
PLANNING TO PREACH EXPOSITIONALLY

BY TIMOTHY BERREY

I do not pray unless I *plan* to pray.

If I have the attitude that I will pray “when the Spirit moves me,” my prayer life will be as sporadic as peace in Jerusalem. I must designate times for prayer in my daily schedule in order to achieve regular personal prayer.

The same is true for in order for a pastor to preach expositively: he must make a *plan* to do so. It really goes back to what solid expositional preaching is: a sermon that isolates the main point of a passage of Scripture, makes it the main point of the sermon, and applies it to modern life.[1] Surely we can see that such preaching will not happen automatically.

We must *plan* to study the passage, construct a textually pointed sermon, and apply it vigorously and meaningfully.

Why should we plan to preach expositively?

- 1) It promotes our own growth as ministers.
By making a “preaching plan,” we will find ourselves encouraged to study Bible books, doctrines, or themes that we have not studied before or deeply. What better way for us to immerse ourselves in these things so that *our profiting may appear before all!* (1 Tim. 4:15)
- 2) We will be able to declare--like Paul--that we have proclaimed the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:27)
Without a preaching plan, we will find ourselves preaching repeatedly our favorite passages or the passages we know well. Or a verse that we just happened to run across. However, there will be no real systematic approach to the teaching of our congregation. This is no small thing. Paul actually commands Timothy to give himself to the (public) reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and to *teaching*. Teaching is related to the word for *doctrine*. It suggests systematic instruction.
- 3) It will help us produce Christians who are truly grounded in the Word.
Let's face it. People will use their Bibles the way they see us using the Bible. If our approach is a kind of random, helter-skelter jumping from text to text or a running back to favorite texts only, without any real depth of understanding of the Bible as a whole, what kind of Christians are we producing? It is only by sustained study of a book of the Bible or a paragraph of the Bible, or a theme in the Bible that our people will learn *how* to study

the Bible for themselves. We are guilty sometimes of rebuking people for their lack of personal Bible reading and study while not really showing them the way.

- 4) It will lessen the weekly pressure to determine what passage we are to preach. A great stressor for pastors is determining what they are to preach on Sunday (or Wednesday). In our fundamental churches, a pastor often preaches 2-4 times weekly. Imagine the pressure (and bodily stress) when 2-4 times every week a pastor has to determine what he is supposed to preach. Not to mention he then needs to give himself wholeheartedly to the preparation of that passage. Too often, it is late Saturday afternoon before God finally "gives" us the passage we are to preach. By then, we are too weary to explore the passage in any real detail and we deliver another rather superficial message, largely true in its Biblical content, but not really a careful presentation of the main point of the passage applied prayerfully to believers today. Imagine the great relief if because you already have a preaching plan, you already know on Monday the text or subject you will be preaching about on Sunday. Even if you leave just one service a week to be guided by the Lord to a "last minute" decision as to what to preach, you have still reduced your stress tremendously.

How can we plan to preach expositively?

- 1) Make a plan.
Set aside a day or two annually, bi-annually, or quarterly to lay out a plan for what you will preach during those weeks in the life of your church. Obviously, what you are laying out is not the "law of the Medes and the Persians." You will have freedom to make changes and adjustments, but at least you have a plan, a guide.
- 2) Plan variety.
Your preaching plan should have a mix that includes some of the following: Old Testament, New Testament, doctrines of the Christian faith, topics of Christian interest or need, and practical Christian living.
- 3) What determines your plan?
In other words, how do you determine what to preach on for the coming six months in the life of your church? Some factors to consider would be things like what do you sense that your church needs? Maybe you sense your church is struggling to understand what the church is or how it should function. So maybe you decide to preach a series of messages on Ephesians (the key NT book on the church). Maybe you sense that your church is really struggling in the area of basic Christian standards. So maybe you decide to preach a series of messages on The Distinctive Standards of a Christian, where you will tackle things like music, entertainment choices, dress, gambling, drinking, and smoking. Another factor in deciding what to include in your preaching plan would be things that you have not yet taught the church. Maybe you realize that you have never preached to your church from the OT prophets. You might start a series on Selected Key Passages from the OT

Prophets. Or decide to exposit through one of the shorter OT prophets. Another factor would be what God is teaching you. Maybe there is a book of the Bible where it is like the lights are coming on for you and God is doing some great things in your soul because of that book. Perhaps He is teaching you because He wants you to teach these things to your congregation. Another factor would be things you see confronting your church in the future. Let's say that you have a younger church that still has no deacons. You realize that in the next year or two, the church will probably choose its first deacons. Why not do a series on the office and qualifications of the deacon so that your church knows what a deacon should do and the kind of person he needs to be?! Or maybe your church is full of young people still in college or just out of college who will be making some very crucial marital decisions in the next few years. Why not do a series of messages on Finding Your Mate God's Way, where you exposit clear Biblical principles on this subject. A wise shepherd foresees what His little flock will need and plans for it. Another factor may be your time. You probably do not have time to prepare brand new messages on brand new subjects or books or doctrines three times every week. That's understandable. Why not take one of your services to review something that you have done in the past or something that you have studied carefully before. We can always profit from review and if you put some effort into revising what you did previously it will no doubt have new life and bring fresh blessing to your people.

4) How rigid should your plan be?

Obviously, it is up to you. The plan is for you; you are not for the plan. If you want to leave yourself one Sunday service every month where you can share something you are learning from your personal devotions, fine! Have that as a part of your plan.

5) Keep it as simple as possible.

Let's say you are planning for six months. Either use a calendar or make your own "grid" on blank paper or make a kind of spreadsheet (or table) in your computer. Then, prayerfully consider what you should preach on Sunday am, Sunday pm, and Wednesday pm. Let's say you decide to preach a series of messages on Philippians in your Sunday am service. You then need to decide roughly how many sermons that might be. This will be determined by how "in depth" your study will be. Maybe you decide that you will need all six months of Sunday am services in order for you to finish the book of Philippians. Then mark that down. How about Sunday pm? Since you are preaching through a NT book in the mornings, you might want to do something different on Sunday evenings. Perhaps selected Psalms from the OT? Or perhaps something on the Parables of Jesus? Or something on financial stewardship from the book of Proverbs? Then decide roughly how many sermons you will spend on that topic. Maybe you decide that you will spend two months on each of the above three subjects. Now you are ready to plan for Wednesday night. Again, think through what your church needs or what you think God wants you to accomplish on Wednesday nights and then make a plan. Don't feel like that because it is Wednesday, you do not need to

study hard or prepare well. Realize that the people who come on Wednesday are probably the ones making the greatest sacrifice. They are typically rushing right from work in order to attend the service! One pastor testified that he puts more work into his Wednesday night sermon than he does into any other of his weekly sermons. Why? Because those who come on Wednesday night are his “core,” his most faithful, and his most grounded. They deserve the best!

6) All of this should be done prayerfully.

That is why you need to take a day (or two) to lay this out. You may want to discuss it prayerfully with the deacons or leaders of the church to see if they have any sense of what the church needs in the coming months or year. Prayerfully lay out before the Lord your preaching plan, commit it to Him, and He will establish your plans! He may redirect you some and steer you a little differently than you might have anticipated initially, but at least you have a preaching plan. And remember it is always easier to steer a moving car than a parked car. Diligent planning pleases the Lord (Prov. 21:5).

Conclusion: How to actually carry out your preaching plan? It will require you to give yourself to diligent preparation and study. Proverbs has a great principle for farmers that I am convinced is helpful for ministers also: *He that tilleth his land shall be satisfied with bread* (Prov. 12:11). Permit me to apply it this way: *he that immerses himself in the study of the Scripture will feed his own soul and have plenty to share with others*. I think one reason we do not make a plan is that we are afraid of it. If we announce a series on the book of Philipians, we know that commits us to fairly serious study. Especially if we have never really studied the book in depth before. So rather than commit ourselves to a plan, we *plan* to do things last minute or *ad hoc* or *on the spot*. In the end, we are the real loser and we have robbed ourselves of great spiritual blessing. Are we not primarily a minister of God's Word? Does that not primarily mean that we need to study what our God has said to us so that we know what He says, how He says it, and why He says it *to us*? This is not our option; this is at the heart of our duty and calling. And we miss the joy of eating our own bread when we refuse to really *till* the ground of Scripture for ourselves. May God help us to *plan* to preach expositively.

[1] Attributed to M. Dever.