

interact



christian growth ministries

Being who you are in the pulpit

by Kel Willis

When people are on the journey into faith, they're likely to attend a church service at some point and many will find it a bit strange! There is almost nothing like a church service in the world that most of them come from, and this may be their first step in becoming part of the church. It seems we often give little thought to the fact that the Sunday service is the shop window into which people look and either engage with us or move on to one they feel more connected with. Sadly, the sermon often seems very disconnected from the rest of the service and much of that is flung together with little thought about how it connects with those present, especially any newcomers. What are people coming into a church for the first time looking for? Be it friendship or acceptance, some answer to their spiritual need or simply curiosity, people in general want to connect. Their decision to go to a church is no different; they want to be able to see its relevance to them. Like the retailers who display their goods in the window, those who spend time planning their display will attract more people.

Growing churches are committed to relevant preaching that really connects with the regulars as well as the 'shop window browsers'.

We often give little thought to the fact that the Sunday service is the shop window into which people look and either engage with us or move on to one they feel more connected with.



First-time church goers have never heard a sermon before, so their capacity to actually engage with one will either encourage them to want to return to hear more or turn them off at the outset, so good sermons are strategic in creating a healthy, growing church. Just as preachers come in all shapes and sizes, so do their sermons. Some are engaging, whilst others are at best reasonable; if less than reasonable, one questions their calling to preach! Growing churches will have a number of strategies to connect with their communities and engage with people in the edification and evangelism process, but they are committed to relevant preaching that really connects with the regulars as well as the 'shop window browsers'.

In my role as mentor to pastors, I listen to lots of sermons and am committed to encourage them to be the very best they can be, for I believe that preaching can help people respond to the opportunity to engage

with biblical truth. This preached truth can be, and indeed should be, utterly transforming. In fact, preaching that does not significantly impact people's minds and hearts is not true biblical preaching at all. I hear some sermons with seemingly little actual content, that when boiled down say nothing of much substance; others are full of content - well-researched expositions with a heavy dose of theology - but are delivered with such clinical objectivity that they convey nothing about how the message has gripped the hearts of those presenting them. The mind is there but not the heart. The truth is that both are lacking the key ingredients that truly impact the whole person, both fail to connect with our spiritual dimensions and both fail to fulfil God's objective for preaching. But I suspect I am a little ahead of myself!

The sermon often seems very disconnected from the rest of the service.

What is Preaching?

Perhaps it might be good for us to first reflect upon the nature of preaching. Most of us will respond, 'Isn't it obvious? It's giving a sermon!' But there are 'sermons and sermons' and the biblical concept is somewhat different from what some of us do in the name of preaching.

Paul in 2 Timothy 4:1-5 exhorts him to 'preach the word'. Imagine Paul in prison with the knowledge that he is about to be executed, but still embracing the situation with a great sense of having finished his life for Jesus well. He is now looking with great anticipation towards the culmination of that wonderful redemptive work Jesus provided through his death and resurrection. This is his last exhortation to Timothy and he wants to remind him of what he has undoubtedly consistently emphasised in his mentoring: never forget that you minister in the sight of God and on his behalf. Keep in mind that all of us face eternity where God will call to account those to whom he has given the special gift and privilege of preaching his word. In this context, he exhorts Timothy to 'Preach the word ... do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.' The word 'preach' means to proclaim, to herald. Heralds were not uncommon in Paul's day; their role was to make a proclamation on behalf of their king or governor. They were to be sure their message truly expressed the will of the one for whom they were speaking. So preaching in the biblical sense was to proclaim clearly and distinctly.

Paul said of himself in 2 Timothy 1:11 that God had called him to be a herald, an apostle and a teacher -- a sent proclaimer who taught the message of his king. Interestingly, this resonates with 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 where as ambassadors we are to not only proclaim the King's message, but also honour that message by how we live it out in the world.

Some preachers believe that all they need to do in their preaching is proclaim the message, however throughout the New Testament, there was a fourfold emphasis:

1. The word was powerfully proclaimed in that the message was clearly and faithfully true to the biblical revelation.
2. It was always consistently applied with a challenge from the preacher to respond.
3. The message was consistently reinforced by its evident outworking in the life of the preacher.
4. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was evident in the whole process, enlightening, enabling and illuminating, bringing added authority to the process. Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica declared, 'Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.'

Can you imagine Paul being satisfied with no real consequence in the lives of people through his preaching?

When we read Paul's message in Acts 26 or his exhortation to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, we see all of these things in evidence. They flow from the lips of a man whose whole being was impacted by his walk with God. He was articulate, passionate and focused, and consistently aware of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in all he did. No one could be left in any doubt as to the challenge of his message, for his whole being was revealed in his presentation. He not only had a deep walk with God, but a

great passion for those he was ministering to. Can you imagine Paul being content with seeing little or no response to his preaching, with no one coming to faith through it? Can you imagine him being satisfied with no real consequence in the lives of people through his preaching? I believe he was convinced that God would always be at work through his preaching - challenging, calling and transforming people's inner lives, so that both hearts and minds would truly engage with the message being proclaimed. Every true preacher of the gospel does so in the anticipation that God will touch the lives of those who listen. I have on a number of occasions read Paul's writings and asked God to continue to transform my inner being so that what he is doing will be evident in all that I say and do, especially as I seek to proclaim his liberating truth.

The Bible is called the living and enduring word of God. It is an essential ingredient in his work in the lives of people and in his church. When we speak of the living word what do we mean? For me it is about how I view the Bible and respond to its message. The Bible is not just a textbook; it is God's ongoing revelation of himself and his declared purpose for us as his people. We are to approach his message with awareness that we are engaging with him through his Word.

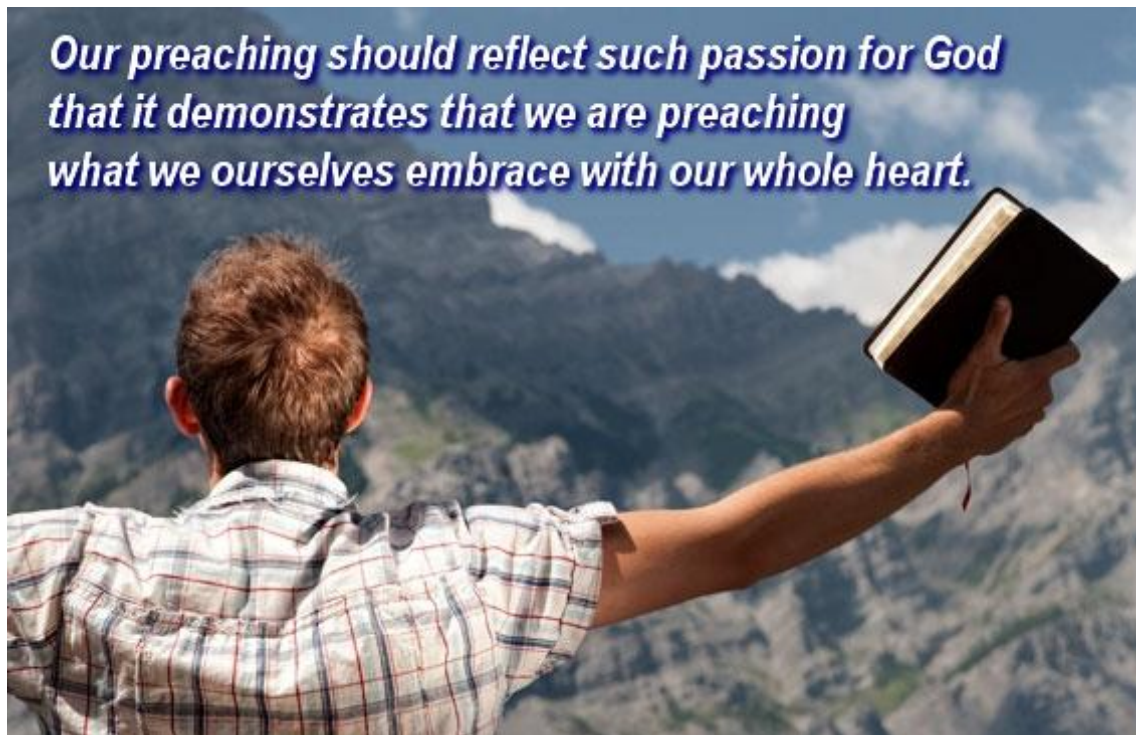
In Hebrews 4:12 God's Word is said to be 'alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword; it penetrates ... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.' This helps us comprehend what Paul had in mind in Philippians 3

Preaching that does not significantly impact people's minds and hearts is not true biblical preaching at all.



Some sermons are delivered with such clinical objectivity that they convey nothing about how the message has gripped the hearts of those presenting them. The mind is there but not the heart.

when he spoke of knowing God as an ongoing process; it affirms the fulness of the Spirit as a daily relational walk with God. These descriptions of spiritual life and growth indicate that God is always at work in those who are listening to his voice as we are alive to his living word. The role of preachers is not simply to be orators or academic theologians but to both proclaim and model what they are preaching. Our preaching should reflect such a love and passion for God and his Word that it demonstrates that we are preaching what we ourselves embrace with our whole heart. When this happens, even the newest person in our church is positively impacted.



(Part 2 and 3 of this series will appear in the next editions of Interact and will look at the themes of preaching with expectation, the importance of story, the danger of being inflexible and the difference that the dimension of the Spirit makes.)



Pastors, We Need to Plan Our Preaching

by Wayne Forward

Consider the following:

- It is estimated that for more than 21 hours every week Australians watch TV - a medium that is one of the most influential for communicating in an increasingly visually oriented culture.
- 65% of Australian internet users spend more than 7 hours a week on social media sites sharing thoughts, ideas and life with friends, the impact of which is seeing marketing companies now targeting social media because of its enormous influence in directing market trends.

In light of this, consider the weekly sermon. It averages 30 minutes and is presented in what is known to be the least effective teaching method, but unlike TV and social media it contains the one message that everyone needs to hear! It is a situation that demands, to use Jesus words, that we be 'as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves' (Matt. 10:16) when it comes to our preaching. Whilst in Australia we do not preach under the same threat of persecution as the disciples, our message remains just as radically counter-cultural and Jesus' words remain just as applicable. Our preaching needs to be characterised by wisdom, prudence and no unnecessary provocation of those seeking to disrupt our ministry ('shrewd as snakes') and at the same time be characterised by lives lived in purity, love and honesty ('innocent as doves'). To allow our preaching every chance to have these characteristics, planning is the key! The message we have been entrusted to share is too important to be left to last minute thoughts.

The weekly sermon is presented in what is known to be the least effective teaching method, but contains the one message that everyone needs to hear!

And before you object and say, 'I don't plan, I let the Holy Spirit lead me,' I would say, 'Don't be lazy.' God is sovereign and knows the needs of our congregations long before we do, so as we take the time to plan we submit ourselves and our preaching intentionally to his leading, which in turn allows the Holy Spirit to shape and mold our messages. Planning our preaching, rather than removing the leading of the Holy Spirit, creates greater space in our busy schedule for him to influence and mold our messages to his purpose.

The message we have been entrusted to share is too important to be left to last minute thoughts.

So how can we be 'as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves' in planning our preaching?

- 1. Begin by examining ourselves.** It's always good to have a mindset that's willing to evaluate the effectiveness of what we do and the reasons we do it. Only when we are honest with ourselves about what has contributed to our methods of planning will we be able to address any areas that are standing in the way of being more effective. Common elements that impact on our approach to planning include: our personality type and how it affects our ability to organise, how central we see preaching to be to our role as pastor, what our relationship with our congregation is like, and how we are feeling physically, spiritually and emotionally.
- 2. Familiarize ourselves with the different approaches to planning preaching.** Being aware of these can help us be alert to the strengths and weaknesses of our own approach.

Approach	Description	Pros	Cons
Lectionary	This approach follows a set of pre-arranged readings for each Sunday. There are a variety of lectionaries available which will generally have as a minimum an OT and a NT passage for each Sunday.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exposes the congregation to a wide range of texts which generally cover major highlights of redemptive history and theological importance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Removes flexibility in selecting text Often jumps between books Can at times force bridges between OT and NT texts that aren't there Doesn't allow for personalization of the preaching plan for a particular congregation
Canonical	This approach seeks to preach through the books of the Bible often in canonical order. This may be confined to just the NT or alternate between OT and NT throughout the year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides a very simple plan to follow Ensures that difficult passages are addressed Provides a good platform for expository preaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can run the risk of not addressing issues relating to a specific congregation Can become stale
Calendar	This approach builds the preaching plan around the major religious and non-religious events in a yearly calendar and the implications these may have on the congregation, e.g. Easter, Christmas, Mother's Day, holiday seasons.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can provide very topically relevant sermons Can be tailored to a specific congregation's needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can see repetition of themes over a number of years that results in other themes being missed Can see some parts of the Bible being neglected as they do not fit into the calendar year
Series	This approach seeks to preach a number of different themed series through the year. These may be topical or systematically work through books of the Bible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easily tailored to the needs of an individual congregation Allows for flexibility Allows for a balance between both expository and topical preaching series 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Series and topics may just reflect pet topics of the preacher Certain passages and topics can be neglected Requires more planning time than some of the other approaches

- 3. Be familiar with the different styles of preaching.** This can bring variety to the feel of our preaching. Some of the major approaches include:
 - Expository preaching** which seeks to allow the biblical text to speak for itself out of the historical and literary context in which it was written. The task of the preacher in this approach is to help the audience understand the implications this has for their lives.
 - Doctrinal and catechetical preaching** seeks to teach the great doctrines and themes of Scripture. The task of the preacher using this approach is both to simply explain what are often complex concepts and to help the congregation understand the implications of these for their daily walk with Christ.

- **Apologetic and polemical preaching** seeks to address specific issues that a particular congregation may be wrestling with or that their culture is debating. The task of the preacher using this approach is help people work through a logical defense of their position.
4. **Understand our congregations.** To ensure we are planning messages that will hit their mark we must understand those to whom they are being addressed: their demographics, their cultural backgrounds, their interest in listening, their age and spiritual maturity.
 5. **Ask ourselves what our congregations need to hear to grow in Christ.** This point in many ways goes to the heart of what it means for us to be “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” in our preaching, for it is the essence of what we are (or I believe should be) seeking to do in our preaching, and in fact, in our whole ministry.

In laying down his last instructions Jesus called on his followers to go and make disciples (Matt. 28:18-20), an instruction that sets up what should be at the heart of everything we do: growing “disciple-making disciples of Christ”¹. The apostle Paul articulates this in Colossians 1:28: ‘We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ’ (emphasis added), a task that certainly needs to extend to our preaching, for as Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, it is through Scripture, its reading and proclamation, that the people of God are ‘thoroughly equipped for every good work’.

All too often we preach our sermons and just hope that our congregations will then put them into action.

Reflecting on this, Scott Gibson in his book *Preaching with a Plan* makes the observation that in our planning it is often presumed that spiritual growth will take place as long as the word of God is preached, and so he says, ‘Preachers plan according to what they want to

preach, what interests them, rather than what will be of immediate benefit to their listeners and their ongoing spiritual maturity.’ A classic example of this is when preaching plans are developed based simply on what has not previously been preached, for example, which NT or OT book hasn’t yet been covered. This approach can still develop great preaching series which our congregations will engage with and be impacted by, for as Isa. 55:11 says, God will accomplish what he desires from the going out of his word. In being ‘as wise as snakes and as innocent as doves’ though, it is an approach that can only be described as a ‘scatter gun approach’ that just prays something will stick. By asking the question, “What does our congregation need to hear to grow in Christ?” our planning will not simply be based on what we want to preach or feel comfortable preaching but will rather ask what will help those that God has entrusted to our care grow in maturity in Christ.

In summary, to be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves in our preaching, we need to be alert to who we are, alert to who we are speaking to and alert to what our objectives are.

With these foundations in place, how can we put together a preaching plan for a year?

1. **Make time to plan.** From my experience, to plan a 12 month calendar I need one to two days back to back. I try to set this time aside in October to plan for the following calendar year. I also need a further ½ - 1 day every three months to tidy up the calendar, confirm other speakers and address any changes that need to be made.
2. **Be ready so the planning time can be used efficiently.** In planning a 12 month calendar the following are required:
 - A calendar of the year ahead with dates of important events including school holidays, public holidays, denominational events, conferences, your holidays, church events and so on.
 - A Bible.
 - A computer to record your plan. I find the best way to do this is with an Excel spreadsheet. In the first column I have each of the Sundays of the year listed. In the second column I add specific facts about any dates e.g. Mother’s Day on the 1st Sunday in May. In the third column I put the sermon topic for that Sunday. In the fourth column I add who will be delivering the message. Each year I simply open a new worksheet. This means that all my preaching calendars are in one workbook, which makes reviewing what has been preached over the years very easy.
 - Any tools you are wanting to use: lectionaries, preaching series that others have developed, your own notes of possible series you have come up with through the previous year, survey results of what the congregation wants, notes about what they need.
 - Prayer that God will help guide you in putting together the calendar.
3. **Plan your series.** I am showing a bias here in speaking of series, as from my experience it is the only way that a preaching calendar can be crafted to ensure that the needs of my congregation are being intentionally met. In any given year I aim for roughly five seven-week series, which are broken up by four, four-week expository and



topical series. There are some great advantages to this approach, beyond being able to meet the needs of your congregation. It allows for repetition of central ideas and momentum can be built around the series. Whilst people may miss the content of one sermon when they are away, they will still be able to pick up the theme of the series and where the challenge to the church is being made. The rationale for a number of different series is that it helps to build variety into the calendar. (The planning of each series is a process in itself and is beyond the scope of this article.)

4. **Plan your calendar.** With an understanding of what your congregation needs to help them grow in Christ and your series planned out, you can begin to try and fit them into your calendar. As you do this you will quickly discover that it is not hard to fill a year, by the time you block out Christmas and Easter and a few other special services. To help fit in the series, give consideration to different ways of breaking it up. For example, if you are doing a series on marriage or family consider splitting it so that half is delivered over the Mother's Day period and half over the Father's Day period. If preaching through a very long book of the Bible over a year, consider breaking it up with different topical breakout series on specific topics raised. There are countless ways of doing this. Be creative and critical as to whether they work so you know whether to try them again or put them down to a failed experiment. This is also the time to be lining up other speakers for the weeks when you are on holidays.
5. **Consider how you will teach to obey (Matt. 28:19).** This step may have already been covered in the series planning, but if not, it is important it is given consideration here. In giving the Great Commission Jesus asked the disciples not just to teach disciples but to teach them to obey -- a subtle but significant distinction. All too often we preach our sermons and just hope that our congregations will then put them into action. Randy Pope in his recent book *Insourcing* suggests that such an approach is a great way of producing 'disillusioned learners' who, having tried so many times to implement ideas and challenges heard from the pulpit and failed, now no longer even try². Taking this point on board, consider how you will help your congregation follow through with the challenges from your message. This may be through integrated series that see the sermon topic considered in the same week through small group studies, through prayer following the service, through mid-weekly discussion groups, through mentoring or setting specific weekly challenges. There are lots of ways it can be done but remember, preaching is the least effective teaching method we have. To be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves in teaching those God has entrusted us to lead, we need to think through how we can support the message we preach.
6. **Think about how you will market the series.** Posters, bulletin adverts, PowerPoint displays and short videos are all great ways of promoting and engaging a multimedia generation with the teaching series. They are also a great way of helping to communicate the central theme of the series which may stick with people a lot longer than specific sermons will.
7. **Review your plan with others.** Whether you are working in a team or individually, there are always going to be other people who will be able to give you ideas for the preaching series you have prayerfully planned. With the draft in place, share your thoughts but be prepared to alter them and incorporate others' ideas.
8. **Once plans are in place, remain flexible.** In remaining sensitive to the leading of the Spirit and the needs of the congregation, you may need to alter the plan in response to disasters, opportunities to host guest speakers, or in response to specific issues that surface in your church.
9. **Make time to plan.** I repeat the first point because this process all takes time and unless it is calendared into diaries, this sort of planning always ends up being squeezed out. The fact is that having a plan in place reduces stress and sees us better placed to disciple our churches and intentionally help those God has entrusted to our care in growing to become more and more like him.

Consider how you will help your congregation follow through with the challenges from your message.

Wayne Forward is currently pastor at Nelsons Bay Baptist Church, NSW

REFERENCES

- ¹ Marshal C. & Payne T., *The Trellis and the Vine*, St Mathias Media, Sydney (2009)
- ² Pope R, *Insourcing*, Zondervan Press, 2013, location 434 Kindle Edition

Copyright 2013 Christian Growth Ministries Inc.

Interact is published three times a year by Christian Growth Ministries Inc, a non-profit ministry registered under the Associations Incorporation Act, 1984. As an interdenominational organisation, CGM aims to contribute to the life and growth of God's people and to the church at large, wherever possible and with whatever means available.

Interact will be emailed to those who request it. Donations to cover production costs would be appreciated. Cheques payable to 'CGM Pastors Fund' should be sent to 3 Tahlee Street Burwood NSW 2134. You can email CGM at: kelwillis@bigpond.com

For further information on Christian Growth Ministries go to <http://www.cgm.org.au>



1
2