

The unashamed conviction that lies behind 'Preach the Word' is that the strength of the Church of Christ is measured by its commitment to preaching – but not just any old sort of preaching – **systematic expository preaching**.

The main thrust of this series of workshops is to train up and develop men who are able to correctly handle the Word of God and effectively preach it. The emphasis will be on necessary steps in the practical and personal preparation of expository sermons, but from time to time we will undoubtedly return to the underlying principles and benefits of expository preaching.

By way of introduction in this first session we are going to look at '*Expository Preaching – What?*' and '*Why?*' before we get into the subject that will occupy us for the next number of months – '*Expository Preaching – How?*'

## 1. Expository Preaching – What?

One way to understand what expository preaching is, is to consider what it is not; to look at some of the approaches that are out there today and see how they match up.

A quick overview of the current trends in preaching would reveal the following approaches

1. The anecdotal or storytelling message  
This is little more than a collection of stories, often entertaining and amusing, loosely strung together with, perhaps, a moral lesson being drawn but very little connection, if any, to Scripture. One writer has described this sort of preaching as erecting a skyscraper, with one storey on top of another!
2. The topical or agenda driven message  
Here the speaker begins with an issue or a topic he wants to address and then finds a passage of Scripture that refers to that – or not - as the case may be. The starting point is not what does God want to say but what do I want to talk about on this occasion.
3. The thematic or scattergun message  
This begins with a theme and then dips into numerous related Bible passages. This is the method used by a preacher I heard a few years ago who started with a text, though I confess I have forgotten which one, and then proceeded to draw our attention to every other Biblical reference he could find to the main words in that text, taking us all over Scripture but wresting text after text from its context and utterly bewildering his listeners.
4. The biographical or character study of a Bible personality  
Here the speaker focuses on the life of an individual in the Bible and draws out moral or character building lessons from that life.
5. The textual - but usually non-contextual - message  
Here the speaker uses a text or a passage of Scripture as authority for what they want to say but in essence it is just a launch pad.

Some of these approaches to preaching are valid on a one off basis or can be profitably used from time to time – as long as they are used with care. For example,

there will be occasions when we want to allow God's Word to speak into some current event or debate that is very much in the minds of our congregation or we want to teach a specific Biblical truth or doctrine.

Also, there is much to be gained from studying the lives of some of the characters that appear in the Biblical record. The caution lies in the need to ensure that what we teach from the passage or the character is what the original writer intended to be taught.

For example, to teach from the story of David and Goliath that God is on the side of the underdog; or to claim Biblical warrant for standing up for yourself against bullies would not be consistent with the original intent of the Biblical author.

Used carefully, some of these approaches to preaching have their place but, if we could use a food analogy, they should be seen as occasional side dishes rather than the main, staple diet. They will not provide a healthy, long-term means of sustenance and nourishment for God's people.

In the words of Walter Kaiser, "It is no secret that Christ's Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, "junk food"; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are not carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church."<sup>1</sup>

If we could continue with Kaiser's food analogy for a moment, what happens if people live on a diet of junk food rather than a well balanced and nutritious diet? Well the answer is clear for all to see in the Church of today – spiritual malnutrition, truth decay, and even obesity.

- *spiritual malnutrition*: If we adopt these generally random, haphazard, agenda driven approaches to God's Word, then the men and women who sit under that sort of preaching week in and week out do not grow in their knowledge and understanding of God's Word or of the God of that Word. They will never grow past the knowledge or maturity level of the preacher. In the words of Colin Smith, formerly of Edinburgh and now in Illinois, "Topical preaching, for example, can only take you where you have already gone with what you already know."<sup>2</sup>
- *truth decay*: Our listeners will never become familiar with, or stretched by, vast tracts of God's Word and, perhaps most dangerously of all, they will end up with a very strange view of the Bible itself. Instead of seeing the Bible as being a series of carefully constructed books with progressions of thought and teaching, they will see it as a collection of proof texts or as some sort of leather bound 'promise box' that you dip into every now and then for a blessed thought or word of comfort.
- *obesity*: But, I hear you say, why are some of the places where they have abandoned expository preaching, if ever they practised it, packing the

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<sup>1</sup> Toward an Exegetical Theology pp7-8

<sup>2</sup> Preaching Today Audio, Issue 290

numbers in? This seems to be what people want and are attracted to so surely we should provide anecdotal, entertaining talks because at least that gets people into Church. The idea of a man standing up for 30, 40 or 50 minutes and talking is so out of date and unattractive so lets abandon it. Let's have short, entertaining messages, ideally strung together with lots of visual images like video clips etc.

The issue is, the congregation may have been entertained but have they been fed? Churches do not exist simply to pack crowds in on a Sunday morning but to be a place where the authoritative word of the living God is heard.

So what's the answer? Well the aim of these preacher's workshops is to encourage preaching that is both *systematic* and *expository*. Systematic, in that it approaches God's Word in a manner that is faithful to and consistent with the very nature and content of Scripture, and expository, in that the content of the sermon is faithful to and limited by the message of the text being preached.

Let's begin by trying to define what we mean by expository preaching. The reality is that it is not easy to come up with a really satisfactory, all embracing definition of expository preaching which is, after all, such a dynamic and living thing. In all my reading and study I have collected literally dozens of definitions, many of which are great and get close to the mark but none of which, in my opinion, cover every aspect of what expository preaching is all about.

Let's look at a few to get us moving in the right direction.

- *"the communication of truth by man to man"*<sup>3</sup>,
- *"teaching plus application"*<sup>4</sup>,
- *"logic on fire, eloquent reason"*<sup>5</sup>,
- *"the proclamation by word of mouth of God's written instead of his spoken Word."*<sup>6</sup>
- *"thirty minutes to wake the dead"*.

Haddon Robinson, one of the greatest exponents and teachers of expository preaching defines it as, "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 applies first to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him...to the listeners."<sup>7</sup>

Richard L. Mayhue, of The Master's Seminary says that expository preaching is, preaching that "focuses predominantly on the text(s) under consideration along with its (their) context(s). Exposition normally concentrates on a single text of Scripture, but it is sometimes possible for a thematic/theological message or a historical/biographical discourse to be expository in nature. An exposition may treat any length of passage."<sup>8</sup>

One of my favourite definitions comes from Bernard Lord Manning, a Congregational writer and Cambridge mediaeval scholar who lived in the first half of the twentieth century, and who said that, "Preaching is the manifestation of the incarnate word from the written word by the spoken word."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Phillips Brooks, 'Lectures on Preaching' p5

<sup>4</sup> J I Packer, qtd Logan p3

<sup>5</sup> J R W Stott, 'Preach the Word!' ed Greg Haslam p50

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Volbeda, qtd J R W Stott, 'I Believe in Preaching' p120

<sup>7</sup> Haddon Robinson 'Making a Difference in Preaching' p64

<sup>8</sup> Richard L Mayhue 'Rediscovering Expository Preaching' p9

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Lord Manning qtd Greg Haslam 'Preach the Word!' p30

My own definition is:

“Expository preaching involves the proclamation, explanation and application of God’s Word in such a way that teaches the mind, touches the heart and transforms the life”.

My reasons for favouring my own attempt are that I feel it

- i. grounds the exercise of preaching clearly in Scripture as the only legitimate and authoritative source of preaching;
- ii. covers the dynamic aspect of preaching, in that it is proclamation or heralding of God’s truth
- iii. addresses not only the intellectual or emotional levels but also the volitional, without which preaching really is not preaching.

The word ‘exposition’, like the word expose, means to lay open or uncover. Expository preaching opens up or unpacks a text or passage of Scripture so that the listener understands clearly what was in the mind of the author of that text.

Some people think that if the Bible is open and perhaps referred to from time to time then that is expository preaching. But a truly expository sermon doesn’t simply allude to Scripture or use it as the starting point, it limits itself to what that particular passage of God’s Word is teaching. I once heard a sermon on Romans 1 which the preacher used as a lesson in being a Christian in your place at work. Now, apart from the fact that I can’t remember the points he was making, even if what he said was factually true, it’s not an honest handling of Scripture because that clearly was not the issue in the mind of the author, Paul.

In an expository sermon, the message of the sermon will be the message of the author. The point of the passage is the point of the sermon.

A truly expository sermon is one determined by the *Content*, the *Method* and the *Effect* of the preaching.

Let’s take a few moments to look at one of the clearest biblical examples of expository preaching, that found in Nehemiah 8

*(Questions:*

- a. What did Ezra read and to whom?*
- b. What was the preaching method of the Levites?*
- c. How could this be described as ‘expository preaching’?*
- d. What were the reactions of the people in the congregation?)*