

Thinking through your preaching outline of the coming months

Three approaches to message content

In most churches, every Sunday is an opportunity to deliver a Message. There are three main kinds of approach to the content of the Message:

- 1) Every week, wait on God for something new without necessarily thinking of what comes next week. We will refer to this as *the one-off approach*.
- 2) Do a series (of 2-8 weeks) around a certain topic or theme. We will refer to this as *the topical series approach*.
- 3) Do a series (of 3-8 weeks) by going through a book, or a part of a book, in the Bible. We will refer to this as *the textual series approach*.

All these approaches have their strengths: The strength of the one-off approach is that it increases a week-by-week sensitivity to the leadings of the Spirit. The strength of the topical series approach is that, to use Bill Hybels' words, 'the bunsen burner of a very specific emphasis or truth can bring the people to boil in that area over a length of time.' The strength of the textual series approach is that the Word of God truly becomes central in the life of the church because we preach its themes rather than just our pet doctrines.

The combined approach

At Friends First, we have decided - at least on Sunday nights for this year (2008) - to experiment in combining in a looping way all three approaches in the annual calendar. So, hypothetically, over six months our preaching outline could look like this...

Week 1: A one-off message on 'Getting a vision for your year.'

Week 2: A textual series - season 1 of Mark - Mark 1

Week 3: A textual series - season 1 of Mark - Mark 2

Week 4: A textual series - season 1 of Mark - Mark 3

Week 5: A textual series - season 1 of Mark - Mark 4

Week 6: A topical series - Sex and the city - Designer sex

Week 7: A topical series - Sex and the city - Single sexuality

Week 8: A topical series - Sex and the city - When sparks fly

Week 9: A topical series - Sex and the city - Tying the knot

Week 10: A topical series - Sex and the city - Is God homophobic?

Week 11: A one-off message on 'The power of prayer and fasting'

Week 12: A one-off message - Visiting preacher speaking into the life of the church

Week 13: A textual series - the life of Joseph, part 1

Week 14: A textual series - the life of Joseph, part 2

Week 15: A one-off message on 'The resurrection and the life' (Easter message)

Week 16: A textual series - the life of Joseph, part 3

Week 17: A topical series - Christ amongst the gods - Christ and Moses (Judaism)
Week 18: A topical series - Christ amongst the gods - Christ and Mohammed (Islam)
Week 19: A topical series - Christ amongst the gods - Christ and the new Christ (New Age)
Week 20: A textual series - season 2 of Mark - Mark 5
Week 21: A textual series - season 2 of Mark - Mark 6
Week 22: A textual series - season 2 of Mark - Mark 7
Week 23: A textual series - season 2 of Mark - Mark 8
Week 24: A topical series - how to have personal devotions - Feed on the Word
Week 25: A topical series - how to have personal devotions - Drink of the Spirit
Week 26: A one-off message - Visiting preacher speaking into the life of the church

You get the idea.

Guiding principles

There are some guiding principles in our planning ...

- We plan flexibly, which means that this plan is not set in stone. We are always seeking to discern the season of our church and the leading of the Spirit to decide which series or one-off message to do next.
- We generally try not to do a series longer than 5 weeks, although it seems like churches like Mars Hill in Seattle effectively have some series that run up to 10 weeks. So this is not a hard and fast rule.
- We advertize the week before when a new series is about to start - even putting up an outline of the dates ahead. We find this is a real draw-card for people and visitors.
- In every message we try to preach in such a way that both Christians are disciplined and deepened in their faith and obedience, and - at the same time - unchurched visitors feel the message really helped them (which makes them want to come back next week).
- As a general rule, we use our strongest preachers to launch a series.
- At the end of each message, we try 'bait' the people for next week's message.
- We make sure that we use those leaders that carry real authority in the church often. And we seldom let two less authoritative preachers preach twice in a row. In our church we have two kinds of leadership: elders and deacons. This means that we use elders more often, and we seldom let two deacons preach in a row. This is because preaching is more than just an opportunity for communication, it is an opportunity for leadership.

The way we're trying to do a topical series

- We keep on thinking of various 2-5 week long topical series that will help our church and attract the unchurched. The sky is really the limit when we think of the wide array of themes explored by the Scriptures, by our culture.
- As a general rule out of every three topical series, we try to do two topical series that will be both helpful to our church, and

attractive to unchurched people too, and one that will focus more on a discipleship theme that does not factor in unchurched people as much. We, like Rick Warren of Saddleback Church, have found that topical series seem to attract unchurched people more effectively than textual series.

- When we do the topical series that will be attractive to unchurched people, we try create invites to give to our church the week before. The best invite we have found is a simple, nicely designed business card (which are relatively cheap) with some thoughtful, non-cheesy copy that will encourage them to come along. We also do a nice advert in the meeting before making it clear that this series will be really helpful to our church and to those friends and family we could invite.

The way we're trying to do a textual series

- At the time of this writing, we have only done the following strategy once before, but here is where we're going this year:
 - *We're trying to correlate people's personal Bible reading with what we're preaching on. We introduce the week's Bible section by preaching on part of it and encouraging them to go through the whole of it in the week following.*
 - *In their personal reading they explore a whole section of the Bible (a chapter or two for example) whereas in the Sunday message, we preach just one part of that section of the Bible. This means that we don't preach through every verse of a book, but focus on one part of a chapter this week, and then one part of the next chapter the following week.*
 - *We make available a downloadable commentary (or booklet) to both the congregation and the preachers to help people get more out of the various sections of the Bible. We do not ask people to read all of it, but as much as they're hungry to. The main focus in the section of Bible, not the commentary.*
 - *We may or may not encourage small groups to go through it too - using the downloadable Group Guide that comes along with the book of the Bible being explored.*

Let me explain this strategy in more detail ...

- 1) We choose a short book of the Bible, or part of a longer book, for which we have currently developed some user-friendly commentary on the website. See www.friends-first.com and click on 'free resources' and then on 'explore the Bible' and you will see the ones we currently have available.
- 2) We allocate certain chapters to be covered over 3 to 6 weeks. For example:
 - *Week one: Esther 1-3 Week two: Esther 4-6 Week three: Esther 7-10*
 - *Week one: James 1 Week two: James 2 Week three: James 3 etc*
- 3) We encourage everyone to download the relevant commentary, or create A5 booklets using the commentaries for those who do not have internet or a computer at home.

- 4) We ask the whole church to go through a section of Scripture every week during their devotions. A useful way to do this is to print and give them a book-mark with allocated readings for the various weeks.
- 5) Most importantly, the Sunday preach is based on one sub-section of their allocated Bible reading for the week. To the preaching team (whom we allocate to the various weeks) we give the following brief: 'Your allocated section of Scripture is ____ (for example, this could be James 2, or Esther 4-6). We want you to preach a message around one primary theme from this section of the Bible. Do not preach all the material, but rather choose some specific verses or a specific theme within that section of the Bible (for example, James 2:14-26 or Esther 1). Your message must not be an overview of the whole section of Scripture allocated to you, but rather a taster of it. By focusing on just one part or one theme within it, you will make people want to explore the rest on their own. Please use the commentary available as one of your key resources, because it gives you a strong idea about how to apply Scripture to people. Please remind the congregation what section of the Bible we're asking them to read and look into in the following week. Also encourage them to use the commentary (a little or a lot) as a way of going deeper into and more effectively applying the Bible.'