



# Faith Pulpit

## When Is It Time to Quit?

Every once in a while I do something that feels akin to beating my head against a wall. This article feels like that because my intention is to discuss how long preachers should preach. I have discussed this topic with enough preachers to know that preachers will preach as long as they want to preach. Certainly every preacher needs to be “convinced in his own mind” of what length of sermon is appropriate. I acknowledge this is an area where good men can disagree. Perhaps there is a certain arrogance when a preacher insists on preaching as long as he wants, or more “spiritually” stated, as long as the Holy Spirit leads.

Certainly no hard and fast rule on sermon length exists other than the guidelines of past practice and good sense. Let me say at the outset that I am advocating for shorter sermons that pack a greater punch. The bottom line is that few preachers have the ability to keep an audience for 50-plus minutes. (I know that I am not one of those preachers and chances are you aren’t either.) In fact, for every preacher who can engage an audience and keep its attention for that length of time, there are a dozen who can’t. I am not arguing for sermonettes for that would only produce “Christianettes.”

I am not making an appeal for lighter sermons with less content and more fluff. I am making an appeal for sermons that concentrate their content and maximize their impact. Certain ministry contexts can affect sermon length such as funerals or weddings. In a school, endings come abruptly at the end of the period and chapel authors need to quit on time. I remember our former president, Dr. David Nettleton, introducing FBBC chapel authors with the admonition, “May the Lord bless you until 9:40.” This gentle but obvious reminder was intended to keep guest authors from undue sermon length.

You might contend that your people want you to preach longer messages and that they complain when their time in the Word is shortened. Without trying to question the sincerity of such comments, I would suggest that our people are extremely gracious, often willing to overlook our shortcomings (or in this

case, our “longcomings”). For every person willing to have you preach longer, ten would appreciate you getting to the point.

I believe an appropriate sermon length for most preachers is 30–35 minutes. This accounts for the pulpit skills of most preachers, the culture in which we live, and the attention span of the average church-goer. Generally, if you cannot say it in 30 minutes, another 20 minutes won’t help.

I recall a sermon preached by Dr. A.V. Henderson at Detroit’s Temple Baptist Church in the early 1980s. His Sunday morning sermon was 18 minutes long, and I still remember parts of it 30 years later. I felt like I needed a seatbelt as the sermon raced from the pulpit that day. While we would consider that sermon short, I experienced that morning his normal style of preaching. What the sermon lacked in length was more than compensated for in intensity.

We can argue that previous generations sat through hour-long sermons, or that other cultures have sermons that go for several hours. In 21st century America we have a culture where people are conditioned by media to think in half-hour segments. Most people mentally check out during a sermon at least once while it is preached, ironically often to check the time.

I recall a story of a preacher who tried to be conscientious about how long he preached, normally preaching for about 30 minutes. His technique was to put a lozenge in his mouth just before he got up to preach and quit when it was gone. One Sunday he preached for 90 minutes. Surprised, his wife asked him what happened to cause him to preach so long. He replied that he had put a button in his mouth by mistake.

We live in a world completely focused on time. Every person in your audience will have at least one time piece and some will have two or three. Yet somehow in the preaching event, all sense of time stops, at least for the preacher. Should the preacher be the only person in the room who has no concern for the clock? We even have some Christian quips stemming from long-winded preachers. “The mind cannot absorb more than the seat can endure.” Or, “If you don’t hit oil after 30 minutes, stop boring.” Often preachers themselves joke about being long-winded and then proceed to preach overtime. One of the worst experiences I had with guest authors while pastoring was a week of meetings with an evangelist who refused to preach for less than an hour.

**Several issues contribute to lengthier sermons. Here are a few notables:**

- Some preachers fail to edit their material properly, bringing far too much material to the pulpit. Sermon preparation will always produce more content than what should be preached. Part of the skill of effective communication is knowing what to leave behind and what to bring with you.
- Some preachers need far too long a runway to get their sermon airborne. Long introductions suck the life out of an audience. Your people are never more willing to listen than the first few minutes of your

sermon. Sermon introductions should normally last about 10% of the total sermon.

- Unprepared rabbit trails plague some preachers, adding unaccounted time. These loose paths of thought can leave preachers wondering where the time went as well as be the source of problems.
- Some preachers never identify the sermon's purpose by using a clear theme or proposition. A sermon without a target is certain to wander hither and yon.
- Some sermons suffer from too many details. Only the exegetical information essential for a proper interpretation should be brought to the pulpit. As one student of preaching has suggested, paint the picture but don't tell everyone what's in the paint.
- Illustrations are helpful in communication but don't let yourself overillustrate a point. Illustrations don't need illustrations. At some point a sermon can be like a skyscraper, one story on top of another.
- Some preachers come to the pulpit not fully prepared. A lengthy sermon can easily flow from an unprepared mind and heart as the preacher unwittingly tends toward areas of comfort and thus greater time. Too little structure can cause a sermon to wander as the preacher tends to be like Abraham, leaving without knowing where he was going.
- When you get to the end of the sermon, end it. Don't give empty promises like saying, "In conclusion," and then go on for another 20 minutes. Never introduce new material at the conclusion. Even a crash landing is better than no landing. Again, your conclusion should be 10% or less of the total sermon.

I am not arguing that the preacher should leave out the good stuff in order to make the sermon shorter. What I am arguing is that you leave out all the other stuff and leave in only the best stuff. Let your words have a sense of urgency and clarity. Get to the point of the passage. You do not need to answer every exegetical question in the passage. You don't need to turn over every rock, understanding it is okay to leave something for another time. Exhaust neither your text nor the audience.

These words are not offered as a rebuke but rather as an encouragement. Sharpen your message. Think purposely about what you preach. Sharpen the sword to a fine edge.

I give these words from one preacher to another, hoping that when you preach your next sermon, you will not do what you have always done. Old habits die hard, but a long-winded preaching habit is one habit worth reconsidering. As Dr. Robert Delnay, founding dean of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, said concerning the length of sermons, "blessed are the merciful."

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