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## EXPOSITORY PREACHING—A CRITICISM.

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This paper is concerned mainly with the question, *What is expository preaching?*

James M. Hoppin, in his "Homiletics", treats the question of expository preaching under the general topic, "*Analysis and Composition of Sermons*", and under the special head, "*Development*" (page 399f.). He makes the expository sermon co-ordinate with the historical sermon, the biographical sermon, etc. (p. 403).

He says: "Expository preaching ends in making a passage of Scripture plain to the hearer's mind and heart, *i.e.*, not only in making the ancient truth clear, but in bringing it into the living present, in drawing out its varied lessons to the soul. It is not simply exposition but it is the expository sermon or the real use and adaptation of the truth that has formed the subject of exegesis."

Then he gives two classes: one, a sort of running commentary on certain clauses of a passage long or short that may or may not have unity of thought and with no concern to show any connection of thought between them. I would call this simply a bad kind of expository sermon, if any at all. The other kind is a "setting forth, after exposition of the whole, of the definite truth or truths which the passage thus explained conveys, especially in the way of practical observations and lessons. This comes nearer than the other mode to the topical form of discourse, but it requires a lengthened exposition, which really forms the body of the sermon". This differs from the former kind, it seems, in having the practical observations and lessons reserved for the last and bunched together in one place.

These two classes arise from the way in which an expository sermon may be managed and this classification by Prof.

Hoppin throws very little light on the question, "*What is expository preaching?*"

But that he thinks of the expository character of the sermon as belonging to the *substance* of the sermon rather than to the *form* is evident from this sentence: "It (the expository kind) is, therefore, a good change from the logical method, when the form often tyrannizes over the substance" (p. 403).

Prof. Austin Phelps, in his "Theory of Preaching", thus explains the expository sermon: "Explanatory sermons, as the name indicates, include all sermons the chief object of which is explanation. It may be an explanation of a text; then the discourse is technically an expository sermon." This candle shines very dimly.

Dr. Herrick Johnson, in "The Ideal Ministry", a new work on Homiletics, discusses the subject of the expository sermon under "*Kinds of Discussion*", and under the more specific topic, "*Explanatory Discussion*" (p. 243ff.). He says: "This preaching (expository) is based upon a somewhat extended section of Scripture. But while the chief business of expository preaching is explanation, it is always explanation in order to persuasion. It is not mere commentary. Commentary is simply for information, may stop here and there without regard to completeness of thought, explains with equal care and fidelity any part of Scripture text, runs on from verse to verse and chapter to chapter, and is utterly indifferent to oratorical arrangement. On the other hand, the expository sermon has what Vinet calls 'a mother idea' running through it from beginning to end as in a parable" (p. 244f.).

This definition distinguishes an expository discourse from the exposition of a commentary but does not distinguish an expository sermon from any other kind of sermon. "A mother idea" is nothing but the unity given to the sermon by the main idea and this every sermon should have. If an expository sermon has not this it is a poor expository sermon, but it may still be an expository sermon. In order to be an expository sermon must it be a perfect one? This definition also gives us little light.

Prof. Pattison, in his work on Homiletics, "The Making of the Sermon", treats the subject somewhat as does Dr. Broadus in his "Preparation and Delivery of Sermons", making the expository sermon co-ordinate with the topical and the textual; his principle of distinction between them being the "way in which the text is treated" (p. 53).

He further explains: "These are: the topical sermon, in which the theme is especially prominent; the textual sermon, in which more regard is paid to the words of the text; and the expository sermon, in which, as a rule, a *longer portion* of the Bible is taken as the basis for the discourse" (p. 53). In this definition he agrees with Prof. Johnson in making a "somewhat extended section of Scripture" necessary for an expository sermon.

In answering the question, "What is an expository sermon?" he mentions three varieties, one of which is a sermon based on some one word of Scripture as it may occur in different places in the Bible. Another kind is a sermon based on a phrase of Scripture, the treatment of which may be for example, "to select some topic, doctrinal or practical, and trace its history along the lines of revelation", it being understood that such topic or doctrine is really in the phrase. In this he departs from his statement above, that, as a rule, a "longer portion of the Bible is taken as a basis for the discourse". It is very difficult to see how one word may be called a "longer portion of the Bible". In this attempted explanation Dr. Pattison betrays confusion, such as was in a brother's mind who cited, as an example of an expository sermon from a short text, an expository discourse upon the entire twenty-third Psalm from the brief opening statement, "The Lord is my Shepherd." But it will be evident, upon a second consideration, that in such a performance the whole psalm is really *the text* and that this brief opening sentence is *his pretext*.

On the subject of *What an expository sermon is*, I get no more light from Prof. Pattison.

Once I thought Dr. Broadus was very clear in his treatment of this subject, but now it seems to me that he, too, is confused

as to what an expository sermon is. I will follow him closely and quote accurately his language as it is in the twenty-third edition of his "Preparation and Delivery of Sermons". He has two classifications of sermons, one based on the materials that enter into them to form the substance of the sermons; the other based on the arrangement or treatment of these materials.

The different species of sermons in this second classification are three: Subject, Textual and Expository. Dr. Broadus puts emphasis on the point that this classification has to do with the "*homiletical structure*", while the other classification has to do with the subject matter (p. 306).

So, then, with Dr. Broadus the expository feature has to do with the *form* and not the *content* of the sermon, not with the thought, doctrine, or substance, but with the way these are treated. We are absolutely certain this thought was in his mind when he wrote the sentences referred to above.

How, now, does the treatment of materials for the expository sermon differ from the treatment of materials for the subject or text sermon?

He explains that "the distinction between subject sermons and text sermons has to do simply with the plan of the discourse *especially with the source of divisions*". "Subject sermons are those in which the divisions are derived from the subject, independently of the text, while in text sermons the divisions are taken from the text." (P. 307.)

One would think now that when Dr. Broadus comes to define the expository sermon he would continue this *fundamentum divisionis*, and say that it is that kind of sermon that not only gets its subject and main divisions from the passage of Scripture but its subdivisions also. But I do not find such a definition. If the text sermon differs from the subject sermon in the matter of the degree of its dependence on the text for its divisions or treatment, it would seem that the expository sermon would differ in the same way, that is, its subdivisions as well as its main divisions must be gotten out of the passage that is being preached from. Otherwise his principle of classification is defective. But Dr.

Broadus does not say this. If the first kind is represented by the form of the body and the second by the form of the body plus the form of the arms and legs, the third kind should be represented by the form of the body plus the form of the arms and legs plus the form of the fingers and toes. But instead of this conception, which the language above would suggest, his treatment shows that, in the case of the expository sermon, he is not thinking of the form of the fingers and toes but of the *flesh of the arms and legs*. This is a logical inconsistency.

Dr. Broadus felt no doubt, that he could not carry this principle of classification through; for such a defining of the expository sermon would have excluded almost all sermons counted everywhere as expository.

Dr. Broadus' statements are perplexing. On page 317 he says: "The name of this species of sermons is derived from a peculiarity in their materials, namely, the fact that they are mainly occupied with exposition. But their homiletical peculiarities belong to the matter of construction."

But on page 322 he says: "An expository discourse may be defined as one which is occupied mainly, or at any rate, very largely, with the exposition of Scripture." Without controversy great is the confusion here.

But how occupied with the exposition of Scripture? So as to give character to the structure of the sermon or to furnish materials for it? Dr. Broadus' treatment of the expository sermon, as also the second of the above statements, shows that he has in mind the latter. In his discussion he does not show, in a single instance, how the *structure* of an expository sermon differs essentially from that of the text sermon.

Of course, it is evident that content may modify form, that the materials may determine to some degree the structure, but the question here is, *With which are we primarily concerned in deciding what an expository sermon is?*

One may be concerned mainly with the exposition of Scripture in a subject sermon.

Dr. Broadus realizes that he cannot distinguish clearly between an expository sermon and a text sermon and says that

"one may pass by almost insensible gradations from textual to expository sermons" and that nearly all that he has said about text sermons applies directly to expository preaching (p. 322). And when he says that an expository sermon may be "devoted to a long passage or to a very short one, even a part of a sentence", my confusion increases. How long must this sentence be, a part of which may do for an expository sermon of average length? Suppose the part of the sentence is only three words in length?

Summing the positions of these various homiletical teachers, I would venture such a definition as this: The expository sermon is a variety of text-sermons; it is a text sermon in which considerable place is given to the explaining of the words and phrases of the text and the application and enforcing of its meaning, the special phases of the meaning that are therein found. The expository feature would then belong not to the structure of the sermon but to its subject matter. According to this view there would be only two kinds of sermons in respect of *homiletical structure*: topical and textual sermons.

This is not according to Pattison's view nor according to one view of Dr. Broadus, but is permitted if his other view is accepted, and fits the views of some others whose definitions I have given. It seems to be in harmony with the general view of expository preaching. Expository preaching should not be defined in so general a fashion as to include all kinds of sermons and it should not be defined so strictly as to exclude almost all kinds. If we take one view as expressed by Dr. Broadus, namely, that it has to do with structure simply and is to be distinguished by this principle from textual preaching, then where will we find such a sermon? We probably can find a few, a very few, specimens. I am not sure that I have ever read such a sermon from Dr. Broadus himself. I never heard him preach such a sermon. I cannot recall one such from Spurgeon. It may be we can find a few from Maclaren. Biblical preaching or such preaching as gives Bible truth, preaching that is filled and characterized by Bible conceptions and arguments, Bible illustrations and language, is not by virtue of this fact expository preaching.

Spurgeon was such a preacher but I would not call him an expository preacher, and when he commends expository preaching to his students he means, it seems, biblical preaching, preaching that proclaims, enforces and applies the doctrines of Scripture. Would Spurgeon urge so earnestly a method that he himself did not practice? Maclaren also is such a preacher and is also the prince pre-eminent of expository preachers.

With this idea of expository preaching ought we to urge that it be practiced? If we have the idea that expository preaching is simply biblical preaching, then, of course, there should be no other kind. And this, it seems to me, is what is commonly in the mind when it is so highly commended. For example, Dr. Maclaren said on one occasion, in speaking to young preachers, that his one aim in preaching from the very beginning of his ministry had been to interpret and apply the Word of God. But who would be so rude as to infer that he was here advocating his method of sermonizing rather than Mr. Spurgeon's, or any other man's method?

If we have one of the views of the expository sermon expressed by Dr. Broadus, namely, that its character is determined by its peculiar "homiletical structure", then it is a question whether such a sermon should be attempted by any one, unless he should by chance hit upon a text that flashed such a treatment immediately into his mind, as for example, Drummond's treatment of I Cor. 13.

If we have the view of expository preaching, as I have ventured to define it, should we attempt such preaching? Should we try to preach such sermons regularly?

The kind of audience would have something to do with it. The expository sermon is confessedly more suitable for educated audiences than uneducated. Robert Hall said he had better success with this kind when preaching to cultured people.

But one's own character of mind has more to do with it. Some can do it better than others. Such preaching was what Dr. Maclaren was pre-eminently gifted in and fitted for. It was not the kind for Spurgeon, Beecher or Moody, though Spurgeon was pre-eminently a biblical preacher.



Should the average preacher ever attempt it? Of course. Should he attempt to preach this kind regularly? Hardly. It is not the popular kind. It is the most difficult kind. A very little exegesis is enough for the average sermon and in an expository sermon one is in constant temptation to make burdensome the exegetical explanations. To know how to give just enough and not too much exegesis is a harder task than the making of another kind of sermon. Life is short and a week is much shorter. Two sermons are to be made and many other things to be done.

Dr. Broadus quotes Alexander with approval as arguing that it is the "primitive and ancient method". I suppose he means the method of the Fathers. But there is a more ancient method than theirs and that is the method of Christ and the apostles. And the New Testament does not give us a single example of expository preaching as herein defined, much less an example of an expository sermon as determined by its structure. To argue that we have an example in the case of our Saviour, when He read from the 61st chapter of Isaiah in the synagogue and then declared to His audience that that Scripture was fulfilled in His own person, is to read into the narrative more than is there or than is fairly suggested.

Our Lord honored the Old Testament and often argued from it and exalted it, but what discourse of His has any expository character? And we have many of them. All of them are topical. The Sermon on the Mount is a good example. We have several discourses of Peter, Stephen and Paul in the Acts, and not one of them is expository as to form. All are topical. If Paul had given an expository sermon in structure from some passage of the Old Testament, the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah for example, to the Athenians instead of the topical discourse, which he did give, it is safe to say that there would have been even fewer disciples made there and more mockers to call him a babler.

The case of Ezra and his assistants (Neh. 8:7f.), reading the Law and giving the sense as they proceeded, has been given as an "ancient example of expository preaching". It is certain

we have in this an "ancient example" of *something*, but not of expository preaching; as it will occur to most people, that are acquainted with that event, that the Law was then in a language that few of the people, if any, understood. It is an example of not reading to people in an unknown tongue without explaining the sense and not an example of expository preaching at all. It may be used against a Catholic priest who reads to the people in Latin but not against a Baptist preacher who takes the Sermon on the Mount and Paul's address at Athens as his models and talks in English.

Two exhortations seem pertinent. Many who commend expository preaching should be more careful to have clear in their minds what they mean by this expression. There should be more preaching of this kind, good or bad, or less commendation of it.