

Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching. By Ramesh

Richard. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001. 217 pp. \$15.99. Reviewed by T. Scott Christmas.

Ramesh Richard, leader of Ramesh Richard Evangelism and Church Helps International (RREACH) and professor of expository preaching at Dallas Theological Seminary, has extended preachers a much needed helping hand through his book, Preparing Expository Sermons. He begins his manual on sermon preparation by introducing the reader to his approach by explaining his motivation, definition, and overview of the process.

In the introduction, the author builds the case for the need for expository preaching. Richard begins by pointing out that some preachers believe that the Bible is optional in their sermon preparation. Further, he states that others don't prepare their sermons at all, but expect the Holy Spirit to prepare the preacher. Still worse, Richard alerts his readers to the dismal fact that some pastors have dismissed preaching entirely as the central thrust of their ministry. The author, however, has designed his book to help the reader overcome these pulpit deficiencies and pursue expository preaching as a way of life and ministry (p. 17). He seeks to accomplish his goal by setting forth the mechanics of sermon preparation. Richard describes this seven-step process as "the Scripture sculpture method." These seven steps include studying the text, structuring the text, finding the central proposition of the text, composing a purpose bridge for the sermon, determining the central proposition of the sermon, structuring the sermon or determining the outline, and, finally, preaching the sermon. The author concludes his helpful work with thirteen appendices written to provide clarification, illustrations, elaborations, and

technical comments on his topic of preaching (p. 143). The topics covered in those appendices include “The Holy Spirit and Your Pulpit Effectiveness,” “The Benefit of the Original Languages for Preachers,” “Choosing a Text for Your Sermon,” “Introductory Notes on Grammar,” “The Perils of Principilization,” “Hermeneutical Analysis and Homiletical Application of Narrative Texts,” “Central Propositions: An Advanced Procedure,” “Understanding Your Audience,” “The Elements of a Competent Sermon Outline,” “A Sample Sermon Introduction,” “Forms of Sermon Introduction,” “A Sermon Evaluation Questionnaire,” and “Topical Exposition.”

Initially, Richard defines expository preaching as “the contemporization of the central proposition of a biblical text that is derived from proper methods of interpretation and declared through effective means of communication to inform minds, instruct hearts, and influence behavior toward godliness” (p. 19). Later, he asserts that his definition is affirmed by Haddon Robinson who describes each expository sermon as the “explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage, or several passages of Scripture” (p. 66). Near the end of the book, the author tips his hand, revealing the source for his descriptive approach to sermon preparation. He calls it “Scripture sculpture.” Richard tips his hand by sharing a very graphic quote by the master sculptor, Gutzon Borglum. Borglum, who orchestrated the carving of the presidents on Mount Rushmore, told people that “the presidents’ faces were always there; we just brought them in view” (p. 141). Richard goes on to declare that that is exactly “what expository preachers pursue—bringing the truth of particular Scriptural texts into view of the audience” (p. 141). He then assures the reader that he, too, can create sculpture from Scripture.

The author divides his definition of expository preaching into three understandable sections. The first section deals with the “what” of expository preaching or the *content* of the sermon. The reader is reminded of his responsibility to make God’s word meaningful to the local congregation through a process Richard labels as *contemporization* (p. 19). Through this process, the content of the text is not changed, but is made applicable or understandable to the current culture. Richard also rightly reminds the reader that the content of the sermon should reflect the content of the biblical text. He does this by stating, “biblical exposition expounds, expresses, and exposes the Bible to an audience and the audience to the Bible” (p. 21). This is a timely reminder to many preachers whose sermon content does not reflect the content of their biblical text.

The second section of his definition deals with the “how” of expository preaching and relates to the *process* of the sermon preparation. “The main criterion for a proper method of interpretation is that there be a demonstrable and reliable connection between the author’s and the original audience’s understanding of a given text and our interpretation” (pp. 21-22). In other words, a proper hermeneutic must be employed to determine the author’s intended meaning as conveyed to the original audience. That original meaning must then be communicated by the present-day preacher to the present-day audience.

The final section of his definition deals with the “why” of expository preaching and relates to the *purpose* of the sermon. Richard declares properly that expository preaching should inform the mind, instruct the heart, and influence behavior (p. 24-25). “The practical test of

good preaching is the fruit that it bears in life” (p. 25). He concludes this introductory section of his book by summarizing the seven steps which move the preacher through the process of Scripture sculpture. Section two of the book, or the remaining seven chapters, contains a detailed explanation of the seven-step process of moving from a biblical text to an expository sermon.

Preparing Expository Sermons has many strengths. The book is filled with helpful charts such as the one which defines and compares different types of biblical exposition (pp. 20-21). Charts such as this provide fodder for determining the direction or philosophy of a pulpit ministry.

Another strength is the time spent defining the problems with “moralistic preaching” (pp. 22-23). Instruction such as this is warranted because of the rampant misuse of the Bible. Richard, however, reminds his readers of the critical question in sermon preparation: “Are you saying what the Bible wanted to say?” (p. 22). His section on “moralistic preaching” assists in exposing an improper, yet common, approach to God’s Word.

His section on observation of the text (pp. 34-52) is one of the most thorough, yet concise, that this reviewer has ever seen in a book on preaching. In essence, Richard presents a mini primer on hermeneutics. Perhaps the reason this portion of sermon preparation is so neglected in preaching manuals is because it is assumed by today’s authors that preachers both understand and practice a proper hermeneutical approach to the text. It seems obvious, however, that this assumption is unwarranted due to the unbiblical and weak preaching that plagues pulpits

today. It is impossible for the preacher to communicate effectively the message of God's Word if he never comes to grasp that message himself. Further, the only way the preacher may gain a proper understanding of the text of Scripture is through a Grammatico-historical approach. In other words, the preacher must discover the meaning of the text which is dictated by the principles of grammar and the facts of history. This process will reveal the meaning which the authors of Scripture intended to convey, as well as the meaning comprehended by the original recipients. In most situations, an errant interpretation is a result of failed observation. Richard helps to eliminate this problem by spending a substantial amount of time setting forth a proper hermeneutical approach to the text.

It was quite encouraging to see Richard devote an entire chapter to structuring or outlining the text. His main emphasis was on equipping and encouraging the reader "to understand *how* the biblical author put the text together" (p. 53). This will greatly assist in not only preaching *what* the biblical author has written, but also in placing the emphasis *where* it was intended (p. 53). This is achieved through a grammatical analysis of the text. Richard is very helpful in providing keys for unlocking the outline contained in every text. It is helpful to remember that the Holy Spirit inspired not only the words of Scripture, but also the order of those words. Therefore, the preacher should let the text do its own outlining. It is his responsibility to find the outline, not to create it. (This is a graphic example of "sculpting" as quoted by Borglum.) This insures that the original author's message and emphasis continues to be communicated. In light of that obligation, Richard provides great assistance in pointing out the grammatical keys which reveal the structure of the passage.

Finally, the author provides extremely practical “action steps” at the end of each section. They assist in moving the reader toward employing the mechanics of sermon preparation as taught in the book. In each action step, the reader is encouraged to step into the preaching lab where Richard reveals his specimen of a text. The reader is then encouraged to practice the principles taught in that particular section. Then, the teacher demonstrates how he employed his own principles on that text which he subsequently preached. This proves extremely beneficial by helping the reader see how theory translates into practice.

Although it may be considered a strength by some, this reviewer saw Richard’s overemphasis on contemporization as a mild weakness. After declaring that contemporization is the main task of the expository preacher (p. 19) (which is a questionable statement in and of itself) the author was slow in detailing how the preacher is to make God’s claims meaningful to the local congregation. This overemphasis on contemporization is continued later in the section addressing the introduction (pp. 103-107) where Richard writes,

The most important part of the main introduction is helping the audience sense a need to hear the issues you will address in the sermon. Raising the need is a critical contemporization strategy. Spend a good amount of preparation and preaching time articulating the need the sermon meets. One way to measure a good sermon is to think through how relevant the need is and how well the sermon met that need (p. 104).

However, it is the opinion of this reviewer that the most important part of the sermon is not raising a need, but is faithfully communicating the message of the text! Much is being said today of the relevancy in preaching and the need to make God’s Word relevant. The preacher cannot make God’s Word relevant; it is relevant no matter what the preacher may do! The sinful heart of man has not changed since the Scriptures were penned; neither has the character and attributes of God. While the preacher can and should raise questions critical to the spiritual lives of his

hearers, those questions should arise from or be addressed directly by the passage of Scripture being preached. The focus should not be on the creativity of the preacher as much on the accurate communication of the timeless truths of God's Word which touch lives today.

Although it may not have been the intent of the author to overemphasize the creativity of the preacher in being relevant, that door was left open. In fact, Richard remarks that he spends 15 to 20 percent of his sermon raising a need in the minds of his hearers (p. 189). While his introduction to Revelation 4:1-11 is masterfully written, it is disheartening to this reviewer. If this is the standard for a proper introduction, then there will be few who will be able to meet the creativity demanded by this example. It seems much safer to emphasize faithfulness to the theology communicated by the text, rather than the preacher's creativity ability to exegete one's culture. The theological principles derived from the text can adequately serve as the bridge to the current audience.

Overall, this reviewer considered Preparing Expository Sermons to be a "must read" on the mechanics of sermon preparation. Although there is much theory behind preaching which is not addressed in this volume, addressing said theory is not the author's intent. Instead, Ramesh Richard intends to encourage his readers to overcome current pulpit deficiencies and pursue expository preaching as a way of life and ministry. He successfully accomplishes his goal by setting forth a very practical, hands-on, and mechanical guide to sermon preparation which can be followed, and indeed was followed by this reviewer. His seven-step process of Scripture sculpture will be revolutionary to some and refreshing to most. In addition, Richard addresses practically the preacher's spiritual life in his helpful and informative appendices. In sum, the book provides tremendous assistance in bringing the truths of a Biblical text into the view of

today's audience through expository sermon preparation and preaching. As this occurs, the preacher can be greatly assured that he has been faithful to the Word of God and the God of the Word.