

# A Plea for Expository Preaching

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TO THE preacher, engaged in the endless tasks of the pastorate, the most urgent question undoubtedly is: "Where can I get some new ideas for sermons?" No one with any experience in preaching will scorn this plea, for he knows the weekly agony out of which it comes. Yet even the busy preacher, reflecting in some quiet retreat temporarily removed from the relentless pressure of Sunday morning, would admit that this question is not the most important one. Rather, the real issue is: "What ought he to be preaching?" What ought to provide the main direction and message of his sermons, not only this week but every week? It is the contention of this article that expository preaching is the answer both to the often desperate cry for ideas for sermons and to the demand to satisfy the basic requirement of preaching. In fact we shall maintain, with Donald Miller, that all true preaching is expository, and preaching that is not expository is not true preaching.<sup>1</sup>

## I

Before any such thesis as this can be defended, however, expository preaching must be carefully defined. In particular, we must set aside some of the traditional definitions that have been given to it, even by great preachers who are worthy of our utmost respect in homiletical matters. These definitions are not so much wrong as only partly true, and, therefore, they are the more misleading.

We may quickly dismiss the notion that expository preaching is guaranteed by the simple announcement of a text from Scripture. Every preacher knows how often the text is found long after the sermon has been shaped and written, serving, in this instance, only to sanctify with Holy Writ the preacher's thoughts derived from other sources. Nor would this definition of expository preaching be made any more acceptable by insisting that the text be chosen before the sermon is written. Such a requirement could not guarantee true expository treatment of Scripture. On the contrary, we have all heard, and may have preached, what have been called "run-way" sermons—sermons that "take off" from the surface of a text and soar into the clouds of the preacher's own ideas, landing many miles away twenty minutes later. Such a flight was made by the preacher who announced as his text: "And he shall be like a tree planted by rivers of water."<sup>2</sup> Though the psalm from which this verse comes means to contrast the blessed estate

1. Donald G. Miller, *The Way To Biblical Preaching* (New York-Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 22.

2. Psalm 1:3.

of the righteous with the unhappy condition of the wicked, the preacher flew immediately to Japan, where, on a visit, he had noticed three kinds of trees: the pine, the bamboo, and the plum. Each of these trees reminded him of a virtue: the pine of strength, the bamboo of resiliency, the plum of courage. But of the text the congregation heard no more.<sup>3</sup> The sermon was totally unrelated to its meaning and message.

A view that needs much more serious consideration is that which defines expository preaching as the detailed exposition of the contents of a particularly lengthy passage of Scripture. This is the traditional interpretation of expository preaching accepted by R. W. Dale and, more recently, by Andrew W. Blackwood. The emphasis in this definition is put on the length of the passage of Scripture used as a text, and on the precise analysis of that passage in the sermon. This view of expository preaching fitted admirably that traditional style of sermon construction that had fundamentally a two-fold structure. Beginning with an interpretation of the content of the scriptural text, it then moved to the application of its lessons to the lives of the listeners. The more modern style, espoused particularly by Harry Emerson Fosdick, which normally begins with the lives of the listeners and their problems rather than with Scripture, does not fit so readily into this definition of expository preaching. In fact it would seem to rule out altogether expository preaching thus defined. In practice this is what has happened, and genuine expository preaching is the exception rather than the rule in the modern pulpit. At their worst, many sermons today are not born out of the womb of the Bible, but have doubtful parentage in current magazines and books.

The real issue, however, is not whether a sermon begins with an interpretation of the text or with a "life-situation." Nor is it whether or not expository preaching can be adapted to modern styles of sermon structure. The issue is whether the traditional definition of expository preaching is true and adequate. Is expository preaching to be determined by the number of verses in the text, and by the amount of time given in the sermon to the interpretation of those verses? This concept of expository preaching is being attacked at its very foundations by modern theologians of preaching. The most thorough attack has been launched by Donald G. Miller, Professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, in his small but precious book, *The Way to Biblical Preaching*.<sup>4</sup> Similar profound rethinking of the meaning of biblical preaching also underlies Henry Grady Davis' excellent text, *Design for Preaching*.<sup>5</sup> These men are justly alarmed by the departure of the glory of expository biblical preaching from the pulpit, and by the dire results that this loss has had on both the preachers themselves and the people of God. They would say without qualification that the biblical illiteracy so much deplored today can be traced in no small measure to preaching that is biblically poverty-stricken. At its worst, they declare, much modern preaching either ignores the Bible completely or misuses it,

3. Miller, p. 23.

4. Cf. ref. 1.

5. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958.

distorting the meaning of texts to undergird thoughts originating elsewhere. The theme of the sermon may even be in actual conflict with the biblical message. So they set themselves to restore expository preaching to its rightful place, not simply by urging it upon us, but by redefining it for us so that it may provide the master-perspective for all our preaching. To achieve this objective we must set aside any definition that would limit expository preaching by such criteria as the length of the scriptural text or the style of handling it, and instead seek to determine the essential nature of expository preaching.

## II

The basic element in expository preaching is that the sermon truly expounds the scriptural idea. That is, the sermon theme, that thread with which all the parts of a sermon are woven together and unified, must coincide exactly with the idea in the text. The major issue in biblical preaching, says Dr. Grady Davis, is "whether the Scripture is the source of the sermon or not, whether the sermon says what the Scripture says or not."<sup>6</sup> Dr. Miller is maintaining the same principle when he writes:

What is insisted upon, however, is that the thought of the sermon should come naturally out of a passage of scripture, and that it should be controlled at every point by adequate historical study of the larger setting of which it is a part, so that the true meaning of the passage shall guide the thought of the preacher in every detail of his development.<sup>7</sup>

Lest previous remarks may have given the impression that this interpretation of expository preaching is a modern innovation, it should be noted that it is, in substance, the principle propounded by Alfred Garvie in 1920,<sup>8</sup> and some years later by Henry Sloane Coffin. Modern writers, however, are re-emphasizing this interpretation and developing its implications for modern preaching. Donald Miller puts the matter most succinctly:

True Biblical preaching is limited only by the broad principle that the substance of one's preaching should be drawn from the Bible.<sup>9</sup>

Broad as this principle may seem to be, it has profound significance for the practice of sermon preparation. It places under severe judgment sermons that might otherwise be assumed to be biblical, and imposes a strict discipline upon the preacher who would adhere to it. Dr. Davis has an excellent illustration of what is involved in this definition of preaching when it is applied to the practical task of preparing a sermon.<sup>10</sup> He cites the text, John 8:31-36, that begins with the words:

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

6. Davis, *Design for Preaching*, p. 47.

7. Miller, *The Way to Biblical Preaching*, p. 25.

8. A. E. Garvie, *The Christian Preacher* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920).

9. Miller, p. 21.

10. Davis, p. 52.

No doubt we all have read, heard, or preached sermons on this text. When we examine these sermons, we observe that their themes may be any one of the following: The Importance of Freedom, The Value of a Liberal Education, Knowledge, The Basis of Liberty. This text and these themes are on display on Dominion Day, or the Fourth of July, and at Graduation Exercises. All such sermons endeavour, in Davis' words, "to claim Christ's authority for the assertion that enlightenment of the mind liberates, that is, redeems men."<sup>10</sup> But is it the message of Christianity that knowledge is salvation, and, therefore, by incontrovertible logic, sin is only ignorance? Is this, from the viewpoint of Christian theology, a truly biblical estimate of the human situation, and of the requirement for man's deliverance from his predicament? Surely this theme is derived from twentieth century humanism rather than from the Bible, no matter what biblical text is used to bless it. Moreover—and this is what is most significant from the viewpoint of expository preaching—the theme that "the enlightenment of the mind liberates" defies both the meaning of the text and the context of Scripture to which it belongs: "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*" It is plain that the freedom promised here is conditioned by several factors. "If you continue in my word"—that is the basis of everything else that is said. If you do this, then "you are truly my disciples." Then and only then "you will know the truth," and then and only then "you will be free." This text has nothing whatsoever to do with any natural freedom that any man may attain by increase of his knowledge, or striving after truth in general. The truth is defined: it is Christ. Obeying the truth makes disciples, and it is disciples who know the truth and are made free. It is the liberty of the Christian man that is being proclaimed here. The context of the verse makes this interpretation abundantly clear. Actually, in contradiction to all the sermons that have used this text to proclaim democratic freedom, or to assert that freedom is the natural consequence of man's growing knowledge, the next verse indicates that this was the very claim put forward by Jesus' opponents. They maintained that their freedom was an inalienable right based upon their heritage.

They answered him: 'We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How is it that you say, you will be made free?'

Jesus replies:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. The slave does not continue in the house forever; the son continues forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever interpretation is to be given to this passage, it is certain that it cannot be made to support the idea that modern man's search for truth and his expansion of knowledge are the bulwark of Christian freedom. It is obvious that the freedom promised here is of a specific kind, and the bondage

11. John 8:32-36 (R.S.V.).

from which deliverance is offered is of a specific kind. The freedom is the freedom Christ offers, that he alone can give.

Expository preaching demands that, if this text is to be the text of the sermon, its theme and none other must be the theme of the sermon. On the negative side, it maintains that one cannot take a text of Scripture and use it to put forward any idea, no matter how true and worthy that idea may be in itself. Such a practice is fundamentally dishonest. More important, it is a denial of the preacher's primary task to expound the Word of God. While the words of Scripture cannot be identified with the Word of God, the Scriptures are the primary means of grace given to us whereby the Word of God sounds in the hearts and minds of men. Therefore, our task is the forthright exposition of the Scriptures, and that means, of the words and ideas they express. We are bound to that task. We are not free to be advocates of ideas rooted in any other source, no matter how high-sounding and agreeable to the modern mind they may be. Still less are we free to sanctify such ideas by a pretense of drawing them from the Scriptures.

Put positively, expository preaching is, in Davis' words, using the text as a "source" rather than merely a "resource" of the sermon. The preacher's task is "to adjust his thinking to Scripture's real idea."<sup>12</sup> The theme of the Scriptures, then, becomes the theme of the sermon.

### III

The fulfilment of this basic principle of expository preaching involves a method of textual treatment that is integral to its whole purpose. Fundamental to this method is the continuous, detailed, critical, study of the Bible on the part of the preacher. During his teaching career at Union Theological Seminary, New York, Dr. Paul Scherer subjected the members of his class to just such a disciplined study. He assigned the Epistle to the Colossians, requiring that we do a precise exegesis of every verse to determine its exact meaning in the context of the passage to which it belonged. Then, out of the fruits of this exegetical study, we were required to draw sermon ideas, themes, and outlines. It was intended that this method of study be applied to every book of the Bible, and that, in this way, an almost inexhaustible resource of sermons could be built up over the years. If it be asked why a preacher should subject himself to so much work when so many excellent commentaries and expositions are available to him, at least two answers can be given. One is that there are details in the verses of Scripture that commentaries cannot exhaust, and in which lurk hidden treasures for preaching. Commentaries are intended to be the preacher's tools, not his masters. The other and more important answer is that it is only through doing his own biblical study that the preacher's sermons become truly his. He must preach, like Paul, "according to my Gospel." His sermons, though Bible-controlled, must flow out through the gateway of his own heart and mind. If he fails

12. Davis, p. 47.

to invest his gifts in serious study, then, as happened with the man of one talent in Jesus' parable, God will take away his gifts, and he will become nothing more than the mouthpiece of other men's thoughts.

Implied in Dr. Scherer's discipline, however, is a precise method of textual interpretation essential for expository preaching. Miller's book, to which I have referred, is also devoted to a full discussion of this method. Reduced to specific principles, it involves the following steps.

The first is to make sure of the exact meaning of each verse in itself. To do this, examination and analysis of difficult or obscure words may be required. For example, what does the word "troubled" mean in the opening verse of John 14: "Let not your heart be troubled"? Does it mean: do not be sad? Is Jesus saying that his disciples, and Christians generally, ought not to be sad in the face of any loss that comes upon them? One dictionary suggests that the Greek word, *tarasso*, has the sense of "being tossed like waves in a high wind." This is surely more than natural sadness. It implies the feeling that life has lost all meaning, that everything that makes life sane and worth living has gone overboard. At any rate, it is clear that this verse, taken in its full context, has a deeper message for wounded hearts than the suggestion that to be faithful Christians they must smile grimly in the face of disaster, or that somehow the Christian faith enables men to remain untouched and unhurt by life's troubles.

But every verse is set in a context of verses. In the treatment of any particular verse as a text for a sermon, it is of utmost importance that the context of the verse should be determined, and the meaning of the verse interpreted within its context. The context of a verse may include only a few verses, or it may extend to the whole chapter. In any case, we neglect the setting of a text at our peril. Recall the difference made to the interpretation of John 8:31 when that verse was placed within its full context.

Though we need not go into all the technical details involved, it should at least be noted that often the context of the chosen text may provide, in its subsidiary themes, the main points for the body of the sermon. That is, any passage of Scripture is composed of a main theme and a cluster of ideas related to it. This cluster of ideas may have in it the basic points needed for the full development of the text. Though sermon preparation is never easy, it is a fact that such passages of Scripture, thoroughly analyzed, can virtually write the sermon! Again, it may often happen that one of the subsidiary ideas in the passage can become the theme for another sermon. The only rule here is that the subsidiary idea, when used as the sermon theme, must not contradict or slip from the control of the main idea to which it is related.

Psalms 8 will serve to illustrate these principles. The main theme of this psalm is the glory or majesty of God.<sup>13</sup> It is twice repeated as a refrain: "O Lord our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!" This theme is developed in three ideas. Though difficult in translation, the second verse

13. Cf. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms and Their Meaning For Today* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), pp. 45ff.

suggests God's victory over his enemies. The psalm also has in embryo the idea of God's glory in creation: "When I consider the heavens, the work of thy fingers. . . ." The major manifestation of God's glory, however, is his wonderful goodness to man, his care for him, and his granting him dominion in the universe. Thus the theme, it should be noted, is not the glory of man, as too many preachers have suggested. The theme is God's glory. The Divine glory is disclosed in God's being mindful of man and bestowing upon him a place of dignity in creation. The sermon may develop the main theme by using the secondary ideas to form its structure:

- (i) God's glory in creation,
- (ii) God's glory in overcoming resistance to his purpose,
- (iii) God's glory in his care for man.

The third and final point might legitimately lead to a climax in the proclamation of God's mindfulness of man in coming to him in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, circumstances or the inspiration of the moment might demand that the theme of the whole sermon be God's mindfulness of man. The wonder of God's concern for man could then be lifted from its position as one of the subsidiary thoughts of the psalm to become the central idea of the sermon. In its development, the sermon might remind men of the dignity God has given them in his creation, and of that dominion he has willed them to have, which is now being realized through modern science. The bewildering achievements of man do not eclipse God. Rather, they testify to his purpose for man in his universe. The sermon should then move beyond the psalmist's limited vision to the New Testament and the Gospel's witness to God's care for man. Such a step is legitimate because, as we shall see, every sermon is governed by the whole drama of the Bible as well as the individual text. The full answer to the psalmist's question: "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" can only be heard in the story of Christ. Nevertheless, whatever form the homiletical treatment may take, the sermon theme must always be governed by the main idea of the psalm, the majesty of God. God and his glory, not man, must remain the centre of it.

Yet verses and passages of Scripture are set within a particular book. Each book has its own background and purpose. The third requirement, therefore, is to set the text in the light of the categories of thought of the entire book. One would not dare to preach on a verse from Revelation, for instance, without reviewing carefully the background and intent of that book. Knowledge of more familiar books is equally essential, not only to ensure correct interpretation of a text, but also to draw from it fresh and rewarding messages.

Furthermore, modern biblical theology has demonstrated that the Bible as a whole has a unified theme and outlook in spite of all the diversity within it. Each passage contributes in some way to that theme, and, as in the instance of Psalm 8, is to be interpreted in the light of it.

In short, expository preaching demands that, by careful analysis of each text within its immediate context and the setting of the book to which it

belongs, the full power of modern exegetical and theological scholarship be brought to bear upon our treatment of the Bible. The objective is not that the preacher may parade all this scholarship in the pulpit. Rather, it is that the preacher may speak faithfully out of solid knowledge of his text, and mount the pulpit steps as, at least, "a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."<sup>14</sup>

The preacher's final step is the most crucial and most perilous of all. It is to relate the biblical message both faithfully and relevantly to modern life. At this point all his skill as a craftsman must come into play. We must be warned that faithful exposition of a text does not of itself produce an effective sermon. We need also to be warned, however, that faithfulness to the text is not to be sacrificed for the sake of what we presume to be relevancy. This sacrifice too many modern preachers seem willing to make, producing, as a result, sermons that are a compound of moralistic advice, their own unauthoritative and sometimes unwise opinions, and the latest psychology. Expository preaching, by insisting that the message of the sermon coincide with the theme of the text, calls the preacher back to his true task: the proclamation of the Word of God in and through the Bible. Donald Miller supplies a full definition of expository preaching, on which we have given but a limited commentary.

Expository preaching is an act wherein the living truth of some portion of Holy Scripture, understood in the light of solid exegetical and historical study and made a living reality to the preacher by the Holy Spirit, comes alive to the hearer as he is confronted by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit in judgment and redemption.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV

We may now conclude by considering the factors that make expository preaching of this kind both an urgent necessity and a boon for the busy preacher, and so, in some measure, by justifying the contention with which we began. Five such factors may be mentioned.

The first is that the Bible in itself is an inexhaustible mine of ideas for sermons. Few preachers fail to suffer from periods of aridity when a theme for a sermon seems unavailable at any price. But the preacher who has made disciplined Bible study the basis of his pulpit work will have at hand numerous suggestions for sermons, and at least one of them will usually provide the needed inspiration in a time of homiletical drought. Andrew Blackwood proposes that during the summer the preacher study a book or section of the Old Testament in preparation for his fall preaching, the New Testament in the fall for his preaching between Christmas and Easter, the Book of Acts or the ethical portions of the Epistles for his spring preaching, and special sections of Scripture, such as the Psalms, for his summer pulpit work.<sup>16</sup> Out of such a scheme of careful study can come series of sermons, courses of

14. 2 Tim. 2:15 (R.S.V.).

15. Miller, p. 26.

16. Andrew W. Blackwood, *Planning a Year's Pulpit Work* (Nashville: Whitmore & Stone, 1942).



sermons on particular books, and an almost limitless supply of sermons in embryo, which may be born when their hour is come. Using a lectionary and following the pattern of the Christian year is another excellent way to ensure that the preacher has a discipline of Bible study. Whatever the pattern of study, however, the constant searching of the Scriptures is the best assurance the preacher has of always having sermon ideas on hand. Moreover, it is more profitable and no more difficult for him to accept this discipline than it is for him to be seeking frantically in magazines and novels, or even theological works, for a new idea for next Sunday morning.

In the second place, and this is still more important, in expository preaching the preacher has assurance that most of his themes will be worth preaching. For whatever may be said about the Bible, it cannot be said that its content is trivial. It grapples with the large issues of human life and destiny—sin and salvation, sorrow, suffering, death. It exposes the true source of human joy and beatitude, and confronts man with the full dimension of his dignity and responsibility as a creature of God. In this connection it may also be pointed out that the preacher who expounds the Scriptures cannot fail in any one year to cover the whole gamut of Christian teaching and the whole range of human need. Everything of significance in life, from the faith required as the foundation of life to the ethical responsibility that issues from it, is present in the Bible, and in many instances in a single book. The symphony of the Bible keeps a preacher from playing only one instrument or from harping on only one tune.

The third result of expository preaching is the education of our people in the Bible. Lack of biblical preaching convinces people that the Bible does not matter. Use of the Bible in the pulpit as a mere backdrop for something else the preacher wants to say at best confuses them in their efforts to understand it, and at worst withholds from them any insight into the profound message of the Scriptures for their everyday living. True preaching should open the treasury of the Bible for the continuous enrichment of the lives of our listeners in worship and daily work.

Expository preaching has a fourth and most essential benefit for the preacher himself. Disciplined use of the Bible, after the manner we have described, protects the preacher against the vagaries of his own mind. It may seem to some that to insist that the theme of the sermon should always correspond with the theme of the text is to restrict the preacher unduly. It is to clip the wings of his own thought and imagination. On the contrary, it is to prevent the misuse of his imagination, and to concentrate his imaginative capacities upon their proper function. The task of the preacher's imagination is to embody the truth in memorable, vivid forms; it is not its task to construct the truth. This raises the age-old problem of the preacher. He must preach the Gospel, but he must preach it relevantly to his specific generation. One of the constant dangers he has to face is that his message may be more relevant than it is Gospel; that is, his sermon may deal with a subject of common interest and be easily understood, but fail to throw any

light upon that subject from the Christian faith. The sermon preached on the three kinds of trees, and their qualities of strength, resiliency, and courage, is a case in point. As Miller points out, these three virtues as presented in this sermon could have been applauded by "a devotee of a pagan religion or the henchman of a totalitarian dictator."<sup>17</sup> In themselves there is nothing specifically Christian about them. The obviousness of this example should not be allowed to blunt the solemn fact that it is astonishingly easy for preachers to come to believe that the messages they are delivering are true to the Gospel, when actually they are merely peddling the standard prejudices and common-sense ideas of their own culture, or the latest opinion of some secular philosophy and science. Expository preaching is a protection against precisely this peril. In requiring that the preacher subject himself to the exact meaning of Scripture and adjust his thinking to its ideas, expository preaching affords some guarantee that the ensuing message will offer something more than his own half-digested ideas, and may, at its best, have a word from the Lord for his people.

This leads to the final and most important factor in expository preaching, that which makes it not an option but a necessity. Expository preaching fulfils our basic role as preachers. Many definitions of preaching have been given, but the mystery of preaching finally forbids that any definition will capture its essence. However, as a simple working principle, we suggest the following: Preaching is the illumination of the life of man in the light of the Word of God. It is the illumination of the life of man. It must thrust its way into every crack and cranny of human existence—exposing, judging, healing. There is no problem, no area of man's life, beyond the preacher's concern or the reach of his sermons. Be assured that expository preaching does not advocate that the preacher quit the world, and dwell only on heavenly things. His task is otherwise. It is to deal with earth and men in all their sin and need. But it is to illuminate the earthly with the heavenly. The light the preacher is called to shed upon human life is not his own light, nor the flickering candles of the world's wisdom. It is the "light of the Word of God." We are not purveyors of pious opinions about many things. We are heralds of God's truth. We are declarers of his mighty Word of judgment and redemption to a world he yearns to save. The chief means given to us, by which we ourselves hear and from which we deliver that Word to men, is the Bible. This means that whatever else we must be or do, we must live with that book. From it we must draw our inspiration. By it our thought must be moulded. Its message is the one we must carry into our pulpits. We may start where we will with our sermon, with some contemporary problem or circumstance of men and society, but we have not done with it what we are called upon to do until we have brought that problem or circumstance into the light of the Bible. When we do this, by divine action of the Spirit, God may speak through us his Living Word. Then preaching is truly expository.

17. Miller, p. 23.