EFFECTIVE CHURCH

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MARCH 29, 2015 *by* BILL TENNY-BRITTIAN | 9 COMMENTS

Sermon Prep When Time is Limited

One of the recommendations we make to pastors with churches under 200 is "Learn to do sermon and worship prep in less than two hours each week so you can spend the vast majority of your time reaching people for Jesus Christ."

It's not a popular recommendation. Homiletics professors faint. Long-time pastors just shake their heads. And younger pastors come out of their seats ready for ... well, ready to strenuously disagree with us.

But we stand by what we recommend for many reasons. But not because we devalue preaching, but because we value reaching people for Jesus more than we do preparing complex and artistic disquisitions.

However, with that said I want to move past the "How dare you" to the "How to." How can you prepare a life-changing message in an hour and plan an inspiring worship service in another hour? In a future post I'll deal with worship prep. In this one we'll spend our time on one-hour sermon preparation.

I want to offer two ways of doing sermon prep in a single hour. The first is the easy way ... one I wish I'd considered when I was doing

church planting. The second is the the less easy way, which is how I did it when I was doing church planting.

Sermon Preparation the Easy Way

Every week, great preachers such as Tim Keller, Andy Stanley, and Adam Hamilton step into the pulpit with great sermons that rock people's lives. They've each worked untold hours writing these near-masterpieces of theologically sound, spiritually moving, and motivational content.

Think you can match their work in a couple hours a week?

Probably not. So why try? Instead, recycle their sermons and sermon series, adapt them for your context, give them full credit, and preach them.

"Isn't that plageuarism?" Not if you give them credit.

"Isn't that unethical?" Not in the least. Besides, don't you preach Jesus' sermon on the mount in one form or another every so often?

"But I've tried that and it sounds flat and not like me." Then you'll need to practice the first couple times until you can preach them naturally. That will cut into your weekly time for the first couple of weeks, but you'll get the hang of it soon enough and you'll be great.

And here's a hint. There are pastors of some very large churches who did just that to get started in order to spend their time growing their church. Indeed, one mega church pastor preached other pastors' sermons until the church he led was averaging over 1000 in weekly attendance.

Here's how to adopt and adapt:

- Choose a sermon series and a sermon – use a manuscript if possible (if you have to listen to a podcast or watch a video and take notes, this will take longer)
- Read through it and replace illustrations that aren't germane or part of your context
- Rephrase sentences into your own style
- Practice preaching it at least once or twice and polish your delivery
- Put a note in the bulletin or on your presentation slide that reads, I'm indebted to _____ for this message."
- Preach it.

Sermon Preparation: The Not-So-Easy Way

Like I said, I wish I'd known back then what I know now ... I'd have done sermon prep the easy way (above). But I realize there are a number of pastors out there who simply will not do things the easy way (even if it's the most efficient and effective way). And there are others who will lean on the easier way, but will want to write their own series now and again because their context's needs something specific. So, here is the not-so-easy way to develop a sermon in record time.

1. **Keep Your Spiritual Tank Full.** Let's get honest for a moment. If your spiritual life is bankrupt you're sermon is going to reflect that – even if you devote forty-hours to write it.

> If your spiritual life is bankrupt your sermon will reflect that – even if you take forty-hours to write it.
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Spend significant time in scripture reading and prayer and you won't need nearly as much time to write a life-impacting sermon.

2. **Spend Time with the Unchurched.** This is the whole point of the two-hour worship prep recommendation – so you can spend more time with the unchurched. However, if you're going to be successful in reaching them, you'll need to know what makes them tick, what concerns them, what metaphors they understand (and don't understand), what inspires them, what depresses them, and what they're doing to fill the emptiness within. That'll give you a wealth of sermon topics.

3. **Choose Your Topic Based On Your Target Audience.** If you're focused on reaching young adults, choose topics that they are interested in and addresses their needs. Start with a problem they're facing.

4. **Develop Your Sermon Biblically, Not Homiletically Correctly.** Seminarians, by and large, are taught a traditional – but not biblical - model of sermon preparation. Start with the scripture, explain the passage, contextualize it, and apply it. That model is generally known as *exegesis*. It has become the Gold Standard of sermon prep ... and it one of the key reasons it takes so long to write a sermon. There are two problems with this model. First and foremost, it's not biblical. There's not a single instance of an exegetical sermon in the Bible. Not one. In fact, do a

study of the sermons preached in the scriptures and you'll discover the model being used is *eisegesis*. That model is the practice that's demonized in nearly all homiletic courses – even though it's clearly the biblical model. The problem with *eisegesis* is that it starts with the preacher and their presuppositions and not the scriptures. Of course, if the preacher knows the audience s/he is trying to reach, intimately knows their hurts and needs, and of course knows the scriptures well, it will be clear what scriptures need to come to bear to address the issue. And of course, that's sermon preparation at it's best because it's the most relevant to the audience – and it's why *eisegesis* is the one used in the Scriptures.

But there's another serious issue with starting a sermon with scripture. We live in a culture that no longer recognizes the Bible as authoritative, let alone relevant. And so when we start with Scripture and build on it, in the eyes, ears, and understandings of the culture we're building a structure on sand – there's no legitimate foundation.

To write a relevant sermon that moves, touches, and inspires those who have a low regard for Scripture, follow a pattern similar to this:

(1) Start with an issue or problem or concern that's common to the audience you're trying to reach. Make this personal if possible.

(2) Share how the culture is addressing the issue. Be careful not to simply slam the solution as how "wrong" it is in order to show how "right" the Bible's answer is. There's rarely any credibility

in that. Most of the time it's better to use a positive example.

(3) Bring Scripture to bear and show how the Bible has been successfully solving this issue for over 2000 years. This builds credibility for the Scriptures and provides an opportunity to reference other passages with a measure of authority.

(4) Build a bridge to real life application. Don't just show the solution, apply it to today's life.

(5) Close with a challenge. Don't leave your audience to figure it out for themselves. There is no truth in the notion that people don't want to be told what to do. If that was the case, there would be only one or two books in the self-help section. We don't want to be told we *must* do something, but we definitely want to know what to do to live a meaning-filled life. So don't just tell us how to apply what you've taught, give us something specific to do that will help us apply it.

One note on the challenge. Telling us the "think about" or to "ponder" something isn't a *to do* and just thinking about something will result in no changes in our lives. If the point of the sermon in to "forgive others" then don't tell us to get out there and think about who or how we should forgive. Give us an assignment, something to do that will help us move to being forgiving – like taking that coworker out to lunch and rebuild the relationship, even though they stole our good idea and got a raise for it.

5. **Create an Effective Title.** Your sermon title isn't just a marker for your bulletin, it's your best marketing tool. A great title does

two things: (1) It piques interest; and (2) It communicates whether or not the topic is relevant to a potential participant. This step is often the most time consuming. The good news you can ponder at your leisure ... or even run possible titles by your unchurched friends to see which ones do both.

6. **Practice Using an Outline or Notes.** If you already preach from an outline or notes, then you're well ahead of many. Writing a manuscript takes too much time. Learn to do without one. If you're afraid you can't, then get signed up at your local Toastmasters to learn. They'll be happy to help you wean yourself off.

That's pretty much it. If you'll use this model you will soon learn how to put together a sermon in an hour or less. That'll leave you a whole hour to put together your worship service and your slide presentation.

Question: How have you successfully streamlined your weekly sermon preparation time? Share in the Comments Section below.

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Comments

Dave says:

April 6, 2015 at 6:53 pm

I'm curious if there are models of growing churches that are using this approach. While I don't think the sermon is the most important aspect in church growth, I'm not sure you can get a creative worship service from an hour a week. I believe you can plan more further out, allowing you less weekly prep.

Reply

Bill Tenny-Brittian says:

April 7, 2015 at 9:31 am

Churches using this model only see meaningful growth if the pastor is investing his/her time networking with the unchurched.

The reality is that there are MANY really great preachers is small, dying churches. Although bad preaching and bad worship will hinder a church's growth, great preaching and great worship doesn't translate into a growth model anymore. Great preaching and great worship don't tend to grow churches until the church has already reached a significant mass whereby the congregation can be depended on to invite and bring their friends … and there enough new people in those who are coming that completely new circles of influence are being reached.

What grows churches under 350-400 is a pastor who are spending 50-80 percent of their time in the community building relationships with the unchurched (the street time is shared with a staff member at the top end of that continuum). Bay Area Fellowship lived this model

for two-plus years - until they reached over 1000 in worship. So yes, it's being used successfully - but only by churches and pastors that understand the point is to create the space for the pastor to do the growing of the church rather than the caring of the members.

Reply

David says:

April 8, 2015 at 2:17 pm

I disagree with this idea, and here's why.

While Tim, Andy and Adam do great work, I'm not any of those guys nor do I attend their respective churches. What God has given them is for their people. I want what God has for me and my church.
Now is anything wrong with using someone else's sermon? NO! But should this be your weekly routine? I don't think so!
Managing your time is important, but just as important is making sure you are spending time in Gods word and seeking Him for the word for His church every week.

D.C. C.

Reply

Bill Tenny-Brittian says:

April 8, 2015 at 3:11 pm

I couldn't agree with you more … so long as the church is seeing significant numbers of

adult baptisms

first-time visitors to worship

returning guests in worship

participants increasing their commitment to adult spiritual formation, service, and missions

In other words, if the church is faithful to the Great Commission and the Great Commandments (and being faithful means experiencing significant measurable results), then the pastor should continue what they're doing.

However, since 85% of all churches in the US are *not* experiencing these characteristics, the majority of pastors might want to consider spending less time doing what they've been doing (and isn't working) and investing in practices that will.

Reply

Rev. Virginia Lohmann Bauman says:

April 13, 2015 at 1:44 pm

Hi Bill -- I took a church team with me to your church growth seminar last summer in Ohio with Bill Easum, and we are diligently addressing all that we learned as we seek to faithfully transform a 143 year old legacy, mainline church in an urban center (a church that was highly conflicted when I arrived with "antagonists" in the midst of an otherwise vital group). We are making great progress, especially with our ministry and outreach to the homeless and marginally housed in our city. So . . . as we begin to grow again, I resonate with this article. Not sure I fully agree, but I am willing to try. Which websites in particular do you recommend for those of us who wish to purchase or use such sermon series, especially sermon manuscripts for series (that are easier for me to update and revise for my particular setting)? I see a lot of podcasts out there, but prefer manuscripts that I can adapt (edit, update) to my particular preaching style and to my congregational context. I have lots of books, resources,

etc. -- but love the thought of updating with some powerful preaching series (we are currently doing the A.D. series) Thank you!

Reply

Bill Tenny-Brittian says:

April 15, 2015 at 12:46 pm

For written manuscripts, HomileticsOnline.com/ wouldn't be a bad place to start. A second thing would be to use fiverr.com and get someone to transcribe the podcasts that you like - that'll cost you a mere $5 per sermon, for most of the services. Otherwise, you'll need to do a search of the church-sites that pastors you most admire or can relate with and see what resources they offer. However, I'll also ask around and see if others have ideas.

Reply

Luke says:

April 14, 2015 at 11:03 am

I know people and how they tend to behave in church. My concern would be that as more and more people caught on to the fact that pastors were crediting so and so pastor for the sermon, the people would start to complain that they're "paying someone" who isn't writing their own sermons. How do you get around that complaint, at least up and until you can point to solid results showing that the outreach being done in the community because the time is freed up, is worth it?

Reply

Bill Tenny-Brittian says:

April 15, 2015 at 12:40 pm

If you immediately switch your sermon time for networking time, there shouldn't be much of a lag between results. But honestly, for

most pastors, the content quality of the sermon should be leaning on the excellent side ... so it's doubtful there will be too much push back.

However, if someone does complain to you, I suspect the best response is to smile broadly and just say, "Thanks for sharing" and then changing to topic.

Reply

Rev. Virginia Lohmann Bauman says:

April 18, 2015 at 12:02 pm

Thanks Bill! Yes, I have used HomileticsOnline (even served as an Editorial Consultant for an issue in 2014), and we have used the occasional preaching series from well-known pastors the last couple of years. I appreciate the additional reference you provided, and welcome and any additional recommendations. As your partner Bill Easum says, our church leadership is "innovating on the fly" with best of them, and we are starting to see results! We continue to seek "best practices" from you and others in the consulting world, as we determine what works best in our context. Blessings!

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MEET BILL TENNY-BRITTIAN

Besides blogging regularly, I'm the author of several books, including *Prayer for People Who Can't Sit Still* and co-author of *Effective Staffing for Vital Churches*.

I served as a pastor and church planter for over 20 years and now devote my life to helping churches grow by writing, speaking, coaching, and consulting.

I'm married, have five children, and live in Columbia, Missouri.

Learn more about me

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