

"SAME OLE, SAME OLE" or *VAIN REPETITION II*

When I pastored in Fairless Hills, PA I had a man in my church who always responded to my greeting asking "How are you doing, Joe?" with his predictable response of "Same ole, same ole." That seems to be the situation in several churches where I am invited to preach, and as a result there is a "Ho-hum" attitude among the congregation, because they know exactly what to expect every service. They can predict almost by the hands on the clock what will take place in each service, because nothing ever varies.

"Same ole, same ole" just won't do. While it is true the church cannot compete with action-packed TV programs, video games, computers, casinos, sports, etc. (nor should we!), it is also true that a little variety would certainly make our services more interesting and exciting. If "same ole, same ole" is the norm in our churches, it is little wonder that people try to find excuses to not go to church or to skip the Sunday evening or Wednesday services. We expect to keep things alive in our Jr. church programs, and teen ministries, but fail to realize that adults are simply grown-up kids.

I certainly don't make any claims to originality and I am not the guru on the church calendar of events or on keeping church services exciting, but I have had 43 years of pastoral experience and have found that the best way to keep the church "alive" was to offer some variety. There is no biblical "order of service" given to us, so there is nothing wrong with changing things around. The order in which you conduct your services should vary so that the "ho-hum" factor is minimized.

Instead of opening your service the same way each week, why not vary things. Open with a choir number one week and then switch to a special number the next. Place baptism at the beginning of the service instead of at the end. Do the same with the Lord's Supper service. Often Communion is "tacked on" to the end of a preaching service which tends to relegate it to something that needs to be hurried through and minimizes its importance. Perhaps you could preach on the Lord's Table after just serving it. Or even interrupt your message when you are dealing with the symbolism of the bread, and actually serve the bread at that time. Then do the same with the cup. The service would surely be more meaningful and the symbolism would be fresh. The same could be done with baptism. We often started our service with baptism, and did not just tack it on to the end. That highlighted its importance and was very practical as well. Move things around: offering, announcements, Bible reading, special music, etc. Keep them guessing. Throw them off balance. Help them to learn to expect the unexpected.

In prayer meetings change from group prayer, to prayer partners, to deacons leading, to the pastor leading, to silent prayer, etc. Also have prayer requests printed out on 3 X 5 cards to be handed out as people come into the auditorium and ask them to lead in prayer briefly about *those subjects*. Many prayer request sheets are way too long and often the "same ole, same ole" every week with very little changes. They become meaningless. It is highly doubtful that many church members will use them effectively. One can only hope...

You could start your service with a chorus or choir number, or begin with a hearty greeting and recognition of visitors (my pastor [Dr. Sal Yannizzi] is a master at making people feel personally recognized. He will often greet folks by name who are visiting, having spoken to them before the service and learning their names, or greeting those who haven't been in services in a while. He also mentions folks by name during his preaching and this has the advantage of keeping everyone alert – they never know when he may mention *their* name!). Maybe you could begin the service with reading your sermon Bible text. (When reading Scripture, remember that although you have studied the passage and know its background and context, your listeners probably haven't, so it is important for you to give them some information that will be helpful to them and enable them to follow your thesis more intelligently. It might also be helpful to define unfamiliar terminology [*"leesing" means lying, for example – or, "houghing horses" means severing the tendon in the horse's ankles so they cannot be used for warfare – KJB*] as you read the text.)

Since "a merry heart" is like medicine, a little humor in the services is a great way to keep attention and also to liven up (and maybe even lighten up) your message when you are dealing with some heavy subject. Using *relevant* illustrations adds to the attention of your listeners and also gives them a moment to apply the truth you are speaking about and relaxes their minds. Spurgeon spoke of illustrations as equivalent to the windows in a house, i.e., they let the light in. With the internet and the volumes of illustrative material available to us these days there is no excuse not to find something appropriate for each main section of your message.

I am not a homiletical expert but don't assume that your congregation knows where you are going with your message. Therefore an *appropriate*, and not-too-lengthy introduction, is very important. Spurgeon likened the introduction to the porch on a house. He advised that we shouldn't let our guests stand on the porch too long, but invite them into the house (your subject in the body of the sermon). I have heard introductions which were too short and didn't prepare the hearers for the message, and others which were rambling and not relevant to the subject at hand, and I have been guilty of both.

The message itself should be clearly and expertly outlined. Even when you are dealing with an exposition of a text, there should be a clear outline, not just a running commentary. (If your people needed a commentary they could buy one that would probably be more exhaustive than yours in a 35 to 45 minute message.) An outline solidifies your thoughts and imparts a natural progression to your message. Each sub-point to your message should add up to your main point. Each main point should add up to your thesis or subject. (Sub-point + sub-point = main point. Main point + main point = subject.)

Each of your sermons should stand alone, even if you are doing a verse-by-verse study of a book of the Bible. People should be able to miss a service and then still feel satisfied that they have received a complete message from your text. If your messages are thoroughly researched and thoughtfully prepared they should be able to enlighten and challenge visitors as well as regulars without necessarily relating to the previous sermon(s). In the ideal world everyone would be regular attenders and not miss out on your previous expositions, but we all know better.

Whenever possible use some visual aid in your teaching and preaching. We cannot perform miracles as did our Savior, but we can do as He did when teaching and preaching ("*Consider the lilies of the field,*" etc. *I don't doubt that he pointed to lilies growing where he was preaching, or perhaps even held one in His hand!*) and use whatever is available to us. Today technology is affordable and available to even the smallest church. The larger, and more successful churches are all using it and the preacher who refuses to do so because great preachers of the past didn't do so or who use the excuse that you can't learn new technology, is unacceptable (Most of us are not orators like Spurgeon, Hyles, or R.G. Lee et.al.).

Visual aids to illustrate your message do not necessarily require the use of technology (although it should be considered). You can use people from the congregation on occasion to illustrate Bible characters, etc. Use objects, costumes, posters, banners, slogans, the overhead projector, a video projector, people or even animals (*I use a live sheep when illustrating the Day of Atonement, with great effectiveness*). We have all been taught that people will remember what they see and hear, more than what they hear alone. (*I also use three light bulbs of different wattage and color to illustrate Daniel 12:3 compared with 1 Cor. 15:40,41.*) Folks often comment to me how they remember the last time I was with them in their church and preached a certain message using a visual they recall. It is odd that we encourage our Sunday School teachers to use flannelgraph, objects, etc. and fail to take advantage of what is available to us when the truths we are preaching are at least as valuable as the lessons they are teaching. (Visit a local public school classroom and see what your competition is doing. What they teach may be wrong, but they use every means available to get their message out and embedded in the minds of their students. Should a Gospel preacher do less?)

The title to a sermon is very important and should reflect what you are attempting to get across. When did you ever read a book or watch a TV show or motion picture that didn't have a title? A catchy title will often be all that people remember specifically about your message long after it has been preached. For example, several preachers, including myself, have used the title of one of Warren Wiersbe's books: "**The Bumps Are What You Climb On**" as a message title. People will remember the title and the thesis of trials being something helpful instead of harmful because of the title. One message I have preached that God has used was on the concept of being content; a principle that many believers neglect. I titled it "**You Can Ask to Change Seats, But...**" Many have commented about remembering the message because of the title and that it reminded them that they need to be content regardless of circumstances. Use whatever you can to help make your message memorable, not just another "ho-hum" sermon to be forgotten before the crowd leaves the building.

May I take the liberty to air one of my pet peeves? The Bible clearly states that preachers are to "**Preach the Word.**" They are not to preach *about* the Word! There are several ways to obey the scriptural admonition. 1) Preach **expository** messages (really *expounding* the passage) [*I believe some preachers avoid expository preaching because it is too much work or because they don't understand how to use a portion of Scripture to construct a meaningful and helpful message.*] 2) Preach **principles** from the Word (not just the preacher's philosophy 3) Preach **textual** messages (and stick to the text, but illustrating it, and every illustration should

illustrate *the Scripture*, not just fill in dead sections of the message. One of the problems I see is that it is obvious that the preacher hasn't devoted enough time to preparing the sermon. Perhaps he has allowed other less important things to become a priority over his main task of feeding the flock with the meat of God's Word. Too much time in outside activities, e.g., visiting disgruntled members, chasing after programs, trying to build the church on human models, too much time on the computer, with the TV, sports, etc., etc., etc. ?????????? The "unpardonable sin" of preachers is misplaced priorities, as I see it. Now please don't get upset with me here and throw the baby out with the bath water. If this point bothers you, you probably need the admonition.

Plan the conclusion of your message carefully. If the introduction and main body of the message are important, then surely the conclusion is vital to the spiritual success of the sermon. You should be able to state clearly the aim or thesis of your message in a short sentence so you (and your audience) can grasp the concept you are preaching, and you should emphasize that thesis in your conclusion and press for a decision relating to it. You should have a clear destination when you begin the journey that is your message. That destination is your conclusion or invitation. What do you want people to do (or believe) as a result of what you have preached. If your destination is unclear in your mind it will be unclear in your hearer's minds as well. They need to know clearly what you expect of them.

What about focus? To really build your church you need a strong Sunday night and Wednesday night crowd. The Sunday-go-to-meetin' crowd will never really build your church or pay the bills. You need to expend the most energy on your Sunday PM and Wednesday PM messages and services. (Please read the previous treatise on "VAIN REPETITIONS" for more help here.) This is where you really need to prepare delicious and attractive "meals" for your flock. These are the services where you will build your people, which in turn will build your church. If variety is the spice of life, then the "same ole, same ole" is not going to cut it. Put much thought and preparation into the structure of those services and the content of your preaching and teaching. Preach relevant and meaningful series. Preach book studies. Serve them the meat of the Word. You can reserve the appetizers and milk for the morning crowd.

Highlight ministries and opportunities for service often. Let people know what is available to them in your church for them to serve the Lord. Ask people to help each other with a "Helping Hands" ministry. Ladies can cook meals for shut-ins, bake cookies for the blind and deaf, clean their homes, etc. Let everyone feel needed. Enlist everyone in some aspect of the ministry. Stress soul-winning and hold regular "how to" sessions and classes. Have shut-in members address envelopes, send cards, etc. (One elderly lady in our church went through the large telephone directory in our general area and sent a personal note and a gospel tract to everyone. She would send a few each week. She even paid for the postage in spite of the fact that we offered to do so. P.S. Be sure you know what is going out in your church's name.) Remember you go soul-winning as a Christian, not as the pastor. You should set the example, but your main responsibility is to "feed the flock, take heed to the flock and lead the flock."

Change the atmosphere! The auditorium and Sunday School rooms should be decorated monthly or at least seasonally. People should notice that you are concerned with details and activities and the holidays that they are aware of. Go to the local Mall and see how they do it! Copy them. It doesn't need to be expensive, just neatly done. Surely someone in your church has some decorative ability. Search them out and use them. I was always surprised that someone was more than willing to do this and do it well, even at their own expense sometimes.

Auditorium décor should be tasteful but not overdone. Traditional is always best. Fads come and go. Have someone who knows how to decorate in charge of this. (Forget committees!) When you visit a home that is especially attractive, enlist that person. Lighting, especially on the pulpit and choir area, is extremely important – that's where the focus of the congregation is. The auditorium should be lighted brightly enough that people don't have to squint to read their Bible or take notes. Windows are one area that can help with lighting, but should not allow people to see what is going on outside; hence the need for drapes or sheer curtains. Windows without at least sheers create harsh outside lighting to enter the auditorium or class room. Besides, windows are not often cleaned especially on the outside due to the difficulty of reaching them, so they become a distraction and people may judge your church as not being clean. If you want to reach everyone you can details like this are important. You want visitors to return and if they see that you can't even wash windows, what does that suggest about the cleanliness of the church overall (not to mention rest rooms!)? Everything in the auditorium should be straightened after each service. (Often, a senior saint can be enlisted for this purpose.) The auditorium must be cleaned each week, and everything should be thoroughly dusted – including the musical instruments. Details! Details! Someone said that if we will take care of the details the big things will be taken care of automatically!

Helpful suggestions based on personal experience. Of course you don't have to copy what is suggested, but hopefully you will find some things which will help your ministry. Each month of the year brings unique and special opportunities to build your ministry. Here are some we have used and/or have seen used effectively.

- January:** New Year theme with a banner and classroom posters. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) could be a Bible theme used for this month, (High Priest, Tabernacle) (*Israeli flag, theme banner*)
- February:** Although not a Christian holiday, Valentine's Day is a perfect time to emphasize marriage, the home, etc. with a "Heart Banquet" for couples. Make it really special with a nice place, décor, etc. You can also emphasize leadership re: President's Day, etc., Snow Camp (*President's pictures, hearts*)
- March:** Missions Conference, Revival, Sunday School promotion (*flags, posters*)
- April:** Spring promotion, messages from Esther (Purim), Passover, the Lord's Table, the Passion of Christ, Easter, special bus promotion to get back the winter drop outs, income tax !!!! (*bus promo flyers, Easter decorations, Passover service*)
- May:** Memorial Day (the unofficial beginning of summer), patriotic themes, honor veterans, Mother's Day, Armed Forces Day, revive soul-winning in nice weather (*patriotic decorations*)
- June:** School's out! Get those kids in Sun. Schl.! Camp for kids, Father's Day, Flag Day (*camp reminders, summer decorations*)
- July:** 4th of July (Patriotic), Tent Revival?, Outdoor activities, picnics, etc., summer sports, outdoor services? (good evangelistic opportunity) (*patriotic decorations, revival banners*)
- August:** Teen Camp, outdoor services?, Tent Revival? (*camp posters, summer decorations*)
- September:** Firstfruits, harvest time, Fall S.S. promotion, back to school (*harvest, School decorations*)
- October:** Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), harvest time, fall begins, Columbus Day (leadership, courage), Prophecy Conference (*Israeli flag, harvest decorations*)
- November:** Elections, Thanksgiving (candlelight testimony service), King James Bible Conference (*Thanksgiving, harvest decorations*)
- December:** Christmas, first day of winter, Hannukah (Festival of Lights celebrating dedication of 2nd Temple in 2nd Century BCE celebrated for eight nights with a Menorah, New Year's Eve (*Christmas decorations*)

Lastly, let me encourage those of you who run a bus ministry. We all know that gas is expensive and that bus insurance is exorbitant, and maintenance is a headache, but children (and their parents) are still lost and can be reached using buses effectively. If bus captains (or pastors?) do their job they will reach into the homes to win the parents of the kids they transport. That must be the goal of a real bus ministry; otherwise it is merely a transportation service. At one point in our ministry at Faith Baptist in Fairless Hills, PA, 40% of our membership came directly or indirectly through the bus ministry. That was our goal initially and it was only when the bus workers lost that vision that parents were no longer being reached. But it takes work and dedication – soul-winning. Every week of the year we made flyers for the bus workers and had some kind of promotion to give out and required 3 hours visitation on each route on Saturdays, plus some time enlisting new riders. Then as visitors came they were visited by the bus captain or another soul-winner for follow up. It was, and can still be a viable method for church growth and for winning lost people to Christ for eternity. Never lose the vision!

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