

PREACHING IS A HALF-TIME JOB

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Preaching forms the theological mind and heart of a congregation. A congregation nurtured by preaching that plumbs the murky depths of truth, preaching that provides a realistic and relevant engagement with the Scriptures, will show signs of spiritual depth and maturity. A congregation that is offered pabulum week after week will show signs of spiritual atrophy. One has to wonder if the state of the pulpit in our church is reflected in the state of our church.

The Session is responsible to “make provision for the regular preaching of the Word (W-1.4004 a).” So let me ask you: Does your congregation bear the marks of good preaching? If not, why not? Please don’t tell me it’s your preacher’s fault, not without considering whether she has the tools she needs, or whether he has the time he needs to do the job. ***That is your role.***

Which begs the question - how much time does it take to preach each week? Truth be told, most of us can write a sermon in about 4 hours. The trouble is, many of us do. We can get away with it for a little while, but before too long, 4 hours a week produces thin, stagnant preaching. Substantive preaching requires far more. In my view, it requires significant, ongoing work in 5 areas: Spiritual Formation, Work with the Biblical Text, Developing a Message that Matters in a Congregational Context, The Sermon Itself: Form and Language, and fifth, Delivery.

Spiritual Formation: If your preacher is not actively engaged in some discipline of spiritual growth, the Word your congregation is hearing is not from God. I can’t say it any plainer than that.

What can you do to help? Keep the issue on the table, but please don’t assume that you know what your preacher should do. There are many ways to develop spiritually. You have a right to expect your preacher to engage in those that will help her. You have responsibility to provide, and a right to insist, that he get what help he needs. ***Time: 6 Hours***

Work with the Biblical Text: We preachers can quote Scripture *ad infinitum*, but if we do not work the text until it produces a fresh word within us, our preaching will have no life. All of us have been taught how to do that work. Sadly, too many of us rely on what we once learned in Seminary, or maybe a few paragraphs we find in some resource on the web. We need the time, the inclination, and the discipline to do the work.

What can you do to help? Keep the issue on the table. You have a right to expect your preacher to do such work. You have a responsibility to give him the freedom to do it. Be creative. We’re all different; maybe she shouldn’t do the work once a week, maybe she needs to be away a couple of days a month. Whatever it takes; it’s got to be done. ***Time: 6 Hours***

Developing a Message that Matters in a Congregational Context: We’re talking about creative process here; it’s inhibited if you’re exhausted. This is the creative moment when spiritual formation, work with the Biblical text, and our understanding of the congregation’s issues come together. If we do not take the time to gain a full knowledge of our congregation’s pastoral, intellectual, cultural, economic, social, and spiritual milieu, we won’t be preaching to you. Fatigued

we are likely to jump on the first idea that comes to mind. Usually we end up preaching to ourselves.

What can you do? Keep the issue on the table. You have a right to expect your preacher to understand the issues in your life. You have the responsibility to make sure she has the time it takes to understand them. **Time: 6 Hours**

The Sermon Itself: Form and Language, (and fifth), Delivery: OK, so we can write the thing in about 4 hours and preach it in 20 minutes, but will it be any good? Maybe, but it will be better if we have paid attention to the form, or outline, of the sermon, and taken time to develop new language instead of stock phrases. I'm not talking about hours, I'm talking about one more hour - enough time to ask if the sermon communicates what we intend, enough time to make sure the gospel is described as carefully as the struggle, enough time to make sure our ideas flow one to another. Nothing improves delivery like knowing what it is you are going to say. Attention to form provides that kind of clarity.

What can you do? Keep the issue on the table. You have a right to expect that your preacher will give it that extra measure of effort. **Time: 6 Hours**

Preachers need to grow in their craft: We need to read sermons – our own and others. We need to read about preaching because the introductory course we got in Seminary, no matter how good, doesn't even come close to covering it. We might need time to train our voice, or work on new methods of delivery. Whatever it is, we always need to attend to the next step in our growth as preachers.

What can you do? Keep the issue on the table. You have a right to expect that your preacher will grow in her craft. So ask, "What is the next step in your growth as a preacher?" **Time: 1 Hour**

All of this is what it means to "make provision for the regular preaching of the Word (W-1.4004 a)." It takes **25 hours a week. Where is your preacher going to find that kind of time?** **Answer: You have to find a way to give it to her, and he's going to have to refocus his time on preaching. It's up to both of you; the future of the church depends on it.**