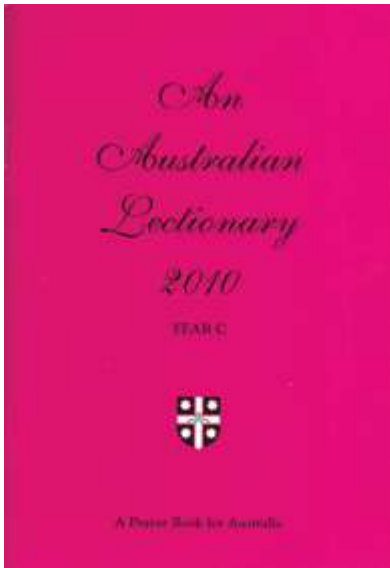
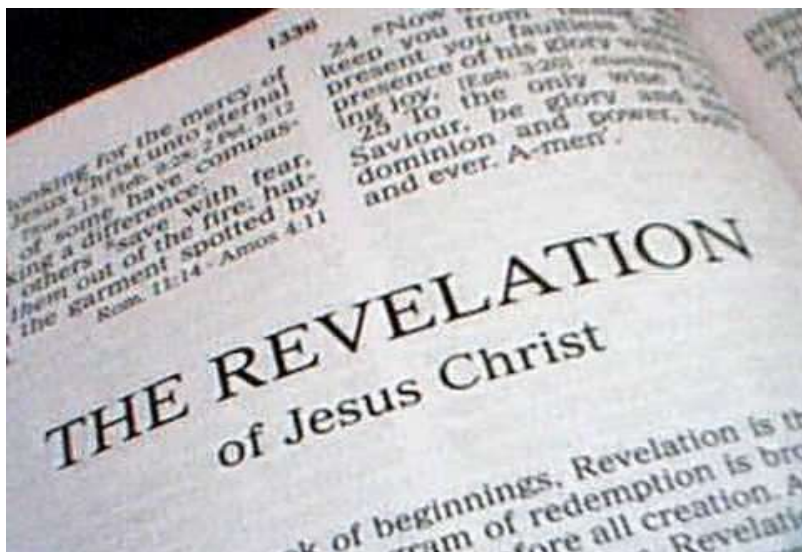


Preach through the Lectionary or through books of the Bible?



It doesn't have to be a choice of one or the other. It's entirely possible to alternate between a term preaching through the Lectionary readings and a term preaching through a biblical book. At the same time, care must be taken when preaching through the Lectionary not to impose on the numerous texts chosen for the day a connection that isn't there. Where there *is* recognition of the diversity of each text in its context, we also need to avoid overloading and even confusing our hearers with three or even four mini-sermons within the one sermon. A good way to do that is to focus the sermon on *one* passage, and, if it's helpful to, *refer to* the others.

If you've never preached through or helped preached through a biblical book, it might seem a bit daunting, but we would encourage you to have a go. Start with small steps. Devote one school term this year to preaching through a biblical book rather than from the Lectionary readings.



Some important benefits in doing a series on a biblical book:

- It exposes the congregation to other parts of the Bible, which will broaden and deepen their understanding of the Bible's overarching message and of the good news about Jesus. Yes, preaching through Exodus will do that! One grand narrative or story is progressively unfolded in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.
- The choice of a specific biblical book to preach through can be guided by the congregation's present spiritual condition and circumstances; in other words, the preaching plan is

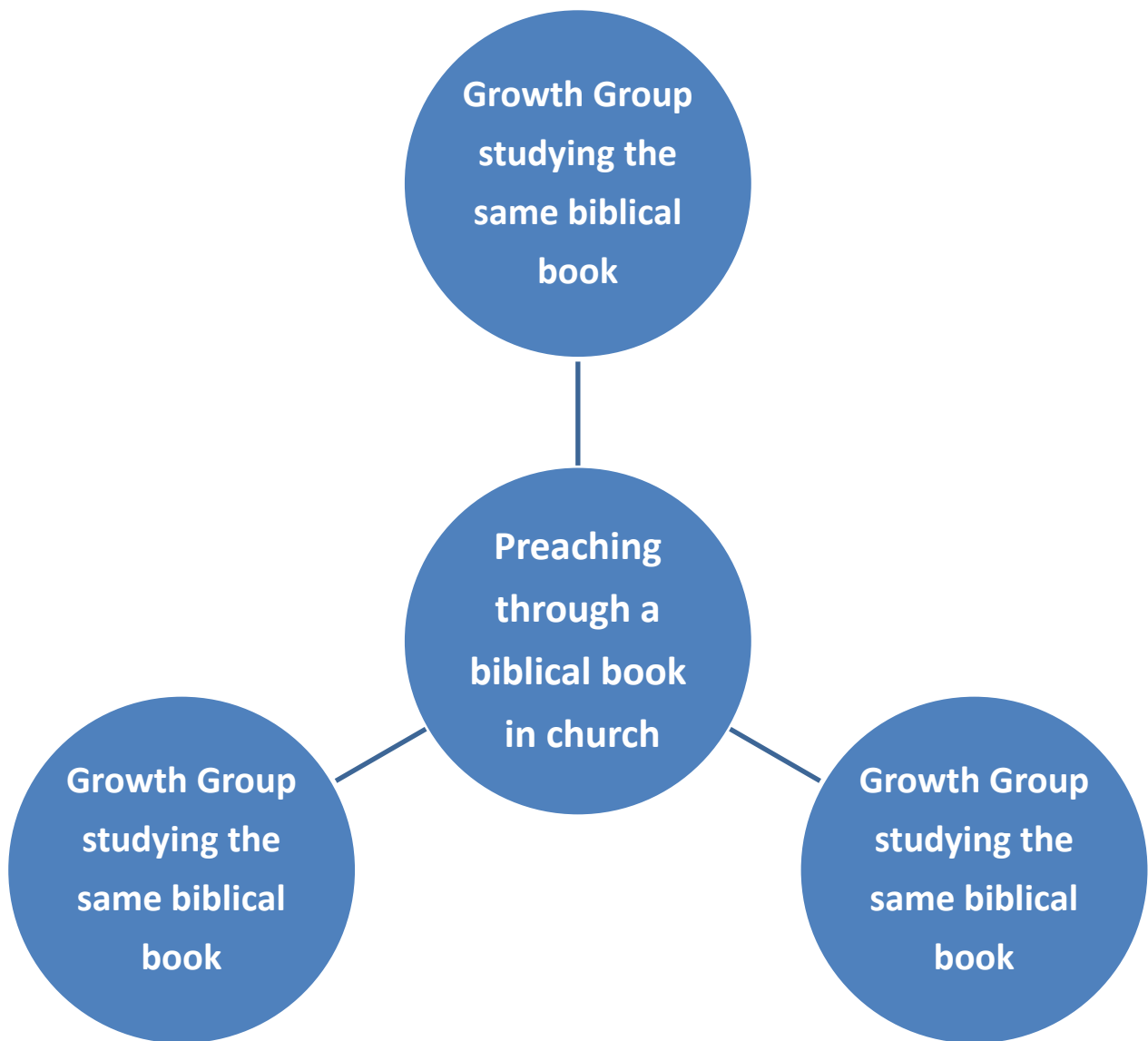
pastorally-driven. A preaching series can also be responsive to wider issues and crises in the world.

- The congregation develops an understanding of an entire biblical book – its place in God’s unfolding revelation, its specific background and purpose, its distinctive theology and themes in context, and in the case of letters or epistles, its argument against some problem in the church – problems that are almost always present in our churches, too – disunity, false teaching, lack of love, pride, elitism, etc. Getting a ‘handle’ on a whole book of the Bible like this can be very satisfying for your church members, as well as helpful, as it gives them some confidence in going back and reading and understanding the book for themselves.

Working through different books of the Bible enables the preachers and the congregation to deal with difficult passages and to make rich discoveries in neglected or obscure texts; and it enables the preachers in a church to come closer to the goal of declaring ‘the whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27).

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- Related to the last point, continual Lectionary preaching on the Gospels presents a vital but incomplete portrait of Jesus. He told the disciples that ‘all the Scriptures’ were about him (Luke 24:27). Other biblical books (Old and New Testament) will deepen, expand and enrich our understanding of Jesus and his saving work and his present rule. Is it just possible that many of our church members have a Gospel-eyed view of Jesus (the incarnate Jesus) but not also a Lord-of-the-nations view of Jesus (the ascended and glorified Jesus)?
- Home groups can easily be linked with the preaching program. When biblical books are chosen that have good study guides written on them (and many do), home groups have an inexpensive, helpful resource with which to work through the same biblical book that is being preached on, and in more detail, with opportunity to apply the text more specifically. If home group members are also reading the passage to be studied at home, they will have read and thought about the same passage at least three times in the week (alone, in their group, and in church). All of this aids real engagement with the text of Scripture and real learning and change – which is what it’s all about!



How do you plan a preaching series?

In his excellent book, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching*, Peter Adam says that the choice of Bible readings for church and preaching is itself a ministry of the Word (p.60). That's because a deliberate and pastoral choice is made of one reading, and in the case of a series, of one biblical book over another; and pastorally-driven choices are made of passages within the one biblical book. It isn't usually possible to cover everything.

So when planning a preaching series, your church leadership will prayerfully consider the felt, actual and spiritual needs of the congregation in its context – local community, nation, world. The leadership might ask some diagnostic questions and plan accordingly. The questions could belong to distinct categories relating to the congregation's theological maturity and moral or relational behaviour:

- Are there interpersonal issues or moral problems that need addressing? Disunity, division around certain personalities, bitterness or malicious talk, tolerance or accommodation of immorality?
- Are there doctrinal deficiencies or weak spots?

- Is there a general lack of confidence in Christ to save and keep us (Heb 3:6)?
- Is there generally a poor understanding of the Christian gospel and an urgent need to give the congregation 'milk' before 'solid food' (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:12)?
- Is the congregation's foundation or identity marker something other than the apostolic gospel, for example, its history, buildings, church tradition or style, its theological emphases (1 Corinthians 3:10-11)?

A sermon series that would address the last four needs and similar problems would be one that examines the person and work of Christ. Working through the New Testament book of Hebrews would do that and more! Here's a suggested outline for preaching through Hebrews in ten weeks (a school term). This series would work especially well through Lent and beyond Easter, with Palm Sunday and Easter providing a short but complementary break:

Week 1	Heb 1:1-2:4	God's Final Word
Week 2	Heb 2:5-18	Only Human
Week 3	Heb 3:1-4:13	Stick at it!
Week 4	Heb 4:14-7:28	God's Final Priest
Week 5	Heb 8:1-13	God's Final Covenant
Week 6	Heb 9:1-10:18	God's Final Sacrifice in the Final Temple
Week 7	Heb 10:19-39	Don't Shrink Back!
Week 8	Heb 11:1-12:3	Keeping the Faith, Running the Race
Week 9	Heb 12:4-13	Don't Lose Heart!
Week 10	Heb 12:14-13:25	Preventing Bitter Roots from Taking Root

[A preaching series can also work well with themes and semi-independent units within biblical books.](#) For example, working systematically through the 'I am' statements of Jesus in John's Gospel, through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, the Upper Room Discourse in John 13-17, the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 & 3, 1 Corinthians 11/12-14 on the nature and purpose of church, Genesis 1-12 for a biblical worldview.

[Another type of series is a series of sermons on the same text over a few weeks.](#) Some texts are so pregnant with concepts and ideas, and lend themselves to so much application, that they warrant taking a few weeks to mine their truths and develop their application to the congregation.

[A topical preaching series once a year](#) has the benefit of bringing a change in format to a series as well as enabling the preachers to deal biblically and pastorally with important issues affecting the church and/or world. The best way to do this is to work out your series structure around the topic, then choose a Bible passage that will best deal with the topic each week.

For example, a topical series on 'The Bible – what is it and what's it for?' could look something like this:

Week 1	How do we know anything about God? Psalm 19; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Week 2	God's Final Word to us – Jesus John 1:1-18; Hebrews 1:1-4
Week 3	What did Jesus think of the Bible? John 5:36-47; Luke 24:25-27, 44-49
Week 4	What did the apostles think of the Bible? 2 Peter 1:12-21; 2 Timothy 3:14-17
Week 5	What about the New Testament? John 14:23-26; 15:26-27; 16:12-15; 2 Peter 1:13-18; 3:13-18
Week 6	A true and trustworthy word from God Titus 1:1-4; Revelation 21:1-8
Week 7	God's words through human words Hebrews 3:7-4:7; 2 Peter 1:16-21
Week 8	How the Lord Jesus rules and sustains his church 2 Timothy 3:10-17; Matthew 4:1-4

All the Bible texts for each week could be read in church, but it is best (and easier!) to preach on one passage with reference to the others. That way, you are still dealing carefully with a passage in context.

Similarly, a topical series on the 'one another' commands in the New Testament can work very well, covering topics such as forgiving one another, loving one another earnestly, encouraging one another, showing hospitality to one another, serving one another, bearing with one another, etc.

In our increasingly secularized, skeptical society, an apologetics series is an important way both to encourage God's people and to equip them for answering common objections and questions. For example:

Week 1	Knowing how to answer the questions people are asking Col 4:2-6; Matt 5:13-16
Week 2	How do I know God exists? Rom 1:16-23; Mark 4:35-41
Week 3	You can't trust what the Bible says, can you? Psalm 19:1-14; John 14:25-31
Week 4	Is Jesus a legend, liar, lunatic or Lord? Acts 2:22-36; John 19:33-38
Week 5	Can I trust God with so much suffering in the world? 1 Pet 2:18-25; Luke 12:54-56; 13:1-5
Week 6	Can't we just be good enough to please God? Rom 3:9-20; Mark 12:28-34
Week 7	Do you have to go to church to be a Christian? Titus 2:11-14; Matt 25:36-51

Of course, church seasons such as Lent and Advent are very amenable to a topical series. Lent lends itself to all kinds of series topics, from an exploration of the gospel culminating with the cross and resurrection at Easter, to a series showing that Jesus features in every part of the Scriptures.

Topical [mini-series can be very effective](#), especially if they happen around significant times of the year. For example, a post-Easter mini-series could look something like this:

Easter 1	What does Jesus' resurrection mean for the world? Acts 17:22-31; Mt 28:16-20
Easter 2	What does Jesus' resurrection mean for the church? Acts 1:1-11; John 20:19-23
Easter 3	What does Jesus' resurrection mean for me? Col 3:1-4; Mt 24:21-31

Here's one that has as its topic 'life-changing love' while staying within one biblical book:

Week 1	The nature of God's love for us and ours for him 1 Pet 1:3-9
Week 2	The nature of our love for the world 1 Pet 2:11-17
Week 3	The nature of our love for God's people 1 Pet 4:7-11

Here's a topical mini-series that tackles the important issue of God's sovereignty over the world and his people, from an Old Testament book whose three chapters lend themselves to a mini-series.

Week 1	Does God care about the injustice and sin that afflict his people? Habakkuk 1
Week 2	How can God use evil to achieve his purposes? Habakkuk 2
Week 3	The place of faith in an insecure world Habakkuk 3

As your preachers grow in confidence in preaching in series, you could eventually pattern your whole year on a series of series. For example, depending on how long each series is, you could have in a year one Old Testament series and two New Testament series punctuated with one topical series or with a thematic mini-series within a biblical book (as discussed above). Of course, along the way will be special sermons for Easter and Christmas, and possibly also Pentecost, Trinity, around Anzac Day, Mothers' and Fathers' Day, etc.

Important steps in shaping the series when preaching through a biblical book:

- Pray for help in understanding the biblical book and in dividing it up for preaching to your particular congregation at this particular time.
- If the book or letter is short enough, first read it through quickly, then re-read it carefully, noting down the passages and ideas that stand out or seem especially relevant for your congregation at this time, major themes, and the main divisions in the book (which may or may not be the same as those in the particular version of the Bible you are using).
- Compare how one or two good commentaries or a Bible Introduction divide the book and make any necessary adjustments to your structure.
- Try writing a summary of the overall message or argument of the book, noting how this and its various themes are developed.
- Divide the book into units for preaching on. These may or may not correspond to your structure of the book; in other words, a division of text may require more than one sermon; and the number of units you choose will be governed by the length of the series. You will probably need to include some passages and not others. This will largely be pastorally determined in view of the needs and issues relevant to your congregation.
- Try to work out the main idea of each unit to be preached on. If you find that two or more of your preaching units have the same idea, you might want to substitute another passage that you had not selected. When you've done this, see what help a basic commentary can give on refining your findings.
- See if you can come up with an interesting sermon title and main theme for each passage. Getting this out in advance will be very helpful for your service leaders and musicians, and publishing the sermon series in your newsletter will create anticipation and momentum. If you are part of a preaching team, and can allocate passages to preachers, they have the benefit of seeing in advance the shape and direction of the series, how and where their passages fit in, and of being alert to potential illustrative material.