

10-1996

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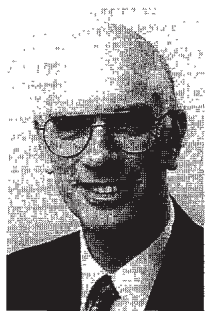
Manners, B. (1996). Battling the worship committee. *Ministry: International Journal for Pastors*, 68(10), 10-12.

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Battling the worship committee

Bruce Manners

An honest look at pastors and their truest role in corporate worship



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Don't get the idea that I'm against worship committees. I'm not. Bless their computer-printout programs, the worship committee is the best thing that's happened in church since Isaac Watts revolutionized church music.

But in so many places the worship committee is taking over the worship hour. It's time for preachers to hit back!

More than likely you'll recognize the following worship scene; it's something that happened to me a few weeks ago. And it probably happened in a church not too far from you.

I glance at my watch: 11:28 a.m. The children are being called to the front pews for a story.

I take another look at the program. There's a musical item, a skit, and a hymn before I preach.

The story ends at 11:41 and, fortunately, includes the musical item.

It's 11:53. I'm about to stand to preach. One of the elders leans across and whispers, "You take whatever time you need."

As a visiting preacher, I'm not exactly sure what that means, but I nod knowingly. As I stand behind the pulpit, I notice several people checking their watches. The elder may be happy for me to preach for as long as I like, but the congregation seems to have other ideas.

After the service I ask whether worship often goes past midday. Often, I'm assured. A deacon tells me of a recent visiting minister who began to preach "on the stroke of midday."

"And he preached for a full 45 minutes," he adds.

There's a hint of pride.

But wait a minute, the worship hour (do we drop the word "hour"?) was never meant to be endured. And if we expect people to spend an hour or more in Sabbath school as well as attend the worship program, we have to look not only at the content of the latter program, but also at the length. That's a message preachers *and* worship committees need to hear.

Is it that the worship committee fears that the preacher may not produce the goods for the members and therefore feels it must make up for it? Is it the committee's intent to fill the hour so full of other things that the preaching ends up as just another part of the program? Is it to keep the people happy?

Preachers can hit back, not with a takeover of the worship committee (although there should be a close liaison between the preacher and the worship committee), but by doing best what preachers should do best—preach.

Here are 10 preaching suggestions to keep your congregation on the pews' edge.

1. Competition always a reality.

You can't assume that just because people have come to church they're going to forget the professionalism of speakers they see on television: the quick wit of the television show host, the rehearsed and carefully written humor, or the closeup emotion of a soap opera.

2. Be sweet and short.

Neil Postman reminds us of days past when the spoken word could be tolerated for longer times. He illustrates with debates between Stephen A.

Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. In one, Douglas spoke first, for an hour; Lincoln responded, for an hour and a half; then Douglas had a half hour to rebut Lincoln's reply.

On another occasion, Douglas spoke for three hours and Lincoln was to respond. Noting that it was 5:00 p.m., Lincoln told the audience he would probably need as much time as Douglas and Douglas was scheduled for a rebuttal. He suggested the audience go home and come back after dinner for four more hours of talk. They did! And neither debate took place during an election.*

Warning: Don't try this at church. These men were trained professionals. More important, these events took place in the 1850s.

We live in the days of the photo opportunity, the sound bite and brevity of *Reader's Digest* style, the *One-Minute Bible* and publishers' extracts; and of problems solved in 30 minutes on sitcoms. It's a brave ("foolish" would fit most times) preacher who talks for more than 25 minutes.

3. Take time to prepare.

The worship hour is the most significant time in any church. There are no other occasions when you have most of the members in one place on a regular basis. Preachers need to recognize the importance of this weekly event. It needs to be the most significant time in our lives as well.

That means preparation.

Most preachers are busy people—especially the church pastor, who is expected to be available for whatever crisis a church attender may have. But if preparing the sermon takes a low priority, listening to it will take an even lower priority.

An hour's preparation on Friday night (or worse, Sabbath morning) just isn't good enough. Why should preachers be taken seriously if they aren't serious about their preaching?

In fact, we cheat our congregations if we haven't taken the time to be properly prepared. We cheat ourselves and our reputation. Worse, we're cheating on the One who called us to preach.

4. Throw away your Spurgeon and your *Zillion and One Sermon Illustrations*—unless you can adapt some of the illustrations you find there. The guest preachers of the past, including Spurgeon, were great preachers because they spoke to the people of their times. If they were preaching today they would preach differently. The message may be the same, but the style would be different.

Read Spurgeon and the other greats from past eras for your own inspiration, but don't expect that they will inspire too many in your congregation. The illustration that will inspire is something from the here and now. This is probably the genius of Bill Hybels—he illustrates the biblical text with the 1990s.

And the biblical text does need illustrating to make it real and relevant for even the most informed congregation. You can preach vividly of dusty sheep trails on Palestinian hillsides, but it may have little relevance for those whose lives are locked into the concrete and tar of city life.

5. Be relevant and varied.

When I was called away from pastoral ministry some five years ago, I discovered a truth about preaching: the local pastor has a huge advantage over any guest preacher. The pastor knows the congregation.

The best preaching is practical and relevant to the needs of the congregation—that's the church pastor's advantage. The shepherd knows the sheep, their strengths, weaknesses, and needs. The people appreciate a word from the Lord that touches their needs.

Variety in preaching content and style is particularly important for those who regularly preach in one church. Just as a one-note piano would soon be tiresome, so it is with a one-theme preacher. Variety in preaching is a recognition of the various needs of the congregation.

6. Find your dairy farmer.

Early in my ministry I was given a church in the Gippsland area of Victoria, Australia. There were a number of dairy farmers in the congregation. I learned more about preaching from those dairy

farmers than they'll ever know.

Every Sabbath morning they were up at 4:00 a.m. to bring the cows in for milking. They rode their motorbikes over their properties in the steep Strezlecki Ranges; they chased cows on foot ("There's nothing quite so stupid as a cow," they'd often tell me); they'd run to get their 80, or 100, or 120 cows through the milking sheds.

After all this activity they'd *always* be at Sabbath school on time. But then, Sabbath school was fine because of the interaction during lesson time. Hymn singing in church was OK, because they were involved. But then came the sermon.

I knew I'd preached well if I could keep all the dairy farmers awake. That was my aim every week. I enjoyed the successes. I try to forget the failures, especially the Sabbath one farmer not only slept through the sermon and the final hymn, but staggered bleary-eyed out of church some 15 minutes after everyone else!

There's a dairy farmer in every congregation. Find him or her. Is it a teenager who sits in the back row? the businesswoman who just can't get her mind off her business? the father who is distracted by his children?

Find your dairy farmer and accept the challenge of reaching him or her each week. Your preaching will be the better for it.

7. Preach with enthusiasm.

It's hard for the congregation to get excited about something for whom the preacher isn't enthusiastic. We don't have to yell, thump the desk, or stalk across the platform to show enthusiasm. The listeners will pick up on a preacher's genuine enthusiasm.

With the best news ever (the good news) as the basis for our preaching, shouldn't we be just a bit excited?

8. Live the life.

All things considered, the very worst advertisement for our preaching is to say one thing in the pulpit and live something else outside. The old proverb "What you do speaks so loudly I can't hear what you

say" is especially true for preachers.

Besides, the pressure (guilt) of not living a life consistent with the Christian qualities we espouse will sap the energy and enthusiasm we need to be great preachers. People will tend to sense this kind of inconsistency, even on an unconscious level.

Let's never set ourselves up as if we believe we're the perfect example of Christian living. We're part of the people in the pew in this life pilgrimage.

9. Preach the Man.

Part of our ordination commitment is to preach the Word. Doing anything less belittles the worship hour. Let's search for ways to best explain the Word. Illustrations from world news, the latest psychological and sociological findings, and historical research are all valid, but we go too far if these illustrations become the center of our preaching.

Neither is preaching the time for expounding our pet theories, pet theology, or pet prophecies. It's meant for the preaching of the Word, and for the uplifting focus on that Word who became flesh, Jesus Christ.

Let us determine to fix the congregation's eyes on the "author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2, NIV). It's worth remembering that we fail miserably if the people see the preacher rather than the Man.

10. Preach powerfully.

Powerful preaching can come only from one plugged into the power source. This means our lives have to be organized enough so that we spend time with God. Or better, our lives need to be organized around the time we spend with God.

When it comes to the bottom line, there is no preaching method, no technique, no creative ability that can take the place of the Spirit working through the preacher. The Spirit working through the preacher is the source of powerful preaching.

What a challenge! But we preachers love a challenge—that's why we preach.

Pastor's role on the worship committee

For the past 12 months I've been a member of my local church's worship

committee. You might find the following suggestions helpful:

- *Work with the worship committee.* The worship program should be a team effort. You don't have to be the chairperson of the committee, but you should be involved.

- *Share your philosophy.* If the worship committee knows your philosophy of worship and the approach you prefer, you both are better able to work together to produce an approach that fits your church.

- *Be willing to negotiate.* Not all church members will share your philosophy of worship, and neither will the committee. Be willing to negotiate.

- *Be appreciative.* When the worship committee does well, don't fail to show your appreciation.

- *Be honest.* When things don't work, talk it through frankly with the worship committee. Prepare the committee early in its life (first meeting) for honest appraisals of worship programs.

- *Share the theme.* Plan well ahead so that the worship committee can build the program around the preacher's theme for the day. They should have at least four weeks notice; eight weeks is better. A longer lead time is needed for big events.

- *Assign responsibility.* You and the worship committee both need to know

who is responsible for what. Who chooses the hymns or songs? Is there a scripture reading each week? A children's time? Who organizes them?

- *Occasionally plan a big project.* Special-event Sabbaths will challenge worship committee members. It's a challenge they should enjoy, and when they pull it off it becomes one of their warm memories and a memory for the church.

- *Solicit suggestions on preaching topics.* Ask the committee members occasionally if they have any suggestions for your preaching. You will be surprised at the response.

- *Trust the committee.* Let the committee do its work. Checking on every detail will add to your burden and may betray your distrust of the members of the committee.

- *Support the committee.* Talk hard and fast in the committee if you have to, but support the committee outside the committee room. The members will find it difficult to support you if you don't support them.

- *Talk of ministry.* Let the committee know that you consider its work to be an important part of the ministry of your church. ■

* Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), p. 44.

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