

2011 OLD UNION BAPTIST MINISTER'S SCHOOL

Expository Preaching

Explaining the Word of God to the People of God by the Power of God.

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"We have been given a treasure in God's Word, the Bible, that's value is infinite; and we have congregations that are starving for God's Word even though most of them don't know it. Let's take up the call to preach it to them!"

"For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe." (1 Thessalonians 2:13 KJV)

It is very clear when Paul wrote to the Church at Thessalonica, he was confident that the word he preached was from heaven and that the very same word was working in those who had believed. It is the duty of every minister to ensure the word he is preaching is the Word of God rather than the word of men. It is possible to be just as confident as the Apostle Paul that the messages we preach are from heaven, and it must be so if we expect God to bless our congregations.

Along with this we should take great effort to get ourselves "out of the way" in the pulpit, and to make ourselves as "invisible" as possible when we preach. A true minister of the gospel does not desire to be recognized or for people to remember his stories. He does not desire the praises and applause of men or for people to constantly tell him how well he performed. If he is genuine in his approach he wants to be forgotten, and his heart's longing is that the people would receive the Word of God. In the words of John the Baptist, *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* (John 3:30 KJV)

The desire for transparency in the pulpit and to ensure that the messages we preach are God's Word are the motives behind the lesson today. This is the aim of expository preaching. We have been given a treasure in God's Word, the Bible, that's value is infinite; and we have congregations that are starving for God's Word even though most of them don't know it. Let's take up the call to preach it to them!

What is expository preaching?

When I state the words, "Expository Preaching", it probably evokes different meanings for different people, so we need to be clear about the definition:

Expository – serving to explain; tending to illustrate¹

Preaching – proclaiming, publishing in discourse; inculcating²

From the definitions of the words, a short definition of the term "Expository Preaching" could be:

"Public proclamation that focuses primarily on explaining the Word of God to the degree that the meaning of the passage is the message of the sermon."

That is going to be the working definition for the purpose of this lesson. No doubt, some may come to me and say, "That is not what I mean when I (or when my favorite Bible teacher) uses the term." I understand that this may be the case, but I am using this definition for the purposes of this lesson.

Expository sermons according to this broad definition could be topical, textual, or topical-textual in their form as long as their primary focus is to explain the Word of God in its context, and the meaning of the Bible passages (in their context) is the message of the sermon.

¹ Webster's 1828 Dictionary

² Ibid

The typical Expository Sermon begins with the scripture text as its basis, derives its topic or "thought" from the text itself, covers the scope of the text, and discloses the eternal message and principles that were intended by the Spirit who inspired the text. In essence, the meaning of the passage of scripture is the message of the sermon preached.³

"So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." (Nehemiah 8:8 KJV)

The account of Ezra's reading of the book of the Law of Moses gives a good biblical illustration of expository preaching. After reading the passage of Scripture, he and the Levites gathered around him would give the explanation of the text so the people could understand the meaning. They did not try to create their own message from the Word of God, but rather preached, taught, and explained the Word of God itself.

One of the key presuppositions of expository preaching is that the Bible is the Word of God, and that it is our duty as ministers to "give the sense" so people understand what God is saying! The man of God is subject to the Word of God, and not the other way around. Expository preachers will be discoverers of God's truths rather than inventors of new ideas.⁴ We are not called to preach clever sermons, but we are called to make God's Word plain!

Who should preach expository sermons?

While I believe that all of God's ministers should approach preaching with the aim of explanation and exposition, my real point in asking this question is to make it clear that it is the pastor's primary role to be a teacher and an expositor of God's Word.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy he describes the criteria by which a church should select its pastor. This is also a good list for every man to examine to see if he would be qualified to be an overseer of one of the Lord's churches.

"This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." (1 Timothy 3:1-7 KJV)

Of all of the qualifications listed, teaching is the one skill that a bishop (overseer, pastor) must be able and inclined to do as a qualification of the office. This skill is a requirement because it is his primary duty above all others. It is the reason the office was given to the church.

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: (Ephesians 4:11-12 KJV)

³ Bryan Chapell, "Christ-Centered Preaching"

⁴ J. Ellwood Evans, "Expository Preaching"

He exhorted Timothy in his second letter to *"...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."* (2 Timothy 4:2 ESV)

Again, in Paul's letter to Titus he wrote as a qualification for the office of an Elder, *"He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."* (Titus 1:9 ESV)

Not all preachers will be, or should be, pastors of churches, but all pastors of churches must be committed teachers and expositors of the Word of God. If you are a young man who is "desiring the office of a bishop" but are not committed to teaching and explaining God's Word, then you should give up your aspiration and move on to another work to which the Lord leads you. If you are currently in a pastoral role, but are not able or committed to the teaching and exposition of God's Word, then you are in the wrong office.

Again, pastors must be committed teachers and expositors of God's Word. The vitality and effectiveness of the church depends on it! A man may say, "I was called to preach, not to teach." This may very well be true, but if a man is going to be the pastor of a church of God then he is called to teach the Word of God!

Why should we preach expository sermons?

There are several reasons why we should preach expository sermons. First of all, **we have no better basis for our sermons than the Scripture because it is breathed out by God.**

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17 ESV)

It must be clear that we are called to preach the Word of God, not merely from it or about it, in our messages. God's Word is laid out clearly for us in the pages of Scripture and it is our calling to explain it and teach it to the people of God so they may hear it and grow by it.

If we truly believe that God's Word is inspired, then we would be foolish to turn to other sources for the primary subject matter of our sermons. Surely it would be better for people to hear God's inspired word than for the sermon to revolve around the latest current events, or some soapbox we decide to stand on. People need to hear from God, and we have His Word to preach to them!

In conjunction with the fact that the Bible is God's inspired word, **it is very important that we ensure we are preaching God's Word and not our own.** When we use our own ideas and doctrines as the basis for messages we preach and use scripture to "back them up" we run in grave danger of falling into error and preaching the "word of men" instead of the "Word of God" to our congregations. This word of men will never produce spiritual fruit in the lives of the hearers, but rather will encourage doctrinal error and stunt spiritual growth.

This occurs in our own churches when we hear more messages about bible versions, baptisteries, and altar benches than we do about the inspiration of God's Word, the message in baptism, and salvation by

Christ's atoning death on the cross. A man who is committed to preaching and teaching the Word of God will not be sidetracked on unimportant, extra-biblical, issues because he understands he is limited to the parameters of the sacred Scripture. When he diligently studies and teaches God's Word for what it says, he will be too busy conveying the eternal truths of God's Word to spend time on insignificant side issues that would most certainly be classified as "the word of men."

The third reason we should preach expository sermons is that **it ensures our messages are Christ-centered and redemptive in nature.** Almost every Bible passage revolves around the Son of God and has a redemptive message for fallen man. When we preach the passage in its context we find that our sermons also become Christ-centered and redemptive. When sinners and saints alike hear messages explaining God's word for them and the hope they have in Christ they will be drawn to him! And what better thing could we ask for? The aim of preaching is never to show how much we know about a subject, but always to draw men to Christ!

Finally, we should preach expository sermons because **preaching the Word of God is effective.** In our text from 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul states that the Word of God is "working in you believers." Only the Word of God will accomplish the task of working in the souls of those that hear.

"For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."
(Isaiah 55:10-11 KJV)

This promise, that God will ensure His Word will not return void, is true for His Word, but is not true for ours. If we remain committed to proclaiming God's Word, and resist the urge to preach our own message, we will reap a harvest for our labor. God's Word is powerful and cuts to the hearts of the men and women who hear it. If we want our preaching to be effective, then we need to make sure we are preaching the Word of God, and not the word of men!

How do we preach expository messages?

I want to be careful to point out that I am not an expert on preaching and that I have much to learn from experience and instruction from my preacher brothers. There are, however, some basic principles that should be mentioned concerning the preparation and delivery of the sermon.

Above all other things, **it is crucial when preparing a sermon that we begin with prayer.** No matter how much effort we put into studying the Word of God it will be deficient if we are deficient in prayer. We need to pray about selecting the appropriate text, pray for illumination of the Scripture so we can understand it, and overall guidance from the time before we open our Bible, to the actual time of delivery from the pulpit. God has already inspired His Word, but we must pray that the Holy Spirit will help us to receive His Word and empower us to deliver His Word!

Along with the importance of prayer is the importance of **selecting the appropriate text for the sermon.** This can be a very agonizing process as we pray for leadership concerning the appropriate passage for the moment. There are a few things to consider when selecting the text.

First of all, we should not be circumstantial in our text selection. We may think we know the Word that's needed for a particular circumstance, but we are typically wrong in our assessment. Only God knows the hearts of men and women and it is very likely they all approach the service with very different circumstances, and therefore very different perspectives, as they listen to you speak. When we become circumstantial in our text selection, the text often is selected based on our circumstances and needs which may be very different than what the congregation needs.

We should also beware of selecting only texts on subjects that we are most comfortable with. God has called pastors to preach and teach the "whole counsel of God"⁵ not just those subjects that tend to be our favorite. It would probably do all pastors well to keep a list of subjects that have been covered so as to see if the messages preached are as balanced as God's Word is.

When selecting a text we should not rule out that God would want us to preach systematically through a series of texts from His Word. Sometimes we feel a spontaneous survey through Scripture is most "spiritual", but I have found the times of most spiritual growth have actually come through times of preaching through a book of the Bible or through a particular cohesive section of the Bible over a period of several weeks or months. Earlier in my ministry I preached through the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord mightily blessed our congregation during that period. Recently I preached through the book of 1 Corinthians verse by verse over a period of 18 months and God always fit the passage to circumstances occurring in the congregation of which I was unaware. It was amazing to see God's leadership and wisdom through the entire process.

Once we have selected the text for the sermon, **it is crucial that we study and understand the text within the context it is written.** We are not prepared to preach a message if we don't understand the meaning of the text ourselves. We must get a firm handle on the subject matter before we seek to teach others about its meaning. How do we study Scripture within its context?

The first thing we must do is understand what the text means grammatically. There are probably words within the text for which we are unclear of their definition. We should begin by defining them both by looking up the meaning of the original language and by getting clarification of the definition of the English word that was used in the translation. We should also examine the sentence structure to make sure we correctly understand the message the original writer was trying to convey.

Once we understand the language of the passage, we must seek to understand the context of the passage. We should consider the immediate context and the remote context of the passage. The immediate context focuses on the verses immediately preceding and following the text, while the remote context focuses on the biblical material in the surrounding chapters and beyond. It is also important to determine the type of literature, interpret any figurative language, and to let scripture interpret scripture.⁶ Once we have a good understanding of the meaning of the passage in its original setting, we can begin to determine how the passage applies to us today.

⁵ Acts 20:27

⁶ Arnold and Beyer, "Encountering the Old Testament"

One of the key elements of preaching the Word of God is **making the link between the original meaning of the passage and the application to the modern day hearer**. The congregant is seeking to understand why the ancient text has anything to do with their life in the 21st Century. Once we have a grasp on the text in its original setting we can begin to see the eternal message that God has for all generations everywhere. When approaching application it may be helpful to ask the following questions:

1. What redemptive message does this have for men in a fallen condition?
2. What commandment is there in this passage to obey?
3. What sin is there in this passage to avoid?
4. What promise is there in this passage to claim?
5. What key lesson is there in this passage to learn?

The people sitting in the pew are trying to figure out what God's message is for them in the sermon. We must make the connection between our study and application if we expect them to find it. While the text is ancient, the message of the Scripture is relevant to every culture on the face of the earth. It is our duty as pastors and teachers to share that relevant message with our congregations.

After we have organized the information from our studies and prayed for guidance we are then ready to **deliver the sermon**. I can't emphasize enough how important it is to pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance and leadership for the delivery of the message no matter how much preparation we have given to study! Though an entire lesson could be devoted to delivery, I feel it is important for this lesson to share the overall goal of delivery.

When we stand to preach God's Word our chief goal should be that the people would look past us to see the message we are bringing, and ultimately the God to whom we are pointing them. We should rid ourselves of any habits that would draw the attention of the hearer away from God and to us. Remember, the power of the sermon is not in our delivery, it is in the message we are delivering! As the Apostle wrote, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."* (Romans 1:16 KJV)

Conclusion

"For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake."
(1 Thessalonians 1:5 KJV)

We have been entrusted with a high calling as pastors and teachers and need to answer that call as faithful stewards of God's Holy Word.

So my call is for pastors everywhere to commit first of all to be a better disciple of the Word of God, and secondly to be committed to teach the Word of God (even the hard teachings) to the people of God. They are hungry for it, even if they don't know it yet.