

8 Principles for Planning Your Preaching Calendar

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Look into the future, and you see a blank preaching calendar you need to fill. People are coming through the doors—some for the first time, some for the thousandth—and you have to deliver sermons that meet them where they are, week after week after week.

It's a wonderful but difficult privilege. Here are eight tips, drawn from interviews with four pastors, that will help you fill that calendar wisely, coherently, and without burdening yourself too heavily.

1. Plan at least one year out.

All four pastors I spoke with know what they will be preaching a year from now. They may not know the exact text or topic, but they know what book or series they'll be in.

And this only makes sense. When you think of all the responsibilities and surprises a pastor handles in any given week, you don't want to add "decide what to preach this Sunday" to the list. Not only does that put you under the tyranny of the urgent, it gives the congregation whiplash.

Structure is good for your schedule and your congregation. When you know what's next, you can settle in for a while.

You can also prepare your sermons more strategically. Preaching through a Pauline Epistle? Read a biography on Paul or a book on the new perspective to add background to your study. Preaching through Isaiah? Spend some time sharpening your Hebrew skills. Or if you're preaching a topical series, you can have your eye out for good texts or illustrations to work into the series.

Planning your preaching calendar helps you prepare for the long haul.

2. Don't plan more than 3 years out.

While plans are good, there's futility in planning too far into the future.

"In my experience, your average church is rebirthed every 3–5 years," says Drew Buell, pastor of Cool Community Church in Cool, CA. "There's always a core of people who are always there, but with how much people move, new people are always coming and going. So I can't look 10 years down the road and know what I'll preach, because I don't know who will be there."

You just can't know what your congregation will need in five years, because you don't know who that congregation is.

3. Preach a balanced diet.

All four of the preachers I spoke with had this as the primary guiding principle for their preaching calendar. A balanced preaching diet means a variety of:

- Old and New Testament books
- Literary genre
- Theological topics
- Points of application
- Series length and intensity

For example, after a three-year series in Romans, you might not launch right into a five-year series in Isaiah. Or you may not do all four Gospels back to back.

Rather, try to represent the variety of themes and genres of Scripture year to year. And keep a sense of your congregation's stamina.

For example, Rob Berreth, pastor of Redeemer Church in Bellingham, WA, likes to balance the intensity of his series. "If we come off a heavy discipleship series—for example, 40 weeks on the Sermon on the Mount—we follow up with a light outreach series, like: 7 Weeks on Neighboring."

4. Plan for the audience you have, not the audience you imagine.

This principle was also unanimous among the four preachers. No one planned without first asking, "What does my congregation need?"

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It could be encouragement. For example, when Buell first came to his church, the congregation had been through a difficult season. They needed help understanding their suffering, so he preached through Philippians.

It could be theological discernment. For example, after the Obergefell decision, Buell noticed that the sense of Christians living as exiles was heightened, so he preached through Daniel. (And since they were primed for the genre, he took them pretty quickly through Revelation just after that.)

Whatever you do, don't preach to who isn't there. Your congregation may not need to know the intricate arguments for Pauline authorship of Ephesians, or why Schleiermacher is wrong about biblical inerrancy. Maybe they just need to know that their suffering has meaning.

5. Mind the seasons.

With how much people travel in the summer, summers are a good time to break from a lengthy series and do shorter books (like 1 John) or topical series. The same goes for the winter holidays. Pay attention to the natural rhythms of a year when planning your preaching calendar so you can break up your series with little breathers.

6. Don't create work for yourself.

One easy way to throw off the burden of coming up with a preaching topic is to get one handed to you.

For example, Nate Walker, pastor of Christ Church Bellingham, roughly follows the Church calendar. For the fall ("before Christ"), he chooses an Old Testament book, rotating yearly between the Pentateuch, historical books, and Wisdom Literature and prophets. From Christmas to Pentecost ("after Christ"), he's in a Gospel or Acts. And from Pentecost through August, he's in a New Testament letter. This process does most of the choosing for him.

Kyle Edwards, pastor of Holy Trinity Church in Chicago, has a similar commitment to expository preaching. "I'd much rather be assigned a text to preach than to have a blank slate to preach on a topic of my choosing, which would require a kind of creativity that I don't have."

Consider using a one or three-year [lectionary](#) to plan your preaching calendar.

7. Preach to your strengths.

One simple way to decide what to preach next is to know your strength as a preacher. I know of one preacher who said he wouldn't preach Romans until he turned 50, because he didn't think he'd be ready as a preacher until then.

Berreth was the same. "As a newer preacher, I just didn't have the skill or experience to do some of the more complicated texts. The entire Bible is stunning and helpful, but it's definitely not all as easy to preach." Early on he stuck to Pauline letters and shorter Old Testament books, where he felt more comfortable.

Buell has learned to occasionally preach what he needs as a pastor, whether that's to take a breather from more challenging books or choose one that will sharpen certain tools, like Greek.

8. Abandon the plan.

Lastly, step out of the plan when you need to. There will be moments where you'll need to temporarily throw your preaching calendar out the window.

One obvious reason to do this is to address tragedy. Drew Buell remembers doing this after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012. "It was on everyone's minds and I couldn't get it off my mind. I had my sermon done for that week already, but I couldn't stop thinking about it, so Saturday I prepared a new sermon on 'Rachel weeping for her children' [from Matthew 2]." The same would apply to local tragedy or an event in your congregation.

Another good reason to step out of the plan is to address a theological topic. For example, when Buell was preparing to preach through John, he realized that priming the series with a few weeks on the hypostatic union and Trinity

was important, so he did a four-week theological prelude.

You could boil all of this down to two main takeaways: **know your audience, and feed them a balanced diet**. Ultimately it all comes down to keeping a close watch of your congregation's needs and knowing what Scripture will meet them. From there, the schedule is simply a tool for feeding your flock.

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