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How Long, O Lord?

April 16, 2018

Footnotes Roundtable

Sometimes church life gets boiled down into small, specific acts. One of these is the Sunday sermon. A sermon has a few measurables: clarity, depth, humor, and, of course, length. Some preachers go long and make us feel like we are on a journey; others go long and make us feel like we are in line at the DMV. Sure, there are old stories of revival preachers like John Wesley preaching so long he needed to start before sunrise. But a preacher who tries that in 2018 better put his best stuff in that message, because it will surely be his last.

All of us have seen people look at their watches, glance at their phones, or turn to see the clock. It happens everywhere. It's also what prompted one preacher to hang a sign under the clock on the back wall that said "Remember Lot's Wife." But I suspect there might be better solutions than shaming time-sensitive hearers. Our panel has some ideas:

Bob Palmer, Sulphur Well Church of Christ (TN).

Steven Hovater, Cedar Lane Church of Christ (TN)

Jeff Hubbard, North Davis Church of Christ (TX)

Jonathan Stormont, Highland Church of Christ (TX).

Let's start with some self-disclosure. How long do you typically preach?

Bob Palmer: I am usually up for 30 minutes...but I would say my actual teaching time (minus announcements/housekeeping) is about 25 minutes.

Steven Hovater: I'm usually hitting in the 28-32 minute range.

Jeff Hubbard: Normally I preach anywhere from 25-35 minutes.

Jonathan Stormont: I preach about 30 minutes.

What factors go into thinking about length? Besides the hearer, does your church have other factors (simultaneous services or classes, childcare, etc.) that influence you?

BP: We offer children's church during our worship...and so yes, I am always keenly aware that at some point during our service, parents will either need to go get children, or the volunteers may bring them out. We also have some who believe (seriously) that the idea of a 'worship hour' is sacred, and that our time should always hit close to 60 minutes. Based on our current worship schedule, we only really allow for around 25-30 minutes for the homily.

SH: Discerning length is all about discerning the moment. If the sermon is a moment of engaged attention to the Word of God, we ask and intuit "what kind of moment are we prepared for?" and "what kind of moment can we sustain?" Those questions probe our expectations and capacities, respectively. Of course, both expectations and capacities (skills) can be cultivated over time.

JH: We only have one service so typically I do not have any restraints. We do have a Children's Bible Hour during the sermon time, so to be respectful of our volunteers I try not to exceed 35 minutes. However, they are very flexible and don't complain when I go over. I do feel that our people get restless when I exceed 30-35 minutes, so I try to honor that as well.

JS: People from liturgical traditions expect something shorter (20 minutes) with a really compact message; those from Evangelical backgrounds expect the sermon to be something else. If I go too long, I will bump up against a Bible class. But I can also just see it in people's body language. If I go much more than 30 minutes and keep including stuff I should have trimmed instead, listeners begin to get restless. Obviously, it is discouraging to see people with their eyes closed and "deep in prayer" when you are pouring your heart out to them.

In some cultures and traditions, longer sermons are valued, while in others there is an assumption that going long must mean he/she didn't know what they were trying to say. To what degree do you think the culture of the hearer should shape the sermon, and to what degree should the sermon shape the hearer?

BP: I think we are naive to ignore how culture impacts our listeners. I do consider that most sitcoms are structured toward 22 minutes of content. I think attention spans are shaped by that formula of media consumption. If I preached in a context where sitting for an hour long lecture was common, I would consider that with my sermon length. However, I have to consider that very few people in my congregation sit and actively listen to a presenter for any long length of time (over 30 minutes) through the week. The sermon experience, for nearly all of them, is a totally unique rhythm compared to how the rest of their weekly hours are spent.

SH: Stubbornly plowing through, regardless of what can be fruitfully heard, is foolish; we have to recognize the realities of our context. However, we are not passive cultural participants, and we can attend to the capacities of both ourselves and our hearers to enter into and sustain the sermon moment for more useful periods of time.

JH: You're correct that our tribe usually desires sermons to stay under 30 minutes. While I appreciate that, I am not afraid to spend more time on a particular subject. Usually when I know I have a lot of ground to cover, I communicate that to our people by saying, "I'm looking forward to diving into our text today. There is a lot of ground to cover so let's strap in and get started."

JS: I once heard a missionary to Zambia say that he preached a 45-minute sermon and realized that the church felt short-changed, and were eager to hear much more. So, there is definitely a cultural aspect to this. Sometimes, though, the expectations of a shorter message might help us as preachers. One of my mentors once told me that my sermon was, "two of the best sermons he had heard." It is tough to trim material out of a sermon, but the cutting room floor needs to have some clutter on it each week.

One episode of a serial TV show is 44-60 minutes depending on platform. The last 5 minutes of a good basketball game will usually go more than 30 minutes. Most people attend church once per week. Are we giving them too little content?

BP: Absolutely...and I think our churches reflect that. I am 33 years old and will be quick to tell anyone that will listen that the scriptural/theological acumen of most churches seems to be on the decline. A lot of it has to do with the malnourishment of biblical consumption and time spent in spiritual community. I am keenly aware that my 30-minute sermon on Sunday is likely the only sort of scriptural depth some listeners will experience all week long...and for some of them, they are barely maintaining that weekly schedule! That's obviously a lot of pressure on the sermon, which increases my faith in the Spirit's ability to shape the listener.

SH: Here we're starting to ask if there is a universal amount of preaching that people generally need, or just what is most useful and fruitful for the church. It's tough to ask objectively because I have to be aware of my bias towards "more of the things that come from me". That said, I think it's worth thinking about "what's useful" as a dynamic between intensity and complexity. Shorter, more intense sermons can be great for challenging and inspiring people, while longer, more complex sermons can add layers of maturity and depth to the church's spirituality.

JH: I don't necessarily believe that length dictates depth. For instance, I heard David Fleeer speak recently for 25 minutes and he had more depth in those few minutes than I include in an entire series. The truth is that while people will sit down for an hour and watch a show, that show is constantly moving and changing. It's not the same scene over and over again. I think if we can have multiple ways to engage multiple senses within individuals, we can keep their attention. Use different methods, analogies, stories, etc... to engage their imaginations and creativity.

JS: I've wondered about this. I don't think people have short attention spans. They can go and hear a comedian do a 90-minute set. I do think that preachers need to craft sermons in such a way that they actually engage listeners. No matter what point I'm making, if I go 6-7 minutes without engaging them, I've gone too long. I think humor can work here. Telling a joke doesn't just make people hear the joke; it gets their attention for what I'll say next. The same is true for delivering a firm word; set it up with a word of comfort. Before we go deep we need to introduce it with something simple.

Any preachers you think of who can pack it in to 20 minutes or less?

BP: As far as popular speakers/preachers go, Max Lucado is someone who seems to structure his sermons more towards a 30 minute or less timeline, while maintaining a high level of effectiveness. I'm not sure I know anyone who goes for less than 20 minutes.

SH: 20 minutes? Any preacher worth their salt can give you something solid in 20 seconds. In all seriousness, the skill of being able to give a focused, intense 5-minute sermon is a foundational building block for good preaching. Only when you master sustaining 5 minutes can you move to 10, and then beyond as the muscles develop. Our friends in the liturgical traditions are used to densely packed sermons, and I think of Anna Carter Florence and Tom Long as being particularly skilled here, although I think of their work as being more about density than intensity.

JH: The best preachers I have seen do this on a regular basis are all women. Women preachers seem to get to the point much quicker. As far as a male preacher, I would say David Fleeer and Randy Harris have that gift.

JS: I think Randy Harris requires his preaching students at Abilene Christian University to promise they won't preach longer than 20 minutes. He is the one who comes to mind.

Any preachers who go long (35+ mins) but never seem to run out of good material and manage to keep listeners engaged?

BP: Tim Keller and Tim Mackie come to mind, and both guys lean heavily on academic and theological content.

SH: Truthfully, I don't know if I keep with enough other sermon feeds to be useful here, but a lot of churches have moved towards longer form material. I can't offer any particularly surprising names here, although I find listening to Steven Furtick out of Elevation church to be a little bit of a guilty pleasure.

JH: Rick Atchley, Jerry Taylor, Andy Stanley.

JS: Andy Stanley, for sure. One way he is able to do it is his model of preaching (We-Me-God-You-We) takes seriously how the hearer receives the message.



Recent Books on PREACHING

Dave Bland
Professor of Homiletics
Harding School of Theology

Cornelius Plantinga
[Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists](#)

This book is a most helpful resource for generating creative insights for preaching from reading fiction and nonfiction books, poetry, and a variety of other written material. Plantinga reads not to find illustrations for sermons but for the sake of better understanding the world around him.

Lynn Japinga
[Preaching The Women of the Old Testament: Who Are They and Why They Matter](#)

The book contains forty chapters, each between three and six pages in length, and each devoted to a woman or a pair of women. I especially enjoyed the way Japinga retold these stories, adding touches of humor along the way, and reminding me of their complexity and richness.

Scott Black Johnston, et. al.
[Questions Preachers Ask: Essays in Honor of Thomas G. Long](#)

Because of Long's interest in addressing questions preachers ask, the editors decided to poll a diverse group of about thirty preachers, asking them what were some of the most pressing questions on their minds about the practice of preaching. Each chapter begins with a question selected from this pool and then responds to that question. The book addresses questions such as: How do we preach in a time when Christians are biblically illiterate? How do we proclaim good news to young adults who are on the margins of church or have left it? How do we preach effectively to a people who are used to sound bites, Twitter, and a visual entertainment culture?

A Few More Footnotes.

1. Will sermons on race prompt white Christians to accuse their preacher of being liberal? [Matt Chandler says they will.](#)
2. "I'm going to tell the world about how there was men in here that mattered," [Anthony Ray Hinton's story](#) of the James Baldwin book club...on death row.
3. Barna's [State of Pastors 2017](#).
4. Dave Bland and others recognize 14 of the most significant preachers among Churches of Christ in [latest update of The Living Pulpit](#).



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April 30
Hacks for Ministry

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