

# **"What is Expository Preaching?"**

*An Essay by T. Scott Christmas*

## Introduction

When the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy in the city of Ephesus, he issued his son in the faith a very sobering charge. In 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Paul writes, "I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word" (NASB). Timothy was commanded by the Apostle Paul to preach. But the content of what he was to preach was very specific. Timothy was to preach "the word," the written revelation of God. The premise for this charge was that "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17; NASB). In other words, the Scriptures were sufficient to meet Timothy's every need. Therefore, if the nature of the Scriptures is such that they were to be the content of what Timothy preached in difficult times (2 Timothy 3:1-13), then the Bible should remain the content of what is preached today. Unfortunately, there is confusion as to how this is to be done.

Many within evangelical circles would affirm that all true preaching must be biblical preaching. Biblical preaching has often been identified with expository preaching, especially in contrast to topical preaching. But what is expository preaching? The term itself seems to be increasingly popular within evangelical circles. This increase appears to mark a resurgence of interest in the practice of expository preaching. However, though more and more preachers are claiming to do it, few are able to clearly define it. At a recent conference on expository

preaching, this writer heard one speaker declare that, because so many were now claiming to preach expositoryly, and yet were not, he would avoid the confusion by ceasing to use the term altogether. When asked about his style of preaching, he proposed that he would describe it as "explicatory preaching." Rather than invent new terms however, it seems better to clarify the old. So what is expository preaching?

The answer to this question will be given and expanded upon in four sections:

- I. A Definition of Expository Preaching
- II. Essential Components of an Expository Message
- III. The Biblical, Theological and Practical Justifications for Expository Preaching
- IV. Personal Reflections on the Importance and Status of Expository Preaching Today

## I. A Definition of Expository Preaching

Although discussion varies as to the exact nature of expository preaching, clarity on the subject can be achieved. First, it might be helpful to consider the definition of the English term exposition. Webster defines exposition as a discourse to convey information or explain what is difficult to understand. If this definition is used for Bible exposition, then the expositor would be one who carefully explains and applies a text that may be difficult to understand. This definition seems close to how the term is defined by accomplished preachers and scholars today. John R.

W. Stott expounds upon this idea of exposition when he writes:

Exposition... refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor prizes open what appears to be closed, makes plain what

is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is "imposition", which is to impose on the text what is not there.

Sidney Greidanus, quoting Merrill Unger, defines expository preaching as:

"Bible-centered preaching." That is, it is handling the text "in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular biblical writer and as it exists in the light of the over-all context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers."

Ramesh 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." Haddon Robinson 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." John R. W. Stott defines the craft in similar fashion when he writes:

Our responsibility as expositors is to open it up [the text] in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsification. 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.

Definitions such as these painfully expose the woeful inadequacy of much of what passes for biblical preaching today. How many times have congregations listened as preachers have done exactly what Stott condemns? On numerous occasions, this writer has listened as preachers have read a text in their sermon introduction, but have never returned to it. Still others approach their passage with a preconceived thought, reading the text in order to justify their message, but ignoring its context and the original authorial intent. Rarely does a man come to the text with no preconceived agenda, other than uncovering and communicating the original author's message

for the original recipients in an understandable way. And yet, this is the very approach which lies at the heart of expository preaching.

Two defining factors of expository preaching seem to keep surfacing: the meaning of the original author must be accurately maintained, and such meaning must be explained and applied in an easily understandable way. Ramesh Richard has a very descriptive approach to sermon preparation; he calls it "Scripture sculpture." Near the end of his book *Preparing Expository Sermons*, Richard reveals the source for his descriptive approach 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." Richard goes on to declare that this is exactly "what expository preachers pursue-bringing the truth of particular Scriptural texts into view of the audience." So, what is expository preaching? Expository preaching is the proclamation of the real and central meaning of a passage of Scripture, as it was intended by the original author to his original audience, in a plain, understandable, and relevant way for present-day hearers. In short, the text of the sermon determines the shape or form and the content of the sermon. As Merrill Unger has so correctly stated, "It is emphatically not preaching about the Bible, but preaching the Bible." "The expositor is only to provide mouth and lips for the passage itself so the Word may advance." If the preacher is not saying what the original author was saying, he is not preaching expositively.

## II. Essential Components of an Expository Message

There are three essential components of an expository message: it must contain the proper content, follow the proper process, and serve the proper purpose. First, it must contain the proper content. What is the message? Every biblical sermon must be biblical! As simple as that may be, it is profound to some. Expository sermons must have Scripture as their source.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones knew the propensity against this practice and exhorted his readers:

As you start preparing your sermon you must begin with the exposition of your passage or single verse. This is essential, this is vital; as I have said, all preaching must be expository. You do not start with a thought, even though it be a right thought, a good thought; you do not start with that, and then work out an address on that. You must not do that, because, if you do, you will find that you will be tending to say the same thing each time; you will be repeating yourself endlessly. If there were no other argument for expository preaching this, to me, would be sufficient in and of itself; it will preserve and guarantee variety and variation in your preaching. It will save you from repetition; and that will be a good thing for your people as well as for yourself!

Regardless of motivation, one must approach the text with no other agenda than uncovering and communicating the original author's message for the original recipients, in light of the whole of revelation. The point cannot be emphasized strongly enough that the content of the sermon must reflect the content of the biblical text. The text of Scripture must be the point of origination, the path of navigation, and the point of culmination. "Biblical exposition expounds, expresses, and exposes the Bible to an audience and the audience to the Bible."

The second essential component of an expository message is that it must follow the proper process of sermon preparation. How is the message to be prepared? If communicating the message of the original author in a more contemporary fashion is the ultimate goal, the preacher must first uncover the original message. This message is mined through a very careful process of exegesis. This necessary hermeneutical discipline is known as the Grammatico-historical approach to Scripture. Although the term may sound intimidating

initially, it simply requires that Scripture be understood according to its historical origin and grammatical construction. And yet, this process is labor intensive! It requires extensive study of the details of the text. Included in this careful process of exegesis are the study of the historical background and literary type of the passage. Next the exegete continues by viewing the text in the context of the entire Bible; the Old or New Testament; the particular book of Scripture; and, finally, the verses that come immediately before or after. Then the passage is to be studied syntactically or grammatically. In this phase, the exegete notes how the words relate to one another grammatically, thereby exposing the primary ideas or thoughts of the passage as well as the modifiers. As this stage is pursued, the structure or outline of the passage will reveal itself. The preacher is not to create an outline, but instead is to uncover the outline that is resident within the text. As the movement of the text is discerned via the main thoughts, the central idea or subject of the text will become apparent. This procedure will enable the preacher to base his authority on the Scriptures rather than on his own thoughts. This process is essential in expository preaching. The text is to determine not only the content of the sermon, but the form or outline as well. After the grammar is examined, the exegete is to study the meanings of specific words in the text. This is known as a lexical study. Once these steps are complete, vital cross-references can be pursued so as to further illustrate and explain the teaching of the passage. Finally, the passage is to be introduced, illustrated, applied, and concluded in a practical, understandable manner for the present-day hearers.

During this process however, it is crucial to remember that exegesis is not exposition.

There is a marked distinction between the two. Walter Liefeld writes:

In exegesis, one studies each part of the Greek sentence, doing careful analysis with a view to understanding each truth presented accurately. In large measure this is done line

by line. In exposition, on the other hand, the passage is studied as a whole, and with attention to the flow of thought or sequence of events.

Exposition is not a running commentary. The preacher is not to back his truck up to the congregation and dump his exegetical data. Exposition traces, packages, and communicates the main idea of the text as supported by the individual details.

The third and final essential component of an expository message is that it must serve the proper purpose. Why preach expositoryly? Simply put, preachers preach expositoryly in order to change lives! This is done in three stages. First, the accurate message of the text is given to inform the mind. This addresses the intellectual side of man. People must know God and what He demands of them. These truths must arise out of the text of Scripture and be presented in a clear and understandable way. Second, the text is expounded in order to affect the heart. This deals with the emotional side of man. The truth of God's Word is not to be considered in a detached and disinterested way. The message of Scripture is not only meant to inform the mind, but to affect the heart as well! The hearer should be convicted of the truth of Scripture and should sense the great need to obey the message that is communicated. Third, the message is proclaimed to move the will. This involves the volitional side of man. Once the mind has been informed and the heart convinced, the will must be moved. Man must act! He must respond to the truth coming from God's Word! Lloyd-Jones remarks, "Preaching is that which deals with the total person, the hearer becomes involved and knows that he has been dealt with and addressed by God through this preacher. Something has taken place in him and in his experience, and it is going to affect the whole of his life." As preachers preach expositoryly, they are able to proclaim the message of God with great authority in order to change lives! "The practical test of good preaching is the fruit that it bears in life. . . . Preaching must result in

godliness." J. I. Packer makes the point by stating:

The purpose of preaching is to inform, persuade, and call for an appropriate response to the God whose message and instruction are being delivered. . . . The purpose of preaching is not to stir people to action while bypassing their minds, so that they never see what reason God gives them for doing what the preacher requires of them (that is manipulation); nor is the purpose to stock people's minds with truth, no matter how vital and clear, which then lies fallow and does not become the seedbed and source of changed lives (that is academicism). The purpose is, rather, to reproduce, under God, the state of affairs that Paul described when he wrote to the Romans, "You wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted" (Rom. 6:17).

Expository sermons are composed of a biblical message gained through a proper hermeneutic, and proclaimed in order to see lives changed for the glory of God.

### III. The Biblical, Theological and Practical Justifications for Expository Preaching

How do we know that expository preaching is the proper way to preach? There are three justifications for preaching expositoryly. The first justification is biblical in nature. Probably the best textual example of expository preaching is found in Nehemiah 8:7-8,

Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people *remained* in their place. And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading (NASB).

The meaning of the text was explicated or explained so that the people could understand what God required of them. Nehemiah 8:9-12 describes the powerful results of that message!

Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest *and* scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them (NASB).



The people came to understand, from the explanation of God's Word, that God not only punishes sin, He also forgives the repentant and blesses obedience, and that was reason to rejoice. There are additional examples in the New Testament of individuals explaining certain Old Testament passage to their hearers. Richard Mayhue describes some of these when he writes:

A particular example is Jesus' expounding of Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue (Luke 4:16-22). He later gave a thematic exposition of Himself to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27, 32, 44-47). In Acts 8:27-35 Philip expounded Isaiah 53:7-8 for the Ethiopian Eunuch. Steven preached a historical/biographical expository sermon to the Jews before they stoned him (Acts 7:2-53).

In Acts 2, 3, and 4, we find the apostles expositing the Old Testament Scriptures in light of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here we find a pattern being established. In Acts 6 however, a crisis arises. People are not being fed properly. What are the apostles to do, preach or feed hungry widows? In Acts 6:4, the Bible shows that they maintained the proper priority, "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (NASB). Concerning this passage Lloyd-Jones writes, "Now there the priorities are laid down once and for ever. This is the primary task of the church, the primary task of the leaders of the church, the people who are set in positions of authority; and we must not allow anything to deflect us from this, however good the cause, however great the need." This was obviously the consensus of the New Testament writers, for in 1 Timothy 4:13, the Apostle Paul encouraged Timothy, "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" (NASB). Later, in 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul exhorted Timothy to "preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (NASB). In 1 Thessalonians 5:27, Paul gave specific instructions to that New Testament church, "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren" (NASB). In Colossians 4:16, he gave similar exhortation to the believers at Colossae, "And when this letter is read among you, have it

also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter *that is coming from Laodicea*" (NASB). In Colossians 3:16 Paul wrote, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:11, "Whoever speaks, *let him speak*, as it were, the utterances of God" (NASB). These passages of Scripture clearly show that the New Testament church was characterized by the reading and preaching of Scripture. To be New Testament is to be expository! There is abundant biblical precedent to support expository preaching.

The second justification for expository preaching is theological in nature. Expository preaching is justified by the nature of man and the nature of salvation. Because of his nature, man must be fed the truth of God through Bible exposition. On his own, man cannot and will not discover the truth of God. In today's society, people find themselves in many precarious and troublesome situations. However, Lloyd-Jones notes that "man's real trouble is that he is a rebel against God and consequently under the wrath of God." Romans 3:10-12 affirms the spiritual hopelessness of man, "as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one"" (NASB).

The Bible paints a very bleak picture of man by using some very descriptive terms. One New Testament description of man indicates that he is blind! Man is blind to the truth of God because Satan has blinded him (2 Corinthians 4:3-4)! The truth of God has been hidden from those who are lost! Though the truth is right before their eyes at times, they are unable to see it!

In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul told the Corinthian believers, "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (NASB). Man is unable to respond to or discover truth unless God enables him to do so because his understanding has been darkened! In Ephesians 4:17-18, Paul uses this term as he exhorts believers not to live as they formerly did: "walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart" (NASB). Because of his spiritual condition, man cannot discover truth on his own. In fact, the situation is so severe that the Bible describes man as being, "dead in your trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). Before salvation man is spiritually dead! He has no fellowship with God! He has no appetite or ability to understand the truth of God! Blind, darkened, and dead are the graphic terms Scripture uses to describe the nature of man. In order to be saved however, man must do what Paul describes in 1 Timothy 2:4, "come to the knowledge of the truth" (NASB). But there is a significant problem! He does not know truth! He does not seek truth! He cannot find truth! Why? Because he is blind; his understanding is darkened; and he is spiritually dead! Therefore, unregenerate man needs the truth given to him through expository preaching. Because of his nature, there is no need for dialogue or discussions. Truth is to be proclaimed through expository sermons! The pattern for ministry has been set in the New Testament. Jesus preached; the apostles preached; and Timothy was commanded to preach the Word! And the Word of God is most clearly, accurately, and authoritatively proclaimed through expository preaching.

Expository preaching is justified by the nature of man and the nature of salvation. The only way that anyone can ever understand and embrace the gospel is if God sovereignly orchestrates it (Matthew 11:25-27)! It is God who sovereignly opens the eyes of the blind! It is God who sovereignly gives light to those whose understanding has been darkened! It is God who sovereignly gives life to those who are spiritually dead! It is God who sovereignly reveals His truth to those who were ignorant! And the way God has chosen to reveal His life-changing message of truth is through the preaching of the gospel (Romans 10:17)! Man must have a clear, accurate, and authoritative presentation of the message of God in order to be saved. And that message is best delivered through expository preaching. Lloyd-Jones concludes:

The moment you consider man's real need, and also the nature of the salvation announced and proclaimed in the Scriptures, you are driven to the conclusion that the primary task of the church is to preach and proclaim this, to show man's real need, and to show the only remedy, and the only cure for it.

Expository preaching is justified biblically, theologically, and, finally, practically. There are at least four ways that expository preaching can be justified practically. First, expository preaching sets boundaries. Sidney Greidanus quotes John Stott as saying, "'it restricts us to the scriptural text' and does not allow us to invent our own message." Not only is the preacher kept from going outside of his text, but he is forced to preach what he normally might avoid! Expository preaching will lead the preacher to deal with texts on divorce, genocide, and the holiness of God. Although this can be distressing to some, it is beneficial that the preacher need not worry about what text he will preach next; he simply deals with the next portion of the book.

Second, expository preaching demands integrity. Again Stott writes, "it confronts the preacher with the question, 'what did the original author intend his words to mean?'" The

preacher remains subject to the theme of the text. The text will either hold him to the message of the author or expose his lack of integrity.

Third, expository preaching stretches the pastor theologically. His growth as a theologian is aided as he is forced to plow new ground week after week, year after year. The preacher's biblical knowledge continues to grow! While Michael Jordan is going downhill, the expository preacher gets better and better!

Fourth, expository preaching carries authority. Greidanus writes, "It gives us confidence to preach, for we are not expanding our own fallible views but the word of God." The text, studied in its context, brings authority to the preaching and the preacher. It gives him the confidence to say, "Thus says the Lord!"

#### IV. Personal Reflections on the Importance and Status of Expository Preaching Today

Expository preaching is the only trustworthy approach to ministry. The church today is going through an identity crisis! It is constantly searching for new methods to accomplish its goals. Preaching the Scriptures is becoming less and less important. Today, there seems to be much emphasis upon the church being warm in its manner of welcome; having contemporary, relevant music; meeting the "felt needs" of the congregation; and addressing all the pertinent political issues of the day. The focus is upon seeing all of these matters dealt with while leaving the central problem unaddressed, that is, "Who will feed the human soul?"

Part of the reason for the rejection of expository preaching is that preachers don't have a proper view of Scripture. Some reject its inerrancy; more reject its sufficiency; many disregard its potency. There can't be, and won't be, expository preaching without the proper view of Scripture.

However, even though some may say they have the proper view of Scripture, they still don't preach expositively. While it is true that some have never been taught the proper method, it is also true that some who think they believe in God's Word have merely acceded to a cultural convention. What men believe about the Bible is declared not by what they say, but how they preach. Don't tell me what you believe about the Bible. Instead, let me hear you preach, and I will tell you what you believe about the Bible.

Most do not preach expositively because it is too much work! They believe there are less labor-intensive, more creative ways to minister. This is the sin of homiletical sloth. In other words, they don't believe the homiletical payoff is worth the work. And yet, the apostle Paul was very clear in 1 Corinthians 4:2, "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful," not innovative, not entrepreneurial, but faithful! Biblically speaking, a man should very well be doubtful about himself, but confident about God's truth! Today, the opposite is true! Man has become doubtful about truth, and confident about himself! This is problematic! Expository preaching is the only God-given, trustworthy approach to ministry, and the steward of the Word of God must prove himself faithful! Furthermore, preachers must preach expositively because the Word and the Spirit are inseparable! The two always go together. You can't have one without the other. The Spirit of God is as closely connected to the Word of God as breath is to

speech (Isaiah 34:16; 61:1; John 3:34; 6:63). When the Word of God is preached, the Spirit of God moves. We may hear the sermon, but who is preaching, the preacher or the Spirit? The answer to that question depends upon the faithfulness of the preacher. The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God!

So, how important is expository preaching today? This writer agrees with John Stott, who wrote "I believe that nothing is better calculated to restore health and vitality to the Church or to lead its members into maturity in Christ than a recovery of true, biblical, contemporary preaching." May the same God who commissioned Timothy through Paul to preach the Word, graciously raise up other men who will be committed to expository preaching.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Greidanus, Sidney. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.
- Liefeld, Walter L. *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.
- Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *Preaching and Preachers*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972.
- Richard L. Mayhue. "Rediscovering Expository Preaching." *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*. John MacArthur, Jr. and the Master's Seminary Faculty. Dallas: Word, 1992.
- Packer, J. I. "Why Preach?" *The Preacher and Preaching*, ed. by Samuel T. Logan. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986.
- Richard, Ramesh. *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001.
- Robinson, Haddon. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980.
- Stott, John R. W. *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.
- Unger, Merrill F. *Principles of Expository Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955.
- Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1988.
- Wingren, Gustaf. *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*. London: SCM, 1960.