

EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING: DEFINED, DESCRIBED, AND DEFENDED

By David Schrock | davidschrock.com

Paige Patterson has said, “There is no genuinely good preaching except exposition.” Such serious words require us to consider what expositional preaching is and why it is so important that preachers only preach expositional sermons.

Exposition Defined

In short, expositional preaching is the kind of preaching that makes the main point of the biblical text the main point of the sermon. Mark Dever defines it this way: “An expositional sermon is a sermon that takes the main point of a passage of Scripture [and] makes it the main point of the sermon, and applies it to life today.”¹ Therefore, it does not mean that exposition is narrowly focused on one or two verses; expositional preaching can have small, medium, or large sections of Scripture (i.e., one verse or one book). An expositional sermon need not be lifeless, boring, or overly technical.² Surely many “expositors” are dull or have preached overly technical messages, but those examples simply illustrate *bad* exposition, not *true* exposition.

Expositional preaching demands that the preacher know the Word he is preaching and that he preaches the Word as it was originally inspired. It defends the congregation from hearing a small sampling of “hobby horse” sermons and it requires the pastor and the church to move through the whole counsel of God over the course of time. Since all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, maturing Christians need to know the whole counsel of Scripture. It is my conviction of expository preachers that *only* expositional preaching will expose a Christian to all the doctrines of the Bible presented in their original contexts, and with their original applications to life.

Expositional preaching stands in opposition to a number of other popular, but less powerful forms of preaching: topical,³ (auto)biographical, preaching to felt needs, etc. Over time expositional sermons demonstrate how one ought to interpret the Bible; they communicate doctrine with application to life; and they ground the life of the believer in the Word of God, not the personality of the preacher or the most recent psychological fad.

A Brief History of Expositional Preaching

¹<http://www.9marks.org/answers/what-%E2%80%9Cexpositional%E2%80%9D-sermon>

²Ibid.

³Admittedly, it is possible to preach about a “topic” in an “expositional” way. Ed Stetzer lists four kinds of expositional sermons; of these, he suggests that topical exposition is legitimate but should be used the least. See his article at LifeWay: <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/Four-kinds-of-expositional-preaching>.

Speaking broadly, expositional preaching went out of fashion in the mid-twentieth century, especially among Southern Baptists. As SBC pastors received training at the hands of moderates and liberals, commitment to the Scripture waned. In its place attention was given to therapeutic counseling, psychological treatments, managerial techniques, and revivalistic sermons that appealed to the emotions with less attention to renewing the mind (cf. Rom 12:1–2).

David Wells, in his classic *No Place for Truth*, chronicles the depletion of “sound doctrine” in American churches during the 1900s. He shows how business models, American individualism, and mass media worked together to remove doctrine from the church and replace it with entertainment in excess. One casualty during this era was the Sunday sermon. Instead of heralding the truth of the gospel (i.e., moving from text to congregation), preachers under pressure to meet the demands of consumers “polled their audiences” to find out what the masses wanted to hear. As a result, the sovereign choices of the audiences often determined the contents of the message.

During this era, one pastor stands out as an exception: W. A. Criswell. Without witnessing any models of exposition, Criswell stumbled into this form preaching. Here’s what he said about expositional preaching,

When I first began to preach as a teenager ... I preached about whatever fell by chance into my mind. I preached according to whatever some incident or event or saying would suggest. That is about as poor a way to prepare a sermon as could be found in all the world ... Why should I struggle to think up topics for my sermons ... when I could let inspiring and informative texts speak for themselves? ... Suddenly I found myself really proclaiming the Word, book by book, text by text, cover to cover from Genesis to Revelation. I felt new power. Instead of pacing the floor, stressed and anxious, trying to find some new topic to preach, I was pacing the floor with excitement, caught up in the might and majesty of God’s Word ...”

Indeed in an era when expositional preaching was lacking, Criswell stood out as a bright light. He was soon followed by others, but one in particular is worth considering: Adrian Rogers.

On the subject of preaching, Adrian Rogers listed four purposes of preaching: to confront, to clarify, to convict, and to convert.⁴ On the point of clarification, he said, “All good preaching is teaching.”⁵ This is at the heart of expositional preaching. Expositional preaching teaches what is in the text for the purpose of leading sinners to encounter the living Christ and by faith and repentance to either be saved or be sanctified.

Today, expositional preaching has been vitally revitalized in the seminaries, but still needs to find a place in local churches. As to the former, Paige Patterson, Albert Mohler, and

⁴James A. Smith, Sr., *The Florida Baptist Witness*, November 17, 2005, www.floridabaptistwitness.com/5155.article.print

⁵*Ibid.*

Daniel Akin have championed expositional preaching, and as to the latter men like the late James Montgomery Boice (through his commentaries) and John MacArthur (through his radio preaching and commentaries) have demonstrated how winsome and exciting expositional preaching can be for the believer who lives on God's word. Consider MacArthur's definition of exposition:

Expository preaching familiarizes people with the Scripture itself instead of simply giving them a speech, as true and as reflective of biblical teaching as that speech may be. With expository preaching, people become familiar with the Scripture. They can go back to the passages that have been addressed, and they can be reminded by the text itself of what it means. So you give people the Word of God in a way that has long-term impact, because it makes them familiar with Scripture.

MacArthur speaks with the heart of pastor, and he explains why expositional preaching is the method of choice for the local church. As opposed to the traveling evangelist who prepares a fine-tuned speech to draw in the lost; the pastor has the responsibility of feeding a flock that will graze together for decades at a time. What the local flock needs is different than what the traveling evangelist can give. In fact, when pastors offer their congregations a diet of revivalistic sermons, the long-term result is a congregation that does not know the word of God. Therefore, the best food that can be prepared for the local church is a regular diet of expositional sermons.

All in all, expositional preaching has witnessed a revival in our nation and gives hope to evangelical believers that entering the twenty-first century, the church will be built up not by gimmicks and marketing, but by the regular (and [often unimpressive](#)) exposition of God's word. As Adrian Rogers once said, "I believe preaching is central, and not because I happen to be the preacher. I believe that the message, preaching, is the stack pole around which everything else is built." Certainly, Roger's ministry testified to effectiveness of his preaching, but we need to ask what Scripture itself says about the matter: Is expositional preaching the only kind of preaching?

Expositional Preaching is Biblical

The simple answer for why expositional preaching is necessary is that the health of the church depends on the regular reading of God's word and the full explanation of the whole counsel of God. This claim can be supported by church history (as seen above), but it can also be seen in Scripture. And in Scripture expositional preaching is supported by both the doctrine of God's word and the practice of God's people.

In the Old Testament

First, as to doctrine, the belief that God's word is powerful is seen in the way that God's created the light by his word (Gen 1:3); he upholds the universe with his word (Heb 1:3); and he raises the dead to life with his word (Ezekiel 37; John 11). Understanding the

power of God's Word, preachers who are unashamed of the Word must labor to expound God's word and not arrange Bible verses around their own words, ideas, or outlines.

The power of preaching is not in the *preaching* of the Word; it is the *Word* preached. A short list of verses can illustrate this point.

- The prophets of old never spoke for themselves; they always began their messages, "Thus says the Lord." For these messengers of God; the power was in God's oracle; not in their rhetorical powers.
- Accordingly Isaiah says that God's word never returns void and always accomplishes what God purposes. (55:10-11)
- In Jesus' parable of the four soils, the seed was the word of God; and the seed had power to create life when it landed on the good soil. (Matthew 13).
- In another parable of the kingdom, Jesus spoke of the word growing when the farmer slept. (Mark 4; 1 Corinthians 3).
- God's word is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword; thus, only the word has the power to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)
- After hearing the voice of God on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter writes that there is more certainty in Old Testament Scriptures than in his own personal encounter with God. In other words, the Bible is more reliable and authoritative than our subjective experiences. (2 Pet 1:19-21)

In short, expositional preaching can only be seen as effective when the doctrine of God's word informs our theology. A high view of God's word will enable us to preach the word in season and out of season; a low view of God's word exposes us to the temptation of looking for something with more immediate flash and less eternal impact. For these reasons, expositional preaching is the method of preaching which best conveys the form and substance of God's word.

Still there is another reason why expositional preaching is necessary—it is modeled by God's people. In the Old Testament, a kind of expositional preaching occurred when the Levites gave the sense of the text to the nation of Israel on a feast day that commemorated their return to the land. Listen to Nehemiah 8:5-8.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Carrying out their priestly duties (cf. Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10–11; Mal 2:1–9), these servants of the Word enabled the righteous remnant to understand what God expected of them. Tragically, the nation of Israel suffered greatly when the priests failed to instruct the people with the Law (Mal 2:1–9). When the Old Testament “pastors” failed to feed God’s people from the book of Moses, the people starved spiritually and went in search for other deities.

Applied to today, could it not be the case that one reason why expositional preachers pack stadiums today is because there is a hunger for the Word of God among God’s people (cf. Amos 8:3)? True believers hunger and thirst for God’s word and they are willing to go anywhere to feast on his Word. As a preacher, who also hungers for the word of God, I know of no better way to ensure that God’s people hear God’s voice than by regularly preaching the Word as it was inspired, praying that God would illuminate eyes and captivate hearts as the Scriptures are explained and applied, verse-by-verse, week-after-week.

Jesus Was an Expository Preacher

The Old Testament is not the only place where we find expository preaching. Jesus himself was an expository preacher. In fact, he was more than an expository preacher, according to John 1:18 he literally ‘exeged’ the Father, meaning that he explained, exposed, and revealed the character of God in his very life and person.

Jesus also carried on a ministry of exposition before and after his death and resurrection. For instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly quoted the Old Testament and then provided a more accurate interpretation and deeper application. In full agreement with his opponents that God’s word was divinely inspired, Jesus taught as one with authority (Matt 7:29). Interestingly, with absolute authority, he did not create his own sermons; he repeatedly put himself under the word of God (cf. Gal 4:4) and interpreted how he himself fulfilled the Old Testament.

One example of this exposition comes on the road to Emmaus. Writing about the day of his resurrection, Luke records the manner in which Jesus spoke to Simon and Cleopas, the two forlorn followers of Christ who had left Jerusalem for the hot springs of Emmaus. Luke records, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). While we cannot know the content of his ‘sermon,’ we know that Jesus began with Genesis and continued through the Old Testament expositing all the places that Christ’s sufferings and glories were revealed. Jesus followed the same pattern in the Upper Room. Luke 24:44–47 reads,

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the

Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Though condensing Jesus’ instruction, it is apparent that Luke gives the sense of Jesus’ teaching. Like on the road to Emmaus, he explains how all three sections of the Old Testament (the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings/Psalms) relate to himself. In so doing Jesus expositis the whole Hebrew Bible in light of his cross and resurrection.

While it was the Holy Spirit that gave Peter and the other apostles power to proclaim the gospel; it was Jesus post-resurrection instruction that explained how the often-confused disciples could understand how to interpret the Old Testament in the light of Christ. As George Smeaton observed a century ago, “Christ’s oral expositions are to be taken as *the middle term*, or as the connecting link between Old Testament records on the one hand, and the apostolic commentary on the other. In a word, He was Himself the interpreter of Scripture.” His Christ-centered interpretations sit underneath the testimony of the apostles and can be observed in the texture of the New Testament.⁶

In the end, it is impossible to duplicate Jesus’ teaching style, because Jesus is inimitable and because we only have the testimony of Jesus’ apostles, not his actual sermon manuscripts. Still, while we cannot copy Jesus’ sermon style, his pattern of citing the Scripture, explaining Scripture, and applying Scripture is the basic formula for all exposition preaching. It is discernible when we look carefully at how Jesus related to the Old Testament, and it is even more apparent when we look at how his immediate followers preached in the books of Acts and Hebrews.

The Apostles Exposed the Old Testament

Not surprisingly, from the pattern of Old Testament priests and prophets to the teaching ministry of Jesus, the church too carries on a pattern of expositional preaching. This is most evident in the book of Acts. In Acts, Luke gives a selection of exemplary sermons by Peter (Acts 3–4), Stephen (Acts 7), and Paul (Acts 13–14, 17). In these sermons, the Spirit-filled preachers are regularly appealing to the Old Testament, retelling the history of Israel, and explaining how Jesus Christ fulfills the Old Testament patterns, promises, and prophecies.

For instance, in Acts 13:15 Paul and Barnabas are invited to give a word of exhortation (a sermon?) “after reading from the Law and the Prophets.” It is easy to see the pattern of exposition here: read the word, preach about the same word. Paul paid attention to his audience, but he faithfully proclaimed God’s Word according to the pattern of sound words that was found in the Old Testament.

Of course, from the terse details in Acts, we cannot replicate the form of the apostle’s exposition, but we can see their commitment to explaining the Old Testament Scriptures:

⁶George Smeaton, *The Apostle’s Doctrine of the Atonement*, 4–7

They showed how the Old Testament related to Jesus, and called their audiences to repent and believe.

Moreover, when Paul handed off his ministry to the Ephesians elders, he said to them, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (vv. 26–27). His reference to blood harkens back to the watchman’s role in Ezekiel (ch. 3, 33); he likens the preacher’s task of protecting the flock to the watchman’s task of warning the city, and the way he tells the Ephesians elders to guard the flock is by means of teaching the whole counsel of Scripture.

Therefore, from the book of Acts, we can discern a flexible pattern of exposition intended to proclaim Christ from all the Scriptures. Still, there is one more place in the New Testament that demonstrates the validity and vitality of expositional preaching. And this final illustration is arguably the most convincing, as it is the only sermon full-length sermon in Scripture—Hebrews.

While we read Hebrews today as a letter, it has every indication that this epistle was a sermon first, and a letter second. On that point Dennis Johnson observes a number of sermonic features:

- (1) The book closes with the words, “my word of exhortation,” which in other contexts including Acts 13 indicate a sermon;
- (2) Hebrews regularly exalts in God’s spoken word (1:1–2; 2:1–4; 12:25–29);
- (3) the Scripture citations are introduced as words spoken, not just written (3:7, 15; 5:6; 10:15);
- (4) the author of Hebrews twice abbreviates his comments in order shorten his sermon (9:5; 11:32);
- (5) unlike other letters that begin with doctrine and transition to application, Hebrews unites exposition and application, such that in each section of the sermon there is biblical quotation, explanation, and exhortation;
- (6) there is a discernible outline to the sermon—Jesus is better than angels (1:4–2:28); better than Moses (3:1–4:13); better than Aaron (4:14–7:28); better than old covenant sacrifices (8:1–10:31); better than the patriarchs (10:32–12:17); better than Moses as the mediator of worship (12:18–29);
- (7) the length of Hebrews read aloud totals about 55 minutes, which is in the ballpark for a sermon.⁷

In this outline, it becomes clear that the content of Hebrews is a series of biblical expositions. Specifically, the author cites, explains, and applies Psalm 8:4–6 (Hebrews 2), Psalm 95:7–11 (Hebrews 3–4); Psalm 110:1, 4 (Hebrews 5–7); Jeremiah 31:31–34 (Hebrews 8–10); Habakkuk 2:2–4 (Hebrews 10–11); Exodus 19:16–23 (Hebrews 12). By citing, explaining, and applying these six passages (plus drawing attention to other Old Testament persons and passages), the author models a kind of biblical exposition that is loaded with Scripture, well-illustrated, and filled with application. For this reason, it serves

⁷Dennis Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All Scriptures*, 167-78.

as conclusive support that the kind of preaching modeled by Scripture is expositional preaching.

But Scripture goes even further. God's word not only models exposition; it also commands it. If we take seriously the words of Paul to Timothy as words of instruction for the church, we find that Paul actually commands pastors to preach expositionally. In his first letter to Timothy Paul writes,

Command and **teach** these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to **teaching**. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the **teaching**. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Tim 4:11-16)

Stressing Timothy's role of teaching (mentioned 3x, plus "commanding" and "exhortation"), Paul tells his son in the faith: "Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching." Like the priests of old (who functioned as pastors in their own right), Paul instructs Timothy to read the Scripture and teach the Scripture with exhortation. In short, to turn back the false teachers and the false teaching in the Ephesian church, Timothy is to herald the truth of the gospel, trusting that the word of God will sufficiently equip the saints, expose the wolves, and build up the church.

A Final Plea for Expositional Preaching

The same is true today. Pastors do not build true churches by managerial excellence, neither do they comfort souls with modern psychology. Rather, pastors are to lead the flock of God to read the Scriptures, understand the Scriptures, and apply the Scriptures.

When pastors are faithful to do that, churches will grow and be built up in the doctrines of the faith. When they fail to do that, they are left to the most popular strategies and psychologies that the world has to offer. In our Southern Baptist context, expositional preaching has been out of fashion in local churches for too long. Only by returning to it, will the word of God be given room to purify the church, sanctify the saints, and convert the lost.

May God be pleased to give us ears to hear the whole counsel of God word, perhaps in a way that is foreign to us, but that is eminently biblical and most effective for building up the church.