

# WHAT IS EXPOSITORY PREACHING?

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Expository preaching may be considered anachronistic by many today as preachers seek to make the message relevant to a secularized culture. Many today criticize expository preaching as lazy, irrelevant and boring – useless for reaching modern audiences. The winds of relevancy in an instant gratification world are sweeping Bible exposition aside as preachers seek to meet the felt needs of their audiences. Caricatures of expository preaching are common among those who consider it futile to a modern, post-Christian culture, but I still believe that expository preaching is vital to the long-term health and holiness of God’s people. I consider it preventive medicine in the fight against unhealthy spiritual lifestyles, easily neglected in a fast food world. Godliness is not a quick fix. Holiness begins with healthy food from God’s Word. Expository preaching is the best way to feed people the deeper truths they need for healthy spiritual lives.

## WHAT EXPOSITORY PREACHING IS NOT

### **Expository preaching is not motivational speaking.**

Preachers have always known that inspirational messages excite listeners and generate crowds. Ancient rhetorical schools equipped speakers with the tools of persuasion in the first century. Motivational speakers use similar techniques to inspire people today. Preachers learn to adapt these skills with great success in the church. Passion and enthusiasm can quickly supplant exegetical and theological explanation. Preaching positive thinking can replace preaching biblical faith.

Excellent communication skills combined with a style crafted to appeal to a target audience help the preacher connect with people. People have great needs, many hurts and tough questions. The preacher identifies with the people; feels their pain and touches their feelings through heart-tugging stories sanctified by a biblical text or two. No attempt is made to deal analytically with the passage of Scripture. The preacher’s ideas rather than the ideas of the biblical passage form the structure and the content of the message. The preacher exudes a passionate and appealing style of communication.

There is nothing new about this approach. The style is different with each generation, but the method remains the same. It is a “pick a text and depart therefrom” approach. For example, preachers in the past would preach entire sermons on phrases like “break up the fallow ground” or “fields white unto harvest” entirely disregarding the context of the passage or the original author’s intent. Preachers today choose topics drawn from the headlines of the news feeds or the life section of the paper to grab people where they live. A biblical text is used to sanctify the preacher’s point without regard to the biblical context of the verse.

Preaching, of course, should inspire and motivate listeners. The danger is that we come to rely on our communication skills, style and techniques more than the power of God invested in His Word (1 Cor. 2:1-5). When eliciting an emotional response drives the message, the result is inspiration without foundation. When generating excitement becomes more important than explaining the Bible, the result is a faith that requires a regular emotional fix to remain strong. The listener depends on the preacher rather than the Bible to sustain his/her faith.

### **Expository preaching is not a topical talk.**

This method is very popular in evangelical churches. The preacher selects a theme or a topic to preach on and develops his thoughts around that theme or topic. The preacher can deal with topics of real interest to people and handle those topics winsomely. Audience analysis is crucial for selecting topics that will connect with the people. A short series of sermons on a relevant topic maintain interest and draw crowds. The sermons can be crafted creatively in the style of “TED Talks.” Sermons focus on life “apps.” They are hard hitting and provocative, challenging and interesting.

This method tends to allow a preacher to ride his favorite “hobby horse.” Topics interesting to the preacher and the audience dominate the preaching. Furthermore, there is a tendency to do real harm to the text by making it say something that it does not say. As the saying goes, “a text without a context is a pretext.” It is easy to take a text out of its context to support an idea. Unfortunately, we have trained Christians in our churches to believe that what the text says is not nearly as important as what it says to me! The meaning of the text is not as important as the application of the text in their minds. Whenever we divorce application from meaning our theology is founded upon quicksand because we no longer have an objective word of God by which to guide our lives.

One of the fundamental questions for preachers is: Am I using the biblical text as the source for what I am saying or as a resource for what I want to say? (H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, p. 47) Does my sermon idea derive from the biblical text in its context or does it come from my life in my context? The temptation of topical preaching is to allow the felt needs of my audience to drive the ideas of my sermon. When the audience determines the message, the authority of the preacher and his audience replaces the authority of Scripture. The preacher will use Scripture, quote Scripture and even talk about Scripture passages, but he uses them as a resource, not a source. The Bible verse is used to sanctify the idea of the preacher to address the felt needs of his audience. The text spiritualizes the preacher’s idea without generating the idea in the first place. The audience learns to place the authority in the cleverness of the preacher and not the veracity of the Bible. The audience learns to use the Bible to validate their ideas rather than searching the Bible to shape their lives.

### **Expository preaching is not verse by verse commentary.**

Verse by verse commentary is what many people think of when they think of expository preaching. The sermon follows the biblical passage verse by verse and clause by clause as it meanders through the Scripture. In this approach, the preacher simply organizes his sermon by either versification or sequential phrases. He speaks about each verse or phrase as he comes to it. It is sometimes referred to as “*stringing pearls together*” because the preacher emphasizes many wonderful tidbits of spiritual insight in the passage.

During my student days, I sat under a preacher who preached verse by verse and word by word. He called it expository preaching, but it was a stereotype that many have legitimately criticized in what has become a caricature of expository preaching. He would read the first word of the passage and launch on an extended explanation of the meaning of that word. Then he would

move to the next word or phrase and do more of the same. We would learn what that word meant in Greek and Latin. He would apply some insights to our lives from these word studies as he passed through the text. When the time was up, he would stop and pick up at that point the next week.

Verse by verse commentary is a form of exposition, but it is not expository preaching. There is no coherent message in the end, no main idea that the listener can take home. Often the listener finds that the sermon does not relate to his/her life in any relevant way. It is simply a lot of miscellaneous data albeit often very rich and beneficial information. The structure is not significant to the listener, and the listener does not understand the ideas that the biblical author was trying to communicate because the major ideas are lost in the running stream of the preacher's observations. The listener doesn't come away from the sermon understanding the biblical passage better although he has many wonderful nuggets of spiritual insight drawn from that passage.

### **Expository preaching is not a theological lecture.**

In this method, the preacher explains the text as a lecturer speaking about a piece of literature, history or theology. It often becomes a rather dry study in linguistics, grammar, and history. The preacher does not show how the text is relevant for people today. He assumes that the listener is interested in the history, grammar, or language of the biblical author. The purpose is to communicate information not persuade or motivate people. The preacher wants people to understand the full scope of a theological topic or the history of the Israelite people. The style of the sermon is analytical, more like a doctoral dissertation designed for a seminary or college classroom.

There is a place for theological and biblical lectures. We need information to anchor our faith on a solid foundation. Systematic theology is important for a coherent and rational faith. Biblical history helps us grasp the flow of Scripture and the events that shaped God's work in this world. We need teachers who explain these matters in the classroom. We need books that help us come to a systematic understanding of Christian theology. Theological and biblical lectures are valuable and interesting in the right settings, but they are not expository sermons. Nobody comes to church on Sunday morning hoping to learn where the Philistines came from or why the Lapsarian controversy is significant.

Life application is missing. This method does not relate the Scriptures to the needs of the people. The purpose is merely to be informative. The content is great, but the application is weak. When the purpose is merely to pass on information, the result is a head full of knowledge that does not change our lives in meaningful ways. The purpose of expository preaching is not informative. The purpose of expository preaching is to persuade and motivate people to change their lives by applying biblical principles to their contemporary situations. Exegetical analysis is important for the preacher to study, but the audience and contemporary issues are also important for the preacher to comprehend. The goal is not to pass on information about something that happened long ago and far away. The goal is to show people how the Bible speaks to our lives today, up close and personal.

## WHAT EXPOSITORY PREACHING IS

Expository preaching is the explanation of a biblical passage in its context that forms a complete unit of thought shaped by the intent of the original author and the structure of the passage which the Holy Spirit applies to the preacher and through the personality of the preacher makes the message relevant to people today (adapted from Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, Baker Academic, 2001, p.20).

Expository preaching ought to be the primary focus of the preaching ministry in the church. Why? Expository preaching allows the Word of God to speak for itself with a minimal amount of human interference. It exposes the text. In other words, it is the method that balances the exegetical with the practical seeking to understand the text as the author intended it to be understood and apply the text as the listeners need it applied. Expository preaching points people to trust in the authority of the Bible not the genius of the preacher. Expository preaching helps people understand the Bible and models for people how to study the Bible and apply it to our daily lives.

There are five key characteristics of an expository sermon.

### **1. The central idea of the passage as it stands in its context is the central idea of the sermon.**

The objective of the preacher is first to understand what the biblical author was trying to communicate with that unit of thought. The preacher must begin with what it meant to them in their day to determine what it means to us in our day. We are often tempted to bypass what it meant to get to how it applies to our lives. This temptation is always dangerous for preaching because it divorces our message from the authority of God's Word and marries the message to the cleverness of the preacher. Preaching can degenerate into form without substance and style without content. Many listeners in the postmodern world are attracted to messages that are appealing in style (dress, setting, atmosphere, "Jesus words") but lack biblical content.

Every expository sermon is preached on a unit of thought. The central idea of that unit of thought becomes the central idea of the sermon. The preacher must encapsulate the unit of thought into a single sentence with a subject and complement. Identifying the central idea may well be one of the most difficult parts of the process of preaching. The better the preacher can state the single main idea of the passage; the easier the sermon will be to preach. The weaker the central idea, the more problems the preacher will have in organizing the sermon.

*"No sermon is ready for preaching, nor ready for writing out until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence as clear as a crystal. I find the getting of that sentence the hardest, the most exacting, and the most fruitful labor in my study. To compel oneself to fashion that sentence, to dismiss every word that is vague, ragged ambiguous, to think oneself through to a form of words which defines the theme with scrupulous exactness – this is surely one of the most vital and essential factors in the making of a sermon: and I do not think any sermon ought to be preached or even written, until that sentence has emerged, clear and*

*lucid as a cloudless moon*” (J.H. Jowett, *The Preacher, His Life and Work*, p. 133).

Good sermon ideas are always stated in a contemporary manner. Sermon ideas should not be stated in the third person, past tense form. “Paul prayed for the Philippians” is not a good sermon idea. Sermon ideas should be stated in the present tense and in contemporary language that relates to our lives today. “We must pray for other believers” is a better sermon idea although the wording is bland and pedantic.

## **2. The sermon focuses the message on meeting the needs of the people.**

The preacher must move beyond biblical content to the needs of the people. There is a tendency to preach on our interests instead of the people’s needs. There is a tendency to preach to our peers in the theological world rather than the people in the factory. Many preachers enjoy learning – digging into the facts, words, grammar, history and culture of the Bible – so there is a real temptation to focus on the information we have dug up from our study. It is easy to forget that the average person in the church is not as excited about those same facts as we are. They come to church with needs that they expect the sermon to address.

I assigned students in my preaching classes over the years to write out their sermons in an annotated outline, so I could review the manuscripts before they preached them. I often would write in bold letters on the manuscript, “So what?” The purpose of the sermon is not merely to communicate biblical data. The heart of hermeneutics is not about passing on our analysis of a passage. Grant Osborne writes: “It is my contention that the final goal of hermeneutics is not systematic theology but the sermon. The actual purpose of Scripture is not explanation but exposition, not description but proclamation” (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, InterVarsity Press, 1991, p.12).

Every sermon should be preached for a specific purpose. The preacher focuses the biblical content on the specific needs of the people like a good photographer uses his camera settings to narrow his depth of field to focus the lens on the subject in the picture. W.E. Sangster wrote, “preaching is meant to do things” (*The Craft of Sermon Illustration*, p.24). Every sermon should be designed to do something in the hearts of the hearers. Vague purposes produce worthless sermons. How do we develop a specific purpose for a specific sermon? We must learn to identify the needs of the people to whom we are speaking. If we do not know those needs, then we must discover them. The preacher exegetes the Bible and the people. The intersection of those two exegetical disciplines forms the purpose of the sermon.

## **3. The structure of the passage determines the organization of the sermon.**

Good expository preaching is not a hit or miss, trial and error, methodology. Many expository sermons are organized like a running commentary of spiritual insights. The preacher often has many good things to say but no organization to focus the message. The sermon follows a stream of consciousness flowing from the mind of the preacher and meandering from thought to thought. People leave this kind of sermon saying “there were great things there, but I had a hard time following him.” People need order and structure for good communication to take place.

That's the way we are wired. People become frustrated when there is no discernable order in the sermon. Minds wander when the sermon meanders!

Expository preaching exposes the ideas in the biblical unit of thought, so the sermon follows the flow of the passage being exposed. The hearers should be able to think their way through the passage after the sermon has been preached. The sermon derives the main points from the structure of the passage. The way the author developed his thoughts is the way we must try to develop them in the sermon. In structural analysis, we seek to trace the arrangement of the passage by following the textual clues the original author has provided. The objective is to see the flow of thought through the relationships of the words in the passage. We want to see what the author was trying to emphasize rather than what we want to emphasize. The preacher seeks to visualize the flow of thought – to picture the structure of the passage. The sermon should expose the hinges on which the passage swings by developing an outline based on the structure but written in contemporary language.

#### **4. The sermon explains the Scriptures as a coherent and coordinated body of truth.**

All of Scripture is brought together to teach and explain the passage but not imposed on that passage. The sermon explains the passage in a way that is theologically consistent with the rest of Scripture. Scripture must relate with Scripture. This principle is often called “the analogy of faith” or as Grant Osborne calls it more accurately, “the analogy of Scripture.” (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, InterVarsity Press, 1991, p.11) There is a bigger context for every sermon because, ultimately, the Bible has one author communicating His truth through many human personalities. Every sermon must fit the bigger picture of the Bible. If we end up merely describing the text in its historical context, then our sermons will be anemic, irrelevant or worse – heretical. Theological analysis forces us to think theologically about the text in the context of all Scripture.

Consult systematic theologies to identify the main theological points in the text. What theological truths does this passage teach? The preacher must learn to think theologically. Study Bibles, systematic theologies, and theological commentaries help us think theologically. The preacher must integrate the text with the rest of Scripture. Systematic theologies may use Scripture improperly to prove text a point, but they help the preacher see the whole of Scripture in a systematic way.

Utilize the method of biblical or exegetical theology. Antecedent information is the foundation for Biblical theology. What did the writer of the sermon text know about that doctrine at the time he wrote the passage? What theological knowledge preceded him? Be careful about “parallelomania” – grabbing a similar passage or word and assuming it informs the meaning of the text being studied. The author did not have access to later revelation so the preacher must be careful not to read back into the text doctrine derived from later revelation unless there is good reason to do so. Transferring the meaning of one passage to another without regard to context is illegitimate. Parallel passages must be used with care.

## 5. The passage is applied first to the preacher and then to the listeners.

The Word of God must relate to people so that the power of the Holy Spirit changes lives. It must be practical, or it is worthless. It must have a bearing on the lives of people in the pews because it is changing us as preachers. We must always preach with the needs of the listener in mind, not merely the felt needs but the real needs. Harry Emerson Fosdick famously said, “Preaching is personal counseling on a group basis – nothing else” although he failed to provide biblical answers to spiritual needs. Diagnosing the real needs of people in the audience requires an understanding of their felt needs married to an understanding of their spiritual needs. The felt needs are the symptoms that lead to a proper diagnosis. Bryan Chapell calls it the “fallen condition focus” (*Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, Baker Academic, 2005, p.48). Humans are spiritually fallen, and sermons must focus on that fallen condition.

The preacher must make sure that the passage says it before he applies it. Application without exegesis is like a bowl of plastic fruit. It looks pretty but doesn’t satisfy. Application without exegesis is like a mirage. It looks beautiful but isn’t real. The preacher must not preach one principle from the passage and then apply something else just because it makes a better application. Missiologists warn us to remember the process of contextualization. There are two sides to contextualization. The preacher must not divorce what it means to us from what it meant to them. The preacher must look for contemporary life parallels between the situations people faced in the Bible and the situations that people face today. The contemporary life parallel (CLP) should be as specific and concrete as possible so that people grasp the relevancy of Scripture to their situational need.

### Colossians 1:28-29

*We proclaim Him (Christ), admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.*

*(New American Standard Bible, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation)*