

WHAT IS EXPOSITORY PREACHING?

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WHAT IS EXPOSITORY PREACHING?

In the milieu in which we are living, expository preaching is in a state of confusion. Travel from one church to another and you will likely find a wide array of preaching that labels itself expository. The differences that you may encounter will amaze you. So what exactly is expository preaching? Is it merely a subjective rendering of preaching based on the individual preacher's style, or is it something more? Is there an objective logic behind expository preaching that provides a basic defining pattern by which expository preaching can be defined? This work seeks to determine if expository preaching can be defined, and if so, then how? What is expository preaching?

The first question that must be asked is, "what is the role of the preacher's sermon?" Is the preacher simply trying to convey information, or is he trying to persuade people to a lifestyle of transformation in conformity to God's Word? If he is merely conveying information, then solid exposition of the text will be sufficient. Koller describes exposition as an analysis of the text in which there is an exegesis of the passage based on a close study of the words and phrases used, while also taking into account the immediate and remote context, as well as the historical-cultural background of the text.¹ If a sermon is designed to be persuasive, in order to bring about spiritual transformation, then the lecture style of exposition will not be sufficient. In this case, exposition must be combined with solid argumentation and exhortation. To put it another way, persuasion

¹ Charles W. Koller, *How to Preach Without Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 21.

and application must be grafted into the exposition in a way in which it calls people to a change of direction in their lives.

In Romans 10:8-15, the apostle Paul teaches that true preaching is designed to bring about spiritual transformation, not simply to give information. Hebrews 4:12 reminds us of the power of the living and active Word of God to transform lives.² Also, we learn in Acts 17:2-4 that Paul used reasoning, explanation, and giving of evidence in order to persuade the Thessalonians to believe in Christ.

Biblically, it is clear that the role of the preacher's sermon is more than conveying information. Since this is true, exposition of a text does not define expository preaching. Koller, rightly concludes that, "*an Exposition becomes a sermon, and a teacher becomes a preacher, at the point where application is made to the hearer, looking toward some form of response, in terms of belief or commitment.*"³ So the essence of expository preaching must include the elements of argumentation and persuasion. Since it has been established that expository preaching is preaching for transformation, where does the sermon begin?

Alistair Begg correctly notes that "*expository preaching always begins with the text of Scripture.*"⁴ He suggests that the preacher does not begin with an end in mind and then find a passage that supports his idea, but rather he begins with the Scripture itself and allows the shape and meaning of the passage to dictate the structure and message of

² Greg Heisler, *PRS 6100 Bible Exposition: Class Notes* (Wake Forest: SEBTS, 2009), 35.

³ Koller, 21.

⁴ Alistair Begg, *Today's Issues: Preaching for God's Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1999), 27.

the sermon.⁵ Olford and Olford agree with Begg's understanding as they suggest that the preacher must here "*distinguish between exposition and imposition....say what God says, and not what you want it to say!*"⁶ On this basis, expository preaching is preaching that is established on biblical authority and not the mere opinion of the preacher.

We must be careful at this point to remember a very important fact about biblical authority, namely its connection to the Holy Spirit. Heisler, rightly reminds expositors that, "*The Word is the instrument of the Spirit, and the Spirit is the implement of the Word. The Word is the written witness, and the Spirit is the inward witness.*"⁷ It is important for the preacher to remember this; because, it is the Spirit of God who molds and makes the preacher long before the preacher molds and makes a sermon.⁸ When the preacher faces the reality of his calling, he can then begin to pray to Christ for illumination and guidance in the crafting of the sermon, based on a text of Scripture. On this basis, the Holy Spirit is preeminent in the crafting and delivery of the sermon.

After the preacher has settled the above issues in his mind and has his passage in hand, what does he do with it? The preacher must now develop a message through a careful exegesis of the Scriptures. Richard cautions the preacher here by stating, "*Really, the Bible can be made to say almost anything you may want it to say. The critical*

⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁶ Stephen E. Olford and David L. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998), 75.

⁷ Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching: The Holy Spirit's Role in Sermon Preparation and Delivery* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Company, 2007), 62.

⁸ Ibid., 68.

*question is this: Are you saying what the Bible wanted to say?”*⁹ Richard’s point is that when you begin your interpretation of Scripture, you must be careful to determine the original author’s meaning. Broadus suggests that “*the thorough exegesis of a passage of Scripture will provide the thought for a sermon.*”¹⁰ He emphasizes that the preacher indeed must interpret, apply, and illustrate; but since in Scripture, he has his core message, there is no need for him to invent a message.¹¹ He succinctly states, “*the preacher adds illustration and application, and a sermon is prepared.*”¹² On this basis, an expository sermon is a sermon that is shaped by the determination of a careful exegesis of the passage’s original authorial intent. So is that it? Do we have an expository sermon after we have objectively determined the meaning of the passage based on its author’s original intention? Not quite! There is another element that is still missing.

Knowing the original author’s intention for a certain passage is an important step; however, we must keep in mind that his intention was for a certain group of people in a different time and culture. This means that we have some more work to do. At this stage in the understanding of an expository sermon, we must realize the subjective nature involved. The question we must ask ourselves is how do we relate the original meaning of our message in a way that is both relevant and meaningful to our contemporary culture without changing the message and its transformational effects? Stott rightly considers

⁹ Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method For Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 22.

¹⁰ John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons: Fourth Edition* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

expository preaching to be “*not exposition only, but communication, not just the exegesis of a text but the conveying of a God-given message to a living people who need to hear it.*”¹³ Stott has developed a metaphor of bridge-building that may be useful in navigating through this cultural divide. He puts it like this,

The chasm is the deep rift between the biblical world and the modern world...It is across this broad and deep divide of two thousand years of changing culture (more still in the case of the Old Testament) that the Christian communicators have to throw bridges. Our task is to enable God’s revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into the lives of men and women of today.¹⁴

What Stott is saying is that we, as preachers, who have been given a message from God, must communicate that message in a way that is understandable and applicable to our audience’s lives. Stott pleads that we,

Treat them as real people with real questions; that we grapple in our sermons with real issues; and that we build bridges into the real world in which they live and love, work and play, laugh and weep, struggle and suffer, grow old and die. We have to provoke them to think about their life in all its moods, to challenge them to make Jesus Christ the Lord of every area of it, and to demonstrate his contemporary relevance.¹⁵

In order for this to occur, we must craft a message that has cohesion of thought, based on the thought of the original author. Liefeld asserts that expository messages have movement and direction that is expressed through repetition of words and various expressions of emotion, among other things.¹⁶ He argues that “*if exposition is explanation, expository preaching is explanation applied....and that application will not*

¹³ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 137.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶ Walter L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library an imprint of Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 6-7.

*violate the purpose, meaning, or function of the text in its original setting.*¹⁷ Carter, Duvall, and Hays have another metaphor that is really saying the same thing. They call it “crossing the river,” and through this they advocate exegeting the audience.¹⁸ They state, “*If you plan to connect the message of the Scriptures with your people in a meaningful and dynamic manner, you must know your people.*”¹⁹

The need of application is so apparent that the preacher cannot ignore it. Chapell says, “*Without application, a preacher simply swings blindly, hoping that the ball of application will hit the bat of exposition.*”²⁰ Chapell has a phrase, which underscores the real subject of a message by revealing the Holy Spirit’s purpose in inspiring a passage, called “the Fallen Condition Focus (FCF).” It is defined as “*the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him.*”²¹ He teaches that application determines what information most strongly supports particular responses a passage requires of listeners in light of the FCF, saying, “*This is what you must do about that problem, need, or fault on the basis of what this passage means.*”²² Application gives exposition a target on which to focus, so that the preacher should have

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Preparing, Developing, and Delivering the Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 85.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 213.

²¹ Ibid., 50.

²² Ibid., 212.

the thrust of application clearly in mind before constructing the sermon.²³ After the sermon is completed, the preacher should be able to know: (1) if he heralded God's message in a way that the audience got it, and (2) that they know what they must do in response to it. Liefeld correctly observes that "*Expository preaching is an elusive ideal...Many preachers aspire to it, perhaps a good number feel they have attained to it, but in reality probably few are acknowledged masters.*"²⁴

CONCLUSION

After observing some of the key features of expository preaching, there are a few key elements that have been uncovered that will help us to determine a pattern by which we may define expository preaching. While it is true that the various subjective styles of preacher personalities do play into the picture, as the Holy Spirit has molded them, there is also a lucid, objective pattern found in authentic expository preaching. This work concludes with a review of these patterns.

True expository preaching is preaching for transformation. Expository preaching is preaching that is established on biblical authority and not the mere opinion of the preacher. Expository preaching always begins with the text of Scripture. The Holy Spirit is preeminent in the crafting and delivery of the expository sermon. The preacher does not have to invent a message. In Scripture, he already has been given his core message. An expository sermon is shaped by the determination of a careful exegesis of the passage's original authorial intent. Expository preaching is not exposition only, but the conveying of a God-given message to people who need to hear it. Expository sermons are

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Liefeld, 5.

cohesive structures with movement toward a clear destination. Expository preachers don't just exegete their passage, they exegete their audiences as well. Expository preaching is Gospel-centered, application-oriented preaching.

What is expository preaching? How would I define it? Expository preaching is preaching that explains, illustrates, and applies the text at hand in a way that persuades the audience to respond to the message God has given through the personality of the preacher molded and guided by the Holy Spirit.

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