

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Sermon Strategy

“For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). “Pastors” and “preaching.” They go together like soup and sandwich. When a prospective pastor is evaluated, church members wouldn't think about extending a call without first hearing the candidate preach. When church members discuss the strengths and weaknesses of pastors, the typical first criteria is their preaching skill. Preaching is obviously an important part of

“The best preachers spend a *minimum* of fifteen hours each week in sermon preparation.”
— Gary L. McIntosh

any pastor's ministry. So, can a pastor become a better preacher? Is there a correlation between time in preparation and quality of presentation? Good preaching, of course, depends on a number of factors. But I have found that the best of preachers spend a *minimum* of fifteen hours each week in sermon preparation.

There are four broad ingredients in a successful sermon: 1) *exegeting* the biblical text to determine what God is saying, 2) *identifying* the topic and the issues that connect with the people in the congregation, 3) *organizing* the content in a logical way that hearers will understand and remember, and 4) *presenting* the message in an engaging and persuasive manner.

Taking these things into consideration, as a rule a pastor should spend at least fifteen hours each week in sermon preparation divided over at least two weeks. In the first week the pastor spends about seven to eight hours exegeting the passage(s) of scripture in order

to understand it. The big idea or eternal principle is defined, and a tentative outline is laid out. Many pastors will then let the message percolate for a week of prayerful reflection. The following week, an additional seven to eight hours are given to filling out the outline with illustrations, stories, testimonies, and other didactic techniques. Practicing the delivery is also a good idea.

Here's a brief glimpse at how two noted orators prepare their messages. John Stott, in his book, *Between Two Worlds*, shared the preparation steps he used:

- Choose the text
- Meditate on the text
- Isolate the dominant thought

Check out Dr. McIntosh's new website for additional articles.

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PO Box 892589

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Do quality exegesis of the passage.

Practice preaching three times out loud.

- Arrange the material to serve the dominant thought
- Add the introduction and conclusion
- Write down and pray over your message

John Piper, popular orator and expositor, shares his similar approach:

- Read the text in English and Greek (or Hebrew), writing down important points.
- While writing, ask God to make clear what is there for his congregation; what's really there, not just something in his head that he forces into the text.
- Pray for wisdom to turn the paper into a sermon.
- Look for the two, three, or four points that will be the outline of the sermon.
- On another sheet of paper, order the points, asking the question: "How will these points fit together?"
- Take a break and come back to write out the sermon manuscript (normally 10 double-spaced pages).
- Go to bed.
- In subsequent days, internalize the sermon by marking it up and working through the manuscript.

Other factors, of course, affect how a pastor prepares his/her sermon. Experience has a major impact on the time necessary to prepare a sermon, with younger pastors typically taking longer, and more experienced pastors needing less time. The genre being preached affects preparation time. Is the message from a Psalm or a passage in Revelation? Some parts of the Bible are just easier to get a handle on, and thus take less time to develop. But regardless of the topic,

time, or context, Paul told the church at Corinth, that while the Jews demanded signs and the Greeks wanted wisdom, "...we preach Christ crucified." (I Cor. 1:23).

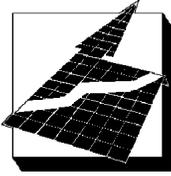
The steps to put this rule into practice are fairly obvious. First, look back over the last three months and determine how much time you currently put into sermon preparation. If it is more than fifteen hours, you are doing well. However, if it is substantially less than fifteen hours, you may not be doing the best job of which you are capable.

Try splitting your sermon preparation time in two halves. In the first week, spend time just understanding the passage. Do quality exegesis of the passage. Take time to think and pray about how the eternal principles impact the lives of your people. In the second week, refine your outline, add illustrations that connect to your people. Write out the sermon. Practice preaching it at least three times out aloud, so that God is most able to speak to the hearts and minds of your people.



Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D. is
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