

FEED MY SHEEP

Common Ground's strategy for planning a good diet of preaching over 52 weeks.

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus asked Peter the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:17)

Like all biblical churches in history, we place a high value on preaching '*the whole counsel of God*' (Acts 20:27) - feeding God's Word to God's people.

To ensure this counsel is effectively digested, another big value of ours is contextualization. By this we mean that we want to not only be faithful to the text but also to the context we find ourselves in.

This document outlines Common Ground's particular contextual strategy and method in selecting preaching content over the span of a year.

It does not consider the construction of a sermon, only what an entire year of sermons will be about. It may not be entirely transferable to your context, but perhaps there are some elements in it that will prove helpful to you as a church leader, seeking to feed the sheep you have the privilege of co-shepherding alongside the Great Shepard.

ONE CHURCH MANY VOICES

We are a multi-congregational church, which means we are one church in one sense, but many churches in another.

One of the values that keeps these many congregations together is that 10 out of 12 months in the year we preach a similar message every Sunday.

The message is not identical, because no two preachers and no two contexts are identical. The term we use is 'one message, many voices'. Each preacher adapts a manuscript or outline to their own style and contextual application. Usually the same text is used, and most often a similar outline.

Every church preaching a similar message called us to high levels of intentionality. This document reveals some of what we landed on. The first thing we agreed on is...

WHY WE ORGANIZE OUR PREACHING IN SERIES FORMAT

There was a time in Common Ground when we used to mainly preach self-standing messages. Each week, the preacher was free to share on whatever text or topic they liked. And we still preach self-standing message 3 to 5 times a year.

There was also a time in Common Ground when we used to preach long, sprawling series that could last several months. And from time to time (though much more rarely now), we preach Bible series of up to 14 weeks – like we did with 1 Corinthians.

In the main, however, our default setting is to preach shorter series that last 3 to 6 weeks. There are several reasons for this.

We don't like too many self-standing talks in a year because:

- ***Self-standing talks tend to be highly forgettable.*** At the end of the year when we ask our congregants what we preached on, they generally don't remember the topics that lasted only one week.
- ***Self-standing talks tend to be too packed with content.*** If a preacher decides to preach on prayer for one week, they will feel pressure to say as much about prayer as they can, because they rightly do not know when the church will be taught on this important subject once again.
- ***Self-standing talks are easy to miss.*** In our context, many people don't come to church every Sunday, and if people miss a particular talk which we really hoped everyone would hear, they miss out on that topic altogether until we come back to it again in the future. For example, any church leader will want to annually revisit the importance of financial generosity. The result is that a person who just happens to miss that Sunday might go 2 years without hearing any teaching on the subject.

We generally don't like long sprawling series because:

- ***For whatever reason, our attendance tends to drop the longer the series lasts.*** This might not be true of other churches in other contexts, but it has been true in ours. We can only guess why people tend to come less as the series progresses, but it may be in part due to:

- ***Our culture has come to expect novelty like they expect fresh water.*** Before we criticize them for this, we must remember that God is a God who makes everything new, and that novelty is not in itself a bad thing. People like things that are fresh. Even Jesus seemed to know this when he advises preachers to bring out of their storerooms things that are old and new (Matt 13:52), and he modeled an ever-fresh presentation of unchanging truths in his parables.
- ***People start to feel they have grasped the jist of a Bible book or topic after a few weeks (even though we as leaders may feel there is so much more), and feel they are not missing out if they don't come.*** Again, we can reprimand our people for this consumeristic tendency, or we can adjust our evangelism and disciple-making strategy to the context we find ourselves in.
- ***Truth be told, we preachers might be getting lazy in getting to essence.*** In the same way that work expands to the space allocated to it, so preachers tend to expand their content to the space allocated to it. We as preachers might enjoy the space, but our congregants rightly start to feel we could have worked harder in getting to the point, and keeping the main things the main things in each series.

The net result is that we generally prefer to preach many shorter series every year (and a few self-standing talks interspersed.) The advantages of this are...

- ***People are far more likely to remember what we preached on because we camped on a topic or portion of Scripture for many weeks.***
- ***We don't pack too much content into any one talk, so the talk is more impacting, going deeper on a few points rather than shallow on too many.***
- ***Our people enjoy the fresh creativity of exploring a new topic or portion of text every month or so.***
- ***People feel like their learning curve stays fairly even.***
Just as they start to feel they have got the jist of a subject, we are onto a new one.
- ***Most of the big topics in Scripture and discipleship can be adequately covered in 4 or 5 weeks of preaching.***
- ***We have found that when people come to church for the first time and connect with whatever series we are doing, they say to themselves, 'I am coming back for the rest of the series.'***
They might not be committing to the church in their minds, but our hope is that if they come for enough weeks they will be bitten by the Gospel and by our church community and stay on.

THE IDEAL LENGTH OF SERIES

We have come to believe that it is four to six weeks. Two weeks is hardly a series. Three weeks is, but if a person attends only every second week, they could miss two out of the three. Once we go longer than six weeks, it can start to feel like a long, sprawling series.

THE 2 MAIN KINDS OF SERIES WE DO

There are two main kinds of series we focus on at Common Ground: Bible series and Topical series.

A Bible series is when we do part or all of one book of the Bible. In this case, we let the texts each week determine the topics we will unpack in our messages.

A Topical series is when we do a series on a specific topic. In this case, we select biblical texts based on the topic at hand.

For example, a series on Colossians 1 (where over 4 weeks, we sequentially unpacked the chapter) is a Bible series.

A series called 'Robust' (where every week we looked at different Bible passages on perseverance) is a Topical series.

To be clear, both kinds of series unpack a passage from the Bible every week - so 'topical' does not ever mean 'not Bible'.

There are times when Bible and Topical series merge. This happens when we choose a portion of Scripture to unpack over several weeks that centres around a primary topic. For example, one can preach through 2 Timothy 2 for three weeks on the topic of endurance. Or John 17 for several weeks on the topic of prayer. Or on Joseph in Genesis 37-50 on the topic of God's sovereign preparing us for our ministry. Or on Ephesians 1:1-2:10 on the subject of salvation.

4 KINDS OF BIBLE SERIES

Though we may do a longer series through a book of the Bible, for the reasons we shared already, we prefer to limit our series to 5 to 6 weeks.

As such we will do a shorter book of the Bible, such as Philippians or Jonah for example, or we will do a chapter or portion of chapters within a longer book, like Joseph in Genesis 39-50, or like the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) or Romans 8.

We tend to think of four main categories of Bible book series

1. *Old Testament narrative series – eg Genesis 1-3, Abraham, David, Daniel or Esther.*
2. *Old Testament non-narrative series – eg Psalms, Joel or Isaiah.*
3. *New Testament Gospel series.*
4. *New Testament Acts-Revelation series.*

On any given year, we like to preach a series from all four of these categories. We will come back to this in more detail later.

4 KINDS OF TOPICAL SERIES

There are four categories of Topical series, and in any given year we try do at least one of each kind.

1. *Discipleship topical series*

Every year as leaders, we ask ourselves, "Where are the cracks in discipleship most obvious?" It might be that people are not feeling empowered or inspired to share their faith with their friends, or have absorbed the fear and negativity in our culture, or that there are higher levels of sexual immorality. We will then choose series topics that speak directly to these cracks.

We have a master list of key discipleship topics we should be preaching on over the years that guides us. They break up into 4 kinds of discipleship topics...

- **Loving God**

- o Prayer*
- o Worship*
- o The Spirit*
- o Reading God's Word*
- o Christlikeness*

- **Loving each other**

- o Community*
- o Serving*
- o Singleness and Marriage*
- o Parenting*
- o Diversity*

- **Loving our city**

- o Evangelism*
- o Faith and work integration*
- o Social justice*
- o Sacrifice and full commitment*
- o Spiritual warfare*

- **Not loving the sins and idols of our city**

- o Tackling the idol of money*
- o Tackling the idol of sex*
- o Tackling the idol of power*
- o Tackling consumerism and overbusyness*
- o Tackling other world views – eg secularism / New Age etc*

2. *Doctrinal series*

Every year as leaders, we ask ourselves, "What are the key doctrines that we have neglected or would like to highlight more?" From creation, to the Attributes of God, from the Trinity, to salvation, to the kingdom, to the church - we choose series topics that directly speak to the theological voids or weak spots in our community and context.

3. Creative biblical series

Strictly speaking a Bible series limits itself to several back-to-back texts in a single part of the Bible. But we might preach several texts that are held together under a biblical topic (as opposed to a discipleship or doctrinal topic). For example, we might do 6 weeks on The Stories Jesus Told and select some of Jesus' parables, or Shocking Things Jesus Said and select some of the harder sayings of Jesus, or Encounters with Jesus and select some of Jesus' one-on-one encounters with people, or Acts of the Spirit and preach on the main chapters in Acts that reveal the ministry of the Spirit,

It is especially these kind of series that show the artificiality of the difference between so-called Topical and Bible series.

4. Attractional topical series

At least twice a year, we do a series where we give a lot of thought to what will make it easy for Common Grounders to invite their unchurched friends to church. Our underlying prerequisite for these series is that when people tell their friends about it, it has immediate resonance with unchurched people. This therefore increases the confidence in our members to actually invite their friends as well as increasing the likelihood their friends will want to come.

Each of our attractional series are in fact a sub-category of one of the previous kinds of series, but it so happens that the topic can have real appeal to not only our church but also our culture. For example, if we do a series on Love and Marriage, it is both a discipleship and an attractional series. If we do a series on Investigating Jesus it is both a doctrinal and attractional series. If we do a series on Encountering Jesus it is both a creative-Bible series and an attractional series.

Here are some more ideas for attractional series topics:

- *Tough Questions – answering the skeptics*
- *Sex and dating*
- *Marriage and parenting*
- *Simplify – in an over busy, fatigued world*
- *I am – finding identity*
- *David's Other Goliath – this is one on depression and anxiety*
- *Co-exist – exploring other religions and comparing them with the Christian gospel*
- *Soul Detox – identifying and displacing mental, emotional and cultural toxins*
- *Thrive – in body mind and soul*
- *The Real Jesus*
- *Supernatural – angels, demons and the unseen realm*
- *The life hereafter*

WHAT IS BETTER – TOPICAL OR BIBLE SERIES?

It is our conviction that this question reveals a false dichotomy. Both are important and have their place.

Topical series tend to:

- Grow us by forcing us to really grapple with an entire doctrine or aspect of life.
- Fit well into 4 to 6 week series formats.
- Really etch a single discipleship value or doctrine into the memory and hearts of our people.
- Appeal to unchurched people and newer Christians, though all people will benefit.

Bible series tend to:

- Honour the Bible in the sequence and format that the Holy Spirit has given it to us.
- Grow us by forcing us to grapple with a wide range of topics that we otherwise might have avoided.
- Help people to read and apply the Bible themselves.
- Appeal to more mature believers, although all people will benefit.

Entire denominations and movements tend to have a preference one way or another.

Some people tend to argue that preaching through books of the Bible is more 'biblical'. But is it really? It may be biblical in the sense that a portion of the Bible is being camped in for some time, but...

- If we get stuck in just one part of the Bible, what about all the other parts of the Bible? It can be argued that to spend months camped in only one part of the Bible hardly honours the whole Bible. If one is preaching to the same people for years on end, we have time. But in a modern urban setting like ours, there is not only a high turnover of people moving in and out, but new people joining all the time.
- Where do the apostles or Jesus ever preach through Old Testament books of the Bible? Instead, they seem to exercise a lot of freedom in bouncing around the Old Testament when quoting it.

In the final analysis, the argument between a topical selection of Bible passages over the weeks, or a back-to-back unpacking of a portion of Scripture over weeks is a silly one. Both have their place.

Before we explore how we now go about planning the year ahead, here is a quick detour that speaks of two kinds of upgraded series we do every year...

OPTIONAL EXTRA: UPGRADING ONE OF THE BIBLE SERIES TO ALSO INCLUDE A DEVOTIONAL STUDY BOOK

In recent years in Common Ground, we annually pre-select one of the Bible series and upgrade it to a Devotional Study series.

If we plan long enough before, we go about creating a 30 Day Devotional Booklet which we will give to everyone. It explores the very portion of the Bible we will be preaching on every Sunday during the series.

The reason we do this is that every year we try to create an on-ramp for people to get into daily Bible reading. By encouraging everyone to do it together, it creates a kind of group momentum around the importance of this personal spiritual discipline.

We recently did a series on Hebrews 10-13 over 6 weeks. The week before, we did a talk on the importance of daily devotions and handed out the 30 Day Devotional study on Hebrews 10-13. We asked everyone to carve out time every day to work through the devotion. The following Sunday, we preached on that portion of text, but were sure to bring fresh angles and applications that were not covered in the devotional guide. Each preacher was encouraged to also make mention of the way God had been speaking to them in their personal devotions.

OPTIONAL EXTRA: UPGRADING ONE OF THE TOPICAL SERIES TO BE A SUPERSERIES

In recent years in Common Ground we have upgraded one of our Topical series, usually but not always an attractational one, into what we call a 'superseries'.

A superseries is a series which:

- Especially aims to bolster the small group ministry by boosting attendance in existing small groups as well as starting new groups for new people.
- Requires a pre-packaged set of compelling video teaching to be watched and discussed in the small groups.
- Creates content around the same topic that complements but does not duplicate between Sunday messages and small group videos.
- Invests a lot more in pre-advertising and mobilising of the church to 1) invite people 2) commit to groups and 3) start groups.

Superseries involve lots of work, but when done well, can deliver amazing results. Our advice is to first adopt superseries done by other churches for a few years before trying to create your own.

For example, last year (2017) we did a superseries called Follow. On Sundays, we defined discipleship. In small groups, we watched another church's set of videos on the same subject dealt with from a different angle. This year (2018) we did a series called More to Life. We watched the Alpha film talks in small groups, and on Sundays answered the same questions the Alpha talks covered, but by looking at sections in the Gospels where Jesus answered that same question. Next year (2019) we are doing a series called Thrive. Each week in both the Sunday message and in the small group video, we will discover how biblical wisdom and the Gospel help us to thrive spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally, financially and vocationally.

PLANNING AHEAD FOR A GOOD DIET

Like a parent who plans the long-term diet of the family by having a nice variety of nutritious meals planned every week or month, so in Common Ground we like to plan a year ahead in the same way.

Following Jesus' plea to the apostle Peter that he feed Jesus' sheep well, we seek to give our people a balanced diet of God's Word.

In October and November of every year, we as preachers and leaders prayerfully discuss and plan the menu for the following year.

We do this by using a template that serves as a starting point.

THE DIET-MENU TEMPLATE

Every year, we feed our people:

- **4 or 5 Bible series that come from...**

- o Old Testament narrative series – eg Genesis or 1 Samuel.*
- o Old Testament non-narrative series – eg Psalms or Isaiah.*
- o New Testament Gospel series.*
- o New Testament Acts–Revelation series.*
- o One of these will be upgraded to a Devotional Study series.*

- **4 or 5 topical series consisting of...**

- o 2 Attractional series*
- o 1 or 2 Discipleship series*
- o 1 or 2 Doctrinal series*
- o 1 or 2 Creative biblical series (which could also be listed under Bible series)*
- o One of these will be upgraded to a Superseries.*

- **4 Stand-alone messages that might be...**

- o A vision talk at the start of the year, after the major holidays*
- o A half-time talk 6 months later*
- o Good Friday*
- o Easter Sunday*
- o Christmas*
- o Gratitude Sunday (we usually do this as the last Sunday message of the year after Christmas)*

THE GLORY OF STARTING WITH A TEMPLATE

Instead of looking at 52 weeks of Sunday messages, and then trying to discern what to preach each Sunday, we have found it so useful to start with a template.

So instead of one dizzying conversation (“What should we preach on this year?”) we break it up into 10 smaller and manage-able conversations as we prayerfully think and discuss questions like:

- What are the stand-alone messages?
- What OT narrative series should we preach?
- What OT non-narrative series should we preach?
- What Gospel series should we preach?
- What Acts–Revelation series should we preach?
- Which of these Bible series can be upgraded to a devotional study series where we create a 30 devotional study book?
- What 1 or 2 discipleship-topic should we preach on?
- What 1 or 2 doctrine-topic should we preach on?
- What 2 attractational-topic series should we preach on?
- Which of these topical series can be upgraded to a superseries, with small group videos as well?

THE IMPORTANCE OF STARTING WITH BIBLE SERIES

In the creative process of selecting series to preach on, we have found it useful to first decide what Bible book series will be preached on and only then, to determine what the Topical series will be.

The reason is this: once we have decided what Bible book series to preach on, we can do a little bit of early work and consider what the major topics are that will surface in those portions of Scripture. This way, we are less likely to duplicate the same content in the topical series, where you would hope to preach on other important things.

For example, we may want to do a series on worship, but when we select to preach on the Psalms, we might realize that actually Psalms will cover the topic of worship, and no additional topical series on worship will be needed that year.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN BIBLE AND TOPICAL

At the time of this writing, we have just had a lengthy conversation as leaders and are feeling that next year we are going to tweak the dials even more towards Bible series. This is not a decision for every year, but for next year.

Why the slight change? After a 3 year gap in doing this, we want to do a longer series in a whole book of the Bible, a series that will take longer than 5 or 6 weeks.

As we spoke, we agreed that, if possible, we need to choose a Bible book that will subdivide up into smaller series, so that it does not feel like a long marathon, but rather four smaller journeys.

As we prayed and thought more about it, we decided to look at dividing the book of Ephesians into four 4-6-week that are both topical and biblical at the same time:

- Personal salvation (1:1-2:10)
- The church (2:11-4:16)
- Transformed life and relationships (4:17-6:9)
- Spiritual warfare (6:10-24 and including Acts 19 – which tells of Paul’s encounter with spiritual warfare in Ephesus)

WHO DECIDES WHAT SERIES WILL BE PREACHED?

Who gets to decide what series will be preached every year? Different churches, or the same church at different seasons of its existence, will have different answers to the question:

- 1) The lead pastor or teaching pastor decides what will be preached.
- 2) The leadership team or preaching team decide what will be preached.
- 3) Many more people are invited to chip in.

In Common Ground, we have done all three of these at various times...

1) In the early years, when we were one congregation our lead pastor mainly decided what series would be preached.

2) Since Common Ground’s senior leadership team now consists of 9 congregational leaders who each lead their own teams and congregations, our current approach is for this group of 9 to decide together.

3) There’s a third idea that has worked really well in the past. To keep our creativity levels high and to give more leaders a sense of ownership in what is being preached in the church, we invite as many key leaders into the room as possible to help us brainstorm and weigh best ideas. For example, we have had as many as 60 leaders in a room who we have asked, if it were up to them personally, what would their choice be for the following...

- *What OT narrative series should we preach?*
- *What OT non-narrative series should we preach?*
- *What Gospel series should we preach?*
- *What Acts–Revelation series should we preach?*
- *What 1 or 2 discipleship-topic should we preach on? (“As you have led people in our church where are the cracks in discipleship most obvious?”)*
- *What 1 or 2 doctrine-topic should we preach on?*
- *What 2 attractional-topic series should we preach on? (“What series would make it so easy for us to invite our unchurched friends to because there will be immediate resonance with the topic?”)*

In a high-energy meeting, we give 5 to 10 minutes to each of these seven sections and ask people to come forward and share their best idea as well as a rationale for doing this series. So, for example, we might have 7 ideas presented for an OT narrative series. We then say, “As a way of weighing these ideas, and not as a final decision (which will be left to the senior leaders), you each have 2 votes for your top 2 favourites.” We then run through the list, ask for hands up, count and write down the count on each. By the end we will have 1 or 2 favourites in each list.

The congregational leaders then make the final decisions, heavily factoring in, but not being limited to the results of this exercise.

As lead elders we should pray and discuss together what series we believe will be best. Sometimes we will reach easy agreement, but very often the decision takes longer.

At the end we want to be able to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us that we preach on..."

In a multi-congregational model like ours, we add yet another nuance of complexity...

Across all congregations, we agree to 10 months of series we will all preach on, and about 7 or 8 weeks (either 1 longer series or 2 normal length ones) in which each congregational leader and their leadership team can decide what they will preach on.

This allows local eldership teams to pastor the unique patterns they are finding in their church, as well as giving people the chance to create their own messages entirely – without the need to collaborate in the creation of it.

12 GUIDELINES IN PUTTING THE SERIES TO CALENDAR

Once we have decided on all the series we want to preach in the year ahead, the next challenge is to plan it into the actual calendar.

This is where it gets complicated!

Here are 12 guidelines we tend to abide by in Common Ground (although we may break our own rules from time to time).

1. First place the stand-alone messages – Vision Day, Good Friday, Easter, Halftime, Christmas, Gratitude Sunday.
2. In month one (in our case January) do a high-challenge discipleship series. People are fresh from their Summer leave and ready to be challenged and grow, so we go hard. This series can also double up for vision-casting for the year ahead.
3. In the next 4-6 weeks of the year (in our case, February and early March) do the Superseries.
4. If possible select a series that surrounds or starts with Easter Sunday (and if possible Good Friday too) into which the themes of cross / resurrection naturally fit. (This is why we usually do a Gospels Bible series in March/April and see if we can include a message on the cross and one on the resurrection in it.)
5. When there are a few public holidays or special city events in close proximity on the calendar that tend to drive numbers down considerably, try have a longer series to stretch over this patch of up-down attendance.
6. Do the next attractational series about 6 months after the superseries, usually August / September.
7. After the final attractational series, do a Devotional Study series.
8. Alternate between Topical and Bible series.
9. When the same subject appears in two series, put some months of distance between them.

10. Start a new series on a Sunday where there will likely be higher attendance – not during school holidays or long weekends.
11. In the 4-6 weeks before Christmas, do a series that is more encouraging than challenging. (Our sense is that when people are fresh they are open to challenge, but when they are exhausted they are in need of more encouragement.)
12. If possible, contain a series in a month. We might say, 'In the month of August we are doing a series on... and in September we are doing a series on...' In a world and city driven and flavoured by these 12 monthly segments, people appreciate these clearly marked riverbanks of time.

PLANNING IN THE SPIRIT, PLANNING IN PENCIL

One objection to planning far in advance could be that it doesn't honour the Holy Spirit.

This view might argue that it is better for the preacher to seek for some special direction from God what they should preach on next, instead of plan too far in advance.

Of course this might work in some contexts. Especially in churches where there is one preacher who is free to move at his/her unique pace. Charles Spurgeon is a case in point.

But there are several problems with this approach:

1. **It tends to favour a very individualist preacher-leader.** When a plurality of people lead a church together and are deciding upon what will be preached, conversation is required, not just one person receiving some direction from the Spirit. It is one thing when a preacher says, "God told me to preach on this in my Monday devotional time." It is another thing to say, "We leaders have given much foresight and prayer to what we preach this year. After much conversation and prayer, it seems good to us and the Holy Spirit that we preach on..."
2. **It suggests that the Spirit can't tell us in advance what he wants us to preach on.** Besides, if he can tell us on Monday what he wants us to preach on in 6 days time, why could he not tell us what to preach on, 6 months in advance.
3. **It means we cannot prepare very well.** Six days of planning means that we can't put in many of the special touches, creative implications and extra research we could have if we planned further out.
4. **It means people often do not get a balanced diet.** If we are left to our 'spiritual sense' of what we should preach on every week, we don't use the mind God has given us to reflect on the whole of Scripture and the best way to feed and disciple our people strategically.
5. **Our general advice in discerning God's guidance is to prayerfully plan, whilst remaining open to God adjusting our plans at any time.** After all, a moving ship is easier to turn than a stationary one. We plan the year ahead, but we do so in pencil. This means that as we draw nearer to a series which is on the calendar, we may realize there is a more pressing issue to speak into, or we realize that we have already covered some of the content in that series in an earlier series, or we may indeed be simply directed by the Holy Spirit to do so.