep, never have a focus and such.

We are starting with two assumptions: No minister preaches as well as he would like; every minister would love to improve.

Anyone for whom this is not the case may get up and leave the room now. Nothing that follows will pertain to you.

Here then are a full dozen ways preachers burden our congregations.

Why take the negative approach? Sometimes it communicates better than the positive. Not often, mind you, but sometimes. Let's see how this goes...

1. The sermon has multiple points with sub-points.

The sermon that seems to go on and on with its points and sub-points is hard to follow. The hearer loses himself/herself in details, and the big picture gets crowded out by all the undergrowth.

My impression is young, beginning preachers are the primary offenders here. They try to do too much in their half-hour and end up doing far less than they could have. They bring in every pertinent text and answer every possible objection. They literally bury their people under points and principles and lessons.

Haddon Robinson popularized the “one big idea” in preaching, which calls for the preacher to hone his focus to one central theme and build everything in and around that. This encourages the minister to avoid side trips, detours and complexities—anything that detracts from the main message.

2. We deliver sky-scraper sermons (one story on top of another).

A well-placed story that is “just right” can take an average message and make it forever memorable.

The preacher who smugly resists using stories because “I just preach the Word” might want to reconsider. After all, Scripture says Jesus never preached without

telling stories (Mark 4:34).

That said, however, we must not give our people too much of a good thing. The story should introduce or bring together, illustrate or drive home the point of the sermon. It should not *become* the point of the sermon. Story after story—even great, unforgettable ones—cloud the subject and bury the listener under too much “stuff.”

3. We become overly scholarly.

When I was in college and beginning to grow spiritually, I loved it when a preacher would tell us the Greek word for this or the Hebrew word for that.

But not everyone feels that way. Some people roll their eyes impatiently and practically hold their breath until the preacher gets past what they see as that little display of one-upmanship. The pastor thinks he's helping the congregation and actually may be blessing several. But the overwhelming majority are ready to get into something that speaks to them.

The smarter a speaker is, the clearer he can communicate.

4. We give the hearers nothing practical.

Harry Emerson Fosdick is credited with telling preachers, “No one ever comes to church wondering whatever happened to the Jebusites.”

Those of us who love the details of history and the finer points of Bible exposition should keep this in mind. The people who are giving you their undivided attention for a full half-hour have come to church for a hundred reasons—worship and fellowship being toward the top—but they will leave frustrated if the message does not give them some practical pointer on how to improve their lives.

5. We overlook lots of great stopping places.

I have heard preachers deliver great messages and seen them undermine their own effectiveness by not knowing when to quit.

The preacher has held our attention for 20 or 25 minutes. He has really connected with the people; he has made his point and driven it home perfectly. Now is the ideal time to send us home on a high note. Instead, he drones on and on. He thinks of something else to add, perhaps a story he left out of an earlier point. He belabors the application.

The congregation begins to fidget. They know the sermon is over. In fact, everyone in the room knows it except the man behind the pulpit.

One of the hardest lessons for young preachers to learn is *when the sermon ends, sit down*.

6. The focus of the message is all over the place.

I'm guilty of preaching pointy-headed sermons. It's far easier than you might think. Your text is a story in the Bible that lends itself to numerous applications. Because you love this story—and in your study you came across some great insights that have nothing to do with the central thrust of your message—you feel that to leave out any of its lessons and principles would be shortchanging your people.

Is there a place for such a message? Yes. In an informal setting where you and others are studying the Word open-endedly, deal with everything.

In a sermon in church, there is almost never any direct audience participation. This means the burden is on the preacher to keep matters clear, his principles relevant, his language focused and the audience with him.

7. We take alliteration to the extreme.

Your sermon has five points and they all start with the letter P. Or seven points, all of them beginning with the letter R.

Why?

"It makes it easier for the congregation to remember," a preacher says.

No, it doesn't. It's actually a distraction. Even a silliness.

There may have been a time—*may have been!*—when outlining sermons was made simpler and more memorable that way. But it is long past. These days, your people are puzzled at this little quirk of preachers, making all the bones of the sermon's body identical.

8. We're too wordy.

Some Facebook commenter accused preachers of "circumlocution." I had to look up the word. It means talking a subject to death. I've done that.

Seven-year-old Holly Martin gave me a wonderful gift on one occasion when she turned to her mom and asked about something I was belaboring from the pulpit: "Mother, why does Dr. Joe think we need this information?" (Every preacher ought to be stopped halfway through his message and made to answer Holly's question!)

A teacher of preachers par excellence, Calvin Miller, would encourage ministers to take a central idea of the sermon and then make every point relate to it. One idea, many aspects.

9. We bring in too much historical stuff.

I do love history. And the pastor who tells of something involving old Sennacherib or Nebuchadnezzar (or Napoleon or President Eisenhower, for that matter) has my undivided attention.

But a little of it goes a long way.

Enough said.

10. Our illustrations are so old, if Adam were to come back today, he would recognize them.

It's been said any incident that occurred more than 20 years ago is ancient history to the average person in the pew. Twenty years ago? I was 52 years old! Man, that was like last week.

You can get by with an old story once in a while, preacher. Congregations are patient and tolerant with pastors they love. (And aren't we glad!) But the stories that will rivet their attention speak of something recent, something you read about this week, a thing a child said to you last Sunday.

11. We can make the most exciting message in the world sound dull.

This may be the cardinal sin of preaching, to take heaven's good news and make it mind-numbingly boring.

That takes skill, but some of us manage to pull it off.

There are no sermon books to correct this problem. Nothing but prayer and a living, vital relationship with the Living God can drive out this demon.

The iron-clad principle to keep in mind goes like this: *If, in your study, you find yourself bored with the message, it's a sure bet your people will be bored with it, too.*

12. We lose ourselves in our material and forget all about the people sitting before us.

Imagine a drawing. The pastor stands at the pulpit preaching to a full house. Now, put the letter A beside the preacher, B on the pulpit and C on the congregation.

If his focus is on "A," the preacher is thinking about himself. If his focus is on "B," his mind is all about the material he's trying to convey. If the focus is on "C," he is centered in his people and really connecting with them.

I can hear someone say: "You left out 'D,' the Lord Himself. We should be focused on Jesus." And no one can argue with that.

However, for the sake of the point, let us assume the pastor is filled with the Lord Jesus, his sermon is about Jesus and the congregation loves Jesus. So, the Lord is in it all. Now, the message-deliverer still has to make a choice, whether to center all his efforts in himself, in the notes in front of him or in the people sitting before him with faces turned his way.

I vote for the latter. Let the preacher focus on the people, see them as individuals in their sitting places. Let him notice what they are doing, whether their eyes are glazing over or they are passing notes or looking at their watches or are engrossed in his every word. He will quickly develop the ability, I'm betting, to preach and pray at the same time!

Finally, brethren.

A Facebook friend said she hates the way preachers will say "finally" several times, as though they were winding up the message, and just keep right on. So, we will take the hint and stop.

There. God bless you, pastor. We love you and thank God for you. Don't obsess about any of this stuff. Just get out there and give us and the Lord your best, and it will be enough.

After five years as Director of Missions for the 100 Southern Baptist churches of metro New Orleans, Joe retired on June 1, 2009. Posted October 23, 2012 at joemckeeper.com. Used by permission.

