

# **A simplified outline for the preparation of topical and doctrinal sermons**

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## **A. Engaging the issue (Estimated time: 30 to 45 minutes)**

Begin with prayer. Ask God to guide your research. Keep a devotional atmosphere throughout the exercise. Do not use secondary sources at this point. Answer the following questions in order to determine your knowledge, ideological pre-suppositions and theological approach to the issue.

1. What is my knowledge of the topic or doctrine? How would I define the issue to be researched?
2. What are my doubts about this topic or doctrine? Which areas should I research in order to address such doubts?
3. What is the relation between this topic or doctrine and my pastoral experience? In which way does my pastoral experience illuminate the topic?
4. Which biblical texts come to mind when you think about this issue? Which theologians? Which philosophers or social scientists?
5. List ideas, quotations, memories or stories that this topic or doctrine may evoke.
6. List all the different aspects of the topic or doctrine that may come to mind. Which ones should I preach to my congregation? Which is the one they need the most?

## **B. Researching the issue (Estimated time: 1 to 2 hours)**

It is almost impossible to research thoroughly a topic or doctrine for a single sermon. Therefore, the scope of your investigation would be limited. The aim of this step is to obtain useful insights on biblical, theological and pastoral insights to the issue.

The dictionaries and encyclopaedias are very useful resources for topical and doctrinal preaching. They provide quick access to different perspectives on a given topic or doctrine. The following resources may be helpful in your research:

### ***Biblical Theology***

*The Anchor Bible Dictionary* edited by David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

*Harper's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by Paul J. Achtemeier. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1985.

*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, in Five Volumes, edited by George A. Buttrick, et. al. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962-1973.

### ***Theology and Ethics***

*Global Dictionary of Theology*, edited by William A. Dyrness & Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, et. al. Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2008.

*A New Handbook of Christian Theology*, edited by Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992.

*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F. L. Cross & A. Elizabeth. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

*The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, edited by James F. Childress & John Macquarrie. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986.

*The Westminster Dictionary of Church History*, edited by Jerald C. Brauer & B. A. Gerrish. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971.

*The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Alan Richardson & John Bowden. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983.

### ***Pastoral Issues***

*Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, edited by Rodney Hunter, et. al. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.

Denominational theological handbooks are also useful resources in the research of doctrinal and pastoral issues.

An alternative way of doing your research is to choose two theologians to become your “partners” in the preaching ministry. One should be a “classic” theologian; the other, a “contemporary” one. Both must be prolific writers who have addressed many theological and social issues in their books. For example, you may pick as your “classic” theologian someone as Augustine, John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, or Karl Barth. Then, as the contemporary one, you may read Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hans Küng, Douglass John Hall, Carl E. Braaten, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Justo L. González, James Cone, Sally McFugue, Rebecca Chopp, or Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, among others. The idea is to buy, read, annotate and read again several of the writings of your two “partners”. Such research will not only inform but also motivate you to engage doctrinal, social and pastoral issues from the pulpit. Although this is a long process, it is by far more rewarding and profitable than the perpetual dependence on dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

In any case, you may use the following questions to guide your research:

1. What does the Bible say about this issue?
2. What theological insights have I found in the dictionaries and encyclopedias on this issue? OR How does my theological “partners” address this issue? Do they address it at all?
3. What are the teachings of my denomination on this issue?
4. Are there any lessons from history that may illustrate the church’s thought and practice on this issue?
5. Which images, anecdotes or stories may I use to illustrate these theological and pastoral insights?
6. Of all the possible approaches to this topic, which may be the most relevant for my congregation? Which one should I preach on this occasion?

C. Contextualize the issue (Estimated time: 45 to 60 minutes)

In this section you should compare the findings of your research with the situation of your congregation. You should also ponder the social, political and

economic reality of your neighborhood, city, county, state and country. The following questions may be useful in your research:

1. Compare the points of continuity and discontinuity between the biblical material and the theological tradition. How would you characterize the development of the church's thinking on this topic or doctrine?
2. How would your congregation react to the contemporary theological and pastoral approaches to this topic or doctrine? Are these congruent with your pastoral practice? Why?
3. Of all the positions, insights and perspectives that you have found on the issue, which ones speak to our reality? Which are no longer acceptable? Which is the most relevant one for your congregation?
4. List those important aspects of the topic or doctrine that have not been addressed by Scripture or by theological tradition. Can I find biblical or theological clues to address those issues?
5. Which aspects of this topic or doctrine are relevant for my congregation? Which aspect do they need to hear the most?
6. Enumerate the possible "main ideas" or "sermons-in-a-sentence" suggested by the topic or doctrine.

Pick one "sermon-in-a-sentence" for your homily. Save your notes for future sermons on this issue.