

THIRD EDITION

BIBLICAL

Preaching

THE DEVELOPMENT
AND DELIVERY OF
EXPOSITORY MESSAGES

HADDON W. ROBINSON

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To the men and women
who keep a sacred appointment
on Sunday morning.
Bewildered by seductive voices,
nursing wounds life has inflicted upon them,
anxious about matters that do not matter.
Yet they come to listen for a clear word from God
that speaks to their condition.

And to those who minister to them now
and those who will do so in the future.

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Preface

Lewis Chafer began the preface to his massive eight-volume set on theology with the simple words, “To be read.” In this preface I would like to give credit to people and forces that have shaped my approach to biblical preaching, and I would appreciate if you would read it.

I have been fascinated with preaching since I was in my early teens. As a boy I began a series of diaries that recorded the tedious events of a fairly humdrum life. Years later when cleaning out my father’s apartment, I came across one of those diaries. Apparently on a Thursday evening I had gone to a service at the First Baptist Church in New York City to hear Dr. Harry Ironside preach. Ironside was the pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago. I can’t imagine what attracted me to a religious gathering on a Thursday evening. At the time I was sure that God kept office hours on Sunday morning. Yet I wrote in my diary, “Some preachers preach for an hour and it seems like thirty minutes; others preach for thirty minutes and it seems like an hour. I wonder what the difference is?”

I have spent my life trying to answer that question.

In college I spent many Friday evenings at the library reading books on preaching. I read several of the Yale lectures. I was swimming in deep waters, and though I didn’t fully understand what I was reading, I read anyhow. When I arrived at Dallas Seminary after graduation, I was disappointed to find there wasn’t much instruction offered on preaching. Dallas wasn’t alone in slighting the practical disciplines. Most seminaries at the time did not have courses in Christian education, counseling, pedagogy, or preaching. It was assumed, I guess, that if you knew the content you could communicate it. During my senior year a few of my classmates asked me

to teach a course in preaching on Tuesday evenings, and I agreed. I taught them all that I knew (and much I didn't know, for that matter), and in the process I learned more about the subject of homiletics than any of the other students in the group.

After graduation I served at the First Baptist Church in Medford, Oregon, and while I was there the administration at Dallas invited me to come back and help in the expanded preaching department. When I went back to my alma mater, I tried to figure out what I didn't know about the field of communication (an enormous amount) and preaching (not a subject that academics care much about). So while I taught at the seminary I earned a master's degree from Southern Methodist University and after that a PhD at the University of Illinois. I minored in sociology at SMU, and in radio/TV at Illinois. It turned out that I have used my minors more than my majors. All this education was an attempt to answer the question, "What makes a preacher interesting and a sermon effective?"

While at the University of Illinois I began to work through the basic elements in the preparation of sermons. The subject was not addressed directly at the university, but my first basic insight came during a class on oral interpretation. We were studying a poem by e. e. cummings that I had been assigned to deliver to the class the following week. During my preparation I realized that we were asking the same kinds of questions to interpret the poem that we used at seminary to interpret a passage in the Bible.

During my first semester after I returned to Dallas I read *Design for Preaching* by H. Grady Davis. That book changed my concept of what a sermon should be. In later years when I was writing the first edition of *Biblical Preaching*, I went back to Davis's book to give him proper credit for his ideas, and I wondered whether he would have been complimented or insulted by my references to him. I owe him a great debt, though, for the way his book influenced me.

This is the third edition of *Biblical Preaching*. Why a third edition? Over the years I have received a great deal of feedback from teachers and readers of the book. Most of the response has been positive, and I thank God for the way he has used *Biblical Preaching* in the education of those who proclaim his Word. The negative responses centered on the exercises provided to reinforce the teaching in the book. For many readers they simply didn't work. Robert Permenter, a graduate of the DMin program at Gordon-Conwell and a teacher of preaching at Bethel Seminary, came to my aid. Bob contributed a number of new exercises for this edition, and the two of us have tested them with students in several classes at two

different seminaries. I hope you will find them helpful in understanding the counsel offered throughout this book.

Many people have contributed to my life, and if I were to try thanking all of them here by name, this preface would resemble the Manhattan telephone directory. Some friends whom I mentioned in the two previous editions have since gone on to heaven. Still, there remain several people who have made significant contributions to me and to this book over the years whom I wish to acknowledge.

Duane Litfin has been a longtime friend and colleague, and even with the enormous burden of leading Wheaton College he took time off to teach with me in the DMin program at Gordon-Conwell.

Don Sunukjian must also be mentioned for his contribution to me and to the discipline of homiletics.

Sid Buzzell is one of the most gifted teachers I have ever known, and although he and I taught together, I believe I learned more from him about teaching than our students did about preaching.

Scott Gibson is a longtime friend and colleague who teaches the basic courses in preaching at Gordon-Conwell and does so with diligence and skill. He and his wife, Rhonda, have the gift of hospitality that has benefited both the students and myself.

Nancy Hardin worked on the first edition and guarded my time so I could write.

Alice Mathews occupies a special place in my life. She contributed her skills and her time to the second edition. She is a brilliant and dedicated servant of Christ who has left her thumbprint on me and all those who have met her.

Finally, Bonnie, my wife, has been one of God's greatest gifts to me. I'm thankful for all she has done to make my life possible. She is truly a remarkable woman.

The Case for Expository Preaching

This is a book about expository preaching, but it may have been written for a depressed market. Not everyone agrees that expository preaching—or any sort of preaching, for that matter—is an urgent need of the church. The word is out in some circles that preaching should be abandoned. The moving finger has passed it by and now points to other methods and ministries that are more “effective” and in tune with the times.

The Devaluation of Preaching

To explain why preaching receives these low grades would take us into every area of our common life. Because preachers are no longer regarded as the intellectual or even the spiritual leaders in their communities, their image has changed. Ask people in the pews to describe a minister, and their description may not be flattering. According to Kyle Haselden, the pastor comes across as a “bland composite” of the congregation’s “congenial, ever helpful, ever ready to help boy scout; as the darling of the old ladies and as sufficiently reserved with the young ones; as the father image for the young people and a companion to lonely men; as the affable glad-hander

at teas and civic club luncheons.”¹ If that description pictures reality at all, preachers may be liked, but they will certainly not be respected.

In addition, preaching takes place in an overcommunicated society. Mass media bombard us with a hundred thousand “messages” a day. Television and radio feature pitchmen delivering a “word from the sponsor” with all the sincerity of an evangelist. Within that context the preacher may sound like another huckster who, in John Ruskin’s words, “plays stage tricks with the doctrines of life and death.”

Undoubtedly, modern techniques can enhance communication, but on the other hand, they can substitute for the message.

More important, perhaps, is that some ministers in the pulpit feel robbed of an authoritative message. Much modern theology offers them little more than holy hunches, and they suspect that the sophisticates in the pew place more faith in science texts than in preaching texts. For some preachers, therefore, fads in communication become more alluring than the message. Multimedia presentations, videos, sharing sessions, blinking lights, and up-to-date music may be symptoms of either health or disease. Undoubtedly, modern

techniques can enhance communication, but on the other hand, they can substitute for the message. The startling and unusual may mask a vacuum.

Social action appeals more to some Christians than talking or listening. What good are words of faith, they ask, when society demands works of faith? Some people with this mind-set judge that the apostles had things turned around when they decided, “It is not right that we should forsake the Word of God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2 ASV). In a day of activism, it is more relevant to declare instead, “It is not right that we should forsake the service of tables to preach the Word of God.”

The Case for Preaching

In spite of the “bad-mouthing” of preaching and preachers, no one who takes the Bible seriously should count preaching out. To the New Testament writers, preaching stood as the event through which God works. Peter, for example, reminded his readers that they had “been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word

1. Kyle Haselden, *The Urgency of Preaching*, 88–89. Note that full bibliographical information is not supplied in the footnotes for books included in the bibliography, nor is bibliographical information that is given in the text repeated in the footnotes.

of God” (1 Pet. 1:23 RSV). How had this word come to affect their lives? “That word,” Peter explained, “is the good news which was preached to you” (v. 25). Through preaching God had redeemed them.

Paul was a writer. From his pen we have most of the inspired letters of the New Testament, and heading the list of his letters is the one to the Romans. Measured by its impact on history, few documents compare with it. Yet when Paul wrote this letter to the congregation in Rome, he confessed, “I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Rom. 1:11–12 RSV). Paul realized that some ministries simply cannot take place apart from face-to-face contact. Even the reading of an inspired letter will not substitute. “I am eager to preach the gospel to you . . . who are in Rome” (1:15 RSV). A power comes through the preached word that even the written word cannot replace.

*A power comes through
the preached word
that even the written
word cannot replace.*

Moreover, Paul recounted the spiritual history of the Thessalonians who had “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven” (1 Thess. 1:9–10 RSV). That about-face occurred, explained the apostle, because “when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (2:13 RSV). Preaching in Paul’s mind did not consist of someone discussing religion. Instead, God himself spoke through the personality and message of a preacher to confront men and women and bring them to himself.

All of this explains why Paul encouraged his young associate Timothy to “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2). Preach means “to cry out, herald, or exhort.” Preachers should pour out the message with passion and fervor in order to stir souls. Not all passionate pleading from a pulpit, however, possesses divine authority. When preachers speak as heralds, they must cry out “the Word.” Anything less cannot legitimately pass for Christian preaching.

The Need for Expository Preaching

Those in the pulpit face the pressing temptation to deliver some message other than that of the Scriptures—a political system (either right-wing or left-wing), a theory of economics, a new religious philosophy, old religious

slogans, or a trend in psychology. Ministers can proclaim anything in a stained-glass voice at 11:30 on Sunday morning following the singing of hymns. Yet when they fail to preach the Scriptures, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. God is not in it.

God speaks through the Bible. It is the major tool of communication by which he addresses individuals today. Biblical preaching, therefore, must not be equated with “the old, old story of Jesus and his love” as though it were retelling history about better times when God was alive and well. Nor is preaching merely a rehash of ideas about God—orthodox, but removed from life. Through the preaching of the Scriptures, God encounters men and women to bring them to salvation (2 Tim. 3:15) and to richness and ripeness of Christian character (vv. 16–17). Something fills us with awe when God confronts individuals through preaching and seizes them by the soul.

The type of preaching that best carries the force of divine authority is expository preaching. It would be fatuous, however, to assume that everyone agrees with that statement. A poll of churchgoers who have squirmed for hours under “expository” preaching that is dry as cornflakes without milk could not be expected to agree. While most preachers tip their hats to expository preaching, their practice gives them away. Because they seldom do it, they too vote no.

Admittedly, expository preaching has suffered severely in the pulpits of those claiming to be its friends. Yet not all expository preaching necessarily qualifies as either *expository* or *preaching*. Regrettably the Bureau of Weights and Measures does not have a standard expository sermon encased in glass against which to compare other messages. Ministers may paste the label *expository* on whatever sermon they please, and no consumer advocate will correct them. Yet, in spite of damage done by admirers, genuine expository preaching has behind it the power of the living God.

What, then, is the real thing? What constitutes expository preaching? How does it compare or contrast with other kinds of preaching?

The Definition of Expository Preaching

Attempting a definition becomes sticky business because what we define we sometimes destroy. The small boy who dissected a frog to find out what made it jump learned something about the parts in the process, but he killed the frog. Preaching is a living interaction involving God, the preacher, and

the congregation, and no definition can pretend to capture that dynamic. But for the sake of clarity we must attempt a working definition anyway.

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.

The Passage Governs the Sermon

What particulars of this elaborate and somewhat dry definition should we highlight? First, and above all, the thought of the biblical writer determines the substance of an expository sermon. In many sermons the biblical passage read to the congregation resembles the national anthem played at a baseball game—it gets things started but is not heard again during the afternoon. In expository preaching, as R. H. Montgomery describes it, “the preacher undertakes the presentation of particular books [of the Bible] as some men would undertake the latest best seller. The preacher seeks to bring the message of definite units of God’s Word to his people.”

Expository preaching at its core is more a philosophy than a method. Whether we can be called expositors starts with our purpose and with our honest answer to the question: “Do you, as a preacher, endeavor to bend your thought to the Scriptures, or do you use the Scriptures to support your thought?” This is not the same question as, “Is what you are preaching orthodox or evangelical?” Nor is it the same as, “Do you hold a high view of the Bible or believe it to be the infallible Word of God?” As important as these questions may appear in other circumstances, a passing grade in systematic theology does not qualify an individual as an expositor of the Bible. Theology may protect us from evils lurking in atomistic, nearsighted interpretations, but at the same time it may blindfold us from seeing the text. In approaching a passage, we must be willing to reexamine our doctrinal convictions and to reject the judgments of our most respected teachers. We must make a U-turn in our own previous understandings of the Bible should these conflict with the concepts of the biblical writer.

Adopting this attitude toward Scripture demands both simplicity and sophistication. On the one hand, expositors approach their Bible with a childlike desire to hear the story. They do not come to argue, to prove a point, or even to find a sermon. They read to understand and to experience what they understand. At the same time, they know they live not as

children but as adults locked into presuppositions and worldviews that make understanding difficult. The Bible is not a child's storybook; rather it is great literature that requires thoughtful response. All its diamonds do not lie exposed on the surface. Its richness is mined only through hard intellectual and spiritual spadework.

The Expositor Communicates a Concept

The definition of expository preaching also emphasizes that an expositor communicates a concept. Some conservative preachers have been led astray by their doctrine of inspiration and by a poor understanding of how language works. Orthodox theologians insist that the Holy Spirit protects the individual words of the original text. Words are the stuff from which ideas are made, they argue, and unless the words are inspired, the ideas cannot be guarded from error.

While an orthodox doctrine of inspiration may be a necessary plank in the evangelical platform on biblical authority, this sometimes gets in the way of expository preaching. Although we examine words in the text and sometimes deal with particular words in the sermon, words and phrases should never become ends in themselves. Words are stupid things until linked with other words to convey meaning.

In our approach to the Bible, therefore, we are primarily concerned not with what individual words mean but with what the biblical writers mean through their use of words. Put another way, we do not understand the concepts of a passage merely by analyzing its separate words. A word-by-word grammatical analysis can be as pointless and boring as reading a dictionary. If we desire to understand the Bible in order to communicate its message, we must grapple with it on the level of ideas.

Francis A. Schaeffer, in his book *True Spirituality*, argues that the great battles take place in the realm of thought:

Ideas are the stock of the thought-world, and from the ideas burst forth all the external things—painting, music, buildings, the love and the hating of men in practice, and equally the results of loving God or rebellion against God in the external world. . . . The preaching of the gospel is ideas, flaming ideas brought to men, as God has revealed them to us in Scripture. It is not a contentless experience internally received, but it is contentful ideas internally acted upon that make the difference. So when we state our doctrines, they must be ideas and not just phrases. We cannot use doctrines as though they were mechanical pieces to a puzzle. True doctrine is an idea revealed by God in the Bible and an idea that fits properly into the external world as

it is, and as God made it, and to man as he is as God made him, and can be fed back through man's body into his thought-world and there acted upon. The battle for man is centrally in the world of thought.²

If we are ever to get sermons, therefore, we must get them first as ideas.

The Concept Comes from the Text

This emphasis on ideas as the substance of expository preaching does not in any way deny the importance of vocabulary or grammar. The definition goes on to explain that in the expository sermon the idea is derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context. This deals first with how expositors come to their message and, second, with how they communicate it. Both involve the examination of grammar, history, and literary forms. In their study expositors search for the objective meaning of a passage through their understanding of the language, backgrounds, and setting of the text. Then in the pulpit they present enough of their study to the congregation so that their listeners may check the interpretation for themselves.

Ultimately the authority behind expository preaching resides not in the preacher but in the biblical text. For that reason expositors deal largely with an explanation of Scripture, so that they focus the listeners' attention on the Bible. Expositors may be respected for their exegetical abilities and their diligent preparation, but these qualities do not transform any of them into a Protestant pope who speaks *ex cathedra*. Listeners also have a responsibility to match the sermon to the biblical text. As Henry David Thoreau wrote, "It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak, and another to hear." No truth worth knowing will be acquired without a tussle, so if a congregation is to grow, it must share the struggle. "To have great poets, there must be great audiences," Walt Whitman confessed. Effective expository preaching requires listeners with ears to hear. Since the souls of listeners depend upon it, we must offer our hearers sufficient information so that they can decide for themselves if what they are hearing is indeed what the Bible says.

If the listeners in the pew must work to understand the preacher, the preacher must labor to understand the writers of the Bible. Communication means "a meeting of meanings," and for communication to occur across a sanctuary or across the centuries, those involved must share things in common—a language, a culture, a worldview, communication forms.

2. Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1971), 121–22.

We try to pull up our chairs to where the biblical authors sat. We attempt to work our way back into the world of the Scriptures to understand the original message. Though we may not master the languages, history, and literary forms of the biblical writers, we should appreciate the contribution of each of these disciplines. We should also become aware of the wide assortment of interpretive aids available to us for use in our study.³ As much as possible, expositors seek a firsthand acquaintance with the biblical writers and their ideas in context.

The Concept Is Applied to the Expositor

Our definition of expository preaching goes on to say that the truth must be applied to the personality and experience of the preacher. This places God's dealing with the preacher at the center of the process. As much as we might wish it otherwise, we cannot be separated from the message. Who has not heard some devout brother or sister pray in anticipation of a sermon, "Hide our pastor behind the cross so that we may see not him but Jesus only"? We commend the spirit of such a prayer. Men and women must get past the preacher to the Savior. (Or perhaps the Savior must get past the preacher to the people!)

Yet no place exists where a preacher may hide. Even a large pulpit cannot conceal us from view. Phillips Brooks was on to something when he described preaching as "truth poured through personality."⁴ We affect our message. We may be mouthing a scriptural idea, yet we can remain as impersonal as a telephone recording, as superficial as a radio commercial, or as manipulative as a con man. The audience does not hear a sermon; it hears a person—it hears you.

*As we study our Bible,
the Holy Spirit studies us.*

Bishop William A. Quayle had this in mind when he rejected standard definitions of homiletics. "Preaching is the art of making a sermon and delivering it?" he asked. "Why, no, that is not preaching. Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that!" A commitment to expository preaching should develop the preacher into a mature Christian. As we study our Bible, the Holy Spirit studies us. As we prepare expository sermons, God prepares us. As P. T. Forsyth said, "The Bible is the supreme preacher to the preacher."⁵

3. Some of these aids will be discussed in chap. 3.

4. Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: Dutton, 1877), 8.

5. P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 11.

Distinctions made between “studying the Bible to get a sermon and studying the Bible to feed your own soul” are misleading and even false. A scholar may examine the Bible as Hebrew poetry or as a record of the births and reigns of long-dead kings and yet not be confronted by its truth. Yet no such detachment can exist for one who opens the Bible as the Word of God. Before we proclaim the message of the Bible to others, we should live with that message ourselves.

Regrettably, many preachers fail as Christians before they fail as preachers because they do not think biblically. A significant number of ministers, many of whom profess high regard for the Scriptures, prepare their sermons without consulting the Bible at all. While the sacred text serves as an appetizer to get a sermon under way or as a garnish to decorate the message, the main course consists of the preacher’s own thought or someone else’s thought warmed up for the occasion.

Before we proclaim the message of the Bible to others, we should live with that message ourselves.

Even in what is billed as “expository preaching” individual verses can become launching pads for the preacher’s own opinions. One common recipe found in homiletical cookbooks reads something like this: “Take several theological or moral platitudes, mix with equal parts of ‘dedication,’ ‘evangelism,’ or ‘stewardship,’ add several ‘kingdoms’ or ‘the Bible says,’ stir in a selection of stories, add ‘salvation’ to taste. Serve hot on a bed of Scripture verses.” Such sermons not only leave a congregation undernourished, but they also starve the preachers. They do not grow because the Holy Spirit has nothing to feed them. William Barclay diagnosed the cause of spiritual malnutrition in a minister’s life when he pointed out that if our minds grow slack and lazy and flabby, the Holy Spirit cannot speak to us. “True preaching comes when the loving heart and the disciplined mind are laid at the disposal of the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Ultimately God is more interested in developing messengers than messages, and because the Holy Spirit confronts us primarily through the Bible, we must learn to listen to God before speaking for God.

The Concept Is Applied to the Hearers

Not only does the Holy Spirit apply his truth to the personality and experience of the preacher, but according to our definition of expository

6. William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

preaching, he then applies that truth through the preacher to the hearers. Expositors think in three areas. First, as exegetes we struggle with the meanings of the biblical writer. Then, as people of God we wrestle with how God wants to change us. Finally, as preachers we ponder what God wants to say to the congregation through us.

Application gives expository preaching purpose. As shepherds we relate to the hurts, cries, and fears of our flock. Therefore, we study the Scriptures, wondering what they can say to people living with grief and guilt, doubt and death. Paul reminded Timothy that the Scriptures were given to be applied. “All scripture is inspired by God,” he wrote, “and is useful for teaching the faith and correcting error, for re-setting the direction of a man’s life and training him in good living. The scriptures are the comprehensive equipment of the man of God, and fit him fully for all branches of his work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17 Phillips).

Dull expository sermons usually lack effective applications. Boring sermons evoke two major complaints. First, listeners grumble, “It’s always the same old thing.” The preacher gives all passages the same application, or worse, no application at all. “May the Holy Spirit apply this truth to our lives,” incants a minister who does not have a ghost of a guess about how the biblical content might change people.

A second negative reaction is that the sermon does not relate to the world directly enough to be of practical use: “It’s true enough, I guess, but so what? What difference does it make?” After all, if a man or a woman decides to live under the mandate of Scripture, such action will normally take place outside the church building. On the outside people lose jobs, worry about their children, and find crabgrass invading their lawns. Normal people do not lose sleep over the Jebusites, the Canaanites, or the Perizzites, or even about what Abraham, Moses, or Paul has said or done. They lie awake wondering about grocery prices, crop failures, quarrels with a spouse, diagnosis of a malignancy, a frustrating sex life, or the rat race where only rats seem to win. If the sermon does not make much difference in that world, they wonder if it makes any difference at all.

We should forget about speaking to the ages, therefore, and speak to our day. Expository preachers confront people about themselves from the Bible instead of lecturing to them about the Bible’s history or archaeology. A congregation convenes not as a jury to convict Judas, Peter, or Solomon but as one to judge itself. We must know the people as well as the message, and to acquire that knowledge, we exegete both the Scripture and the congregation.

After all, when God spoke in the Scriptures, he addressed women and men as they were, where they were. Imagine that Paul's letters to the Corinthians had gotten lost in the mail and instead had been delivered to the Christians at Philippi. The Philippians would have puzzled over the specific problems Paul wrote about because they lived in a situation different from that of their sisters and brothers in Corinth. The letters of the New Testament, like the prophecies of the Old, were addressed to specific assemblies struggling with particular problems. Our expository sermons today will be ineffective unless we realize that our listeners, too, exist at a particular address and have mind-sets unique to them.

Effective application thrusts us into both theology and ethics. Traveling from exegesis to application, we make a hard trip through life-related and sometimes perplexing questions. In addition to grammatical relationships, we also explore personal and psychological relationships. How do the characters in the text relate to one another? How are they related to God? What values lie behind the choices they make? What apparently went on in the minds of those who were involved? These questions are not directed to the "there and then," as though God dealt with men and women only back in the "once upon a time." The same questions can be asked in the "here and now." How do we relate to one another today? How does God confront us about similar issues? In what way does the modern world compare or contrast with the biblical world? Are the questions dealt with in Scripture the questions people ask today? Are they put forth now in the same way or in different forms? These probings become the raw material of ethics and theology. Application tacked on to an expository sermon in an attempt to make it relevant skirts these questions and ignores the maxim of our Protestant forebears: "Doctrines must be preached practically, and duties doctrinally."

Inappropriate application can be as destructive as inept exegesis. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he tried to achieve victory through misapplication of Scripture. The tempter whispered Psalm 91 with admirable precision: "He will give his angels charge over you to keep you in all your ways . . . lest you dash your foot against a stone" (vv. 11–12). Then Satan reasoned, "Because you possess this strong promise, why not apply it to a leap from the pinnacle of the temple and demonstrate once and for all that you are the Son of God?" In refuting the devil, Jesus did not debate the grammar of the Hebrew text. Instead he attacked the application of Psalm 91 to temple jumping. Another passage of Scripture better fits that situation: "Do not put the LORD your God to the test" (Deut. 6:16 NRSV).

We must preach to a world addressed by the TV commentator, the newspaper columnist, the internet, and social media. If we do not, we will have hearers who are orthodox in their heads but heretics in their conduct. Of course in speaking to a secular world we dare not speak a secular word. William Willimon observed that some preachers seem to have bent over backward to speak to a secular audience and they have fallen in. While biblical ideas must be shaped to human experience, men and women must be called to conform to biblical truth. “Relevant” sermons may become pulpit trifles unless they relate the current situation to the eternal Word of God.

F. B. Meyer understood the awe with which biblical preachers speak to the issues of their age. They are “in a line of great succession. The reformers, the Puritans, the pastors of the Pilgrim fathers were essentially expositors. They did not announce their own particular opinions, which might be a matter of private interpretation or doubtful disposition, but taking their stand on Scripture, drove home their message with irresistible effect with ‘Thus saith the Lord.’”

Let’s sum this up. We preach expository sermons when

- We have studied a passage in its context, giving attention to its historical, grammatical, and literary setting;
- We have in some way experienced, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the power of our study in our own lives;
- And from this, we shape the sermon so that it communicates the central biblical concept in a way that is meaningful to our hearers.

DEFINITIONS

Expository preaching—the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.

FOR FURTHER READING

Many writers attempt to define or describe biblical preaching. Some describe the trees and others settle for the forest.

- Richard Mayhue spends a chapter of *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word, 1992) grappling with what it is not and then what it is. An expositor, he concludes, “explains the Scripture by laying open

the text to public view in order to set forth its meaning, explain what is difficult to understand, and make appropriate application” (11).

- Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix put more emphasis on the listeners in their definition of biblical preaching as “the oral communication of biblical truth by the Holy Spirit through a human personality to a given audience with the intent of enabling a positive response” (*Power in the Pulpit* [Chicago: Moody, 1999], 27).
- Bryan Chapell allows for a broader definition when he makes the observation that any “sermon that explores a biblical concept is in the broadest sense ‘expository,’” but he cannot leave it there. He adds that “*the technical definition of an expository sermon* [his emphasis] requires that it expound Scripture by deriving from a specific text main points and subpoints that disclose the thought of the author, cover the scope of the passage, and are applied to the lives of listeners” (*Christ-Centered Preaching*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005], 128–29).
- John Stott, in his book *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), makes the flat statement, “All true preaching is expository preaching.” He goes on to say, however, that “expository” refers to content and not to method, and then he describes what it looks like. “In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said” (125–26).
- Fred Craddock, who might not be comfortable with my definition, recognizes that we are wrestling with “a fundamental theological question of authority.” He goes to the central issue of what any of us do in the pulpit. “The preacher is obligated, regardless of the sermons the parishioners may like,” he says, “to ask and respond to the questions, What authorizes my sermons? If the authorization is by the Scriptures, in what way? How do I prepare so as to enter the pulpit with some confidence that my understanding of biblical preaching has been implemented with honesty and integrity? . . . It is not likely that any preacher will arrive at a satisfactory position that does not involve serious grappling with the text of Scripture” (*Preaching* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1986], 100).

On another level, at some time or other, you will have to respond to the question, “How does the centrality of Jesus Christ affect the way that I handle the biblical texts? If a thoughtful Muslim or a Jew would be satisfied with my interpretation of the Old Testament, could it really be

Christian?” Two books that work toward a way of solving this problem are Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). An older book by Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), approaches the same question from a different angle.

Questions and activities for this chapter can be found in the student exercises section at the back of the book.