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PRACTISING THE METHOD

Expository preaching takes the Bible so seriously that it ensures the Bible is in the driving-seat of the sermon. But are we saying that expository preaching is the only way? And what does it mean in practice to be committed to this as the heart of our ministry? As we examine the answer to the second question I think the answer to the first will become clear.

Initial Comments

We start with the premise that God is the perfect communicator (how could it be otherwise?) and that the Bible is His perfect self-revelation in both its contents and its method. It is the supreme means by which we can come to a true knowledge of God and in that personal, relational knowledge of God, 'his divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness' (2 Pet. 1:3). Since God Himself has chosen to communicate Himself in this way, our task as His ministers (servants) is to work hard at understanding its contents and message and to pray that as we seek to preach and expound Scripture, God's voice will be authentically heard. This requires discipline and sacrifice. It is not my voice, not the bees buzzing in my bonnet, not even my explanation of the

text that shape the content or direction of the preaching. I don't have to do something with the Bible text. I don't have to try to make it relevant through pop psychology or by generating emotional warmth. I have to let the Bible text first do something with me and in me as I receive and respond to its message in my own life. And I don't have to make it relevant because it already is. It is the 'living and abiding word of God' (1 Pet. 1:23), so how could it not be the most relevant document anyone could read, the most important message anyone could hear?

But having a bag of tools is very different from being a skilled craftsman. A surgical procedure may be very well documented and proven, but the surgeon does not pick up the ability to perform it with precision by the odd half-hour or two on the internet. That requires hard work and grows increasingly with experience. So Paul's charge to Timothy is highly relevant for all gospel ministers. 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth' (2 Tim. 2:15). There are several important observations to make about this key verse. First, the Christian pastor is to be a worker. It is a demanding life-work. Next, his work is carried out in the knowledge that it will be assessed by God. He does not want to fail that test. He wants to be approved, having met God's standards and proving to be a genuine and faithful steward. And that is why he does his best. He concentrates his attention and energy on doing the job as well as he possibly can. The fact that he knows that it is only God who gives the increase is no excuse for his laziness or half-

heartedness, because he is responsible for his own use of God's resources and the task is very demanding. Lastly, both the task and the criterion for assessment is described as 'rightly handling the word of truth'. The literal meaning of the verb is to cut straight and the word of truth signifies 'the pattern of the sound words', 'the good deposit entrusted to you' by the apostle (see 2 Tim. 1:13-14). John Stott comments, 'For us it is quite simply, Scripture. To 'cut it straight' or 'make it a straight path' is to be accurate on the one hand and plain on the other in our exposition.... [The good workman] handles the word with such scrupulous care that he both stays on the path himself, keeping to the highway and avoiding the byways, and makes it easy for others to follow'.¹

I remember hearing John Stott, when I was a theological student, answer a question about the secret of his expository ministry, by saying that there were three. The first was hard work, the second more hard work and the third....! Yet it is the most fulfilling hard work that any of us could be involved in. It yields eternal dividends. But it is this hard work that is perhaps the greatest deterrent to quality expository preaching, in our age of sound bites and quick fixes. One of the secrets of an effective expository ministry I have discovered is diary control. You cannot do this work unless you set aside sufficient time for it and that time will not just appear miraculously from nowhere. It has to be diarised. It's all a matter of priorities. If the hungry sheep are to be fed, you will need to set aside a number of non-negotiable study times in the week before you preach.

1 *The Message of 2 Timothy* IVP, 1973, pp. 67-68.

When I was a local church pastor, I aimed for two-and-a-half hours in the study, for four mornings in the week. Everyone will develop their own pattern, but expository preaching takes time in the preparation and there are plenty of other competing demands that will erode that time, if you do not guard it. But I know that I served my congregation best when I prepared best.

Working on the Text

As we follow some of the preparation patterns which we need to develop if we are to become expository preachers, I hope that we shall also see how greatly this approach will benefit our congregations.

Firstly, expository preaching deals with the Bible in the way that God has put it together and presents it to us, which is book by book. All the recent surveys show a sharp decline in the practice of private Bible reading or study among Christians, so that we are faced in the churches with a growing problem of Biblical illiteracy. In the case of many who are coming to faith from a totally secular background there is often no understanding of the Bible at all. I think it is highly likely that pulpit practices may have a negative effect on this. The Bible is a complex (but not complicated) library of sixty-six individual books, each with its own distinctive message contributing to the whole overarching story from Genesis to Revelation. We can easily forget how daunting it can appear. Many Christians know only a handful of verses, usually the choices of Christian calendars, or a selection of favourite stories. If the preaching they hear takes Bible passages disconnected

from their book context, or gathered together from various parts of the Bible to illustrate a particular chosen theme, their understanding of the Bible is always going to be at best piecemeal and inadequate.

Preachers will frequently say that their congregation cannot 'take' a series through a book; they will become bored and disengaged. But isn't this dangerously near to saying that we know better than God does about how to nurture His people? He could have written us a book of systematic theology, but He didn't. He might have provided us with a series of uplifting anecdotes, but He didn't. Instead, He provided us with sixty-six books, set at different periods in salvation history, written by a variety of authors to a wide range of audiences, employing different literary genres, but each with its own distinctive message and purpose. God selected and preserved each one because of its unique contribution to our understanding of His character and knowledge of His purposes. So, if I choose to take just one chapter out of its book for a short sermon series, followed by a month of psalms, followed by some key episodes from the life of Abraham, followed by a short series on prayer or the second coming, I can claim that I am being Biblical in my preaching, but I am not being thoroughly committed to exposition. Whereas, if I am working my way systematically through a book, I am able to set the text in its book context and see how that relates both to the bigger Biblical metanarrative and to the parallels in our own situation. Consecutive exposition teaches the text in its context and concentrates on the distinctive ingredients of this particular book, along with

the author's pastoral intention. It builds the understanding week by week and the hearers begin to learn the Bible book by book.

Of course, this does not mean that one should necessarily work one's way through a long book of the Bible from beginning to end. Much depends on the condition of the congregation. There is no reason why a longer book cannot be subdivided into sections, which would enable it to be visited consecutively in several series over a few years. A major book like Isaiah, for example, could be divided into five parts (1-12, 13-27, 28-39, 40-55 and 56-66), each series perhaps occupying a three-month period over successive years.

The Importance of Context

Next, expository preaching forces the preacher to pay attention to the contexts so that the book's intended, authentic message is clearly heard. We all know that 'a text out of context becomes a pretext for a proof text', but when that happens it greatly reduces the authority of the sermon and, by association, that of the Bible too. This is very dangerous, because it undermines the hearers' confidence and faith in the Word. The response is often, 'Well, I didn't see where he got that idea from', or 'That's just the preacher's interpretation; I have my own'.

Recognising that every passage of Scripture is set within its own context both in its book and in the whole Bible, the expositor is acutely aware that meaning is not exclusively determined by vocabulary and sentence structures, but also by position and purpose. So his study

will look at what immediately precedes and follows the passage being studied, in order to determine why what is being said belongs to *this* place in the book's argument or storyline. Context questions will include, 'Why does the author use these particular words to convey his meaning?' Again, 'Why does he say it to these people (his original hearers) at this point in the development of the book and in their own history?' As we begin to understand what it meant to them then, we shall begin to see how it can relate to us now. Context provides application for the expositor, as we see the parallels between the original audience and our own situation, although we are at a very different point along the historical timeline. This means that he does not have to find some external application from his contemporary evangelical sub-cultural framework to bolt on to the text. Rather, in exploring the original context and then relating that into the whole Bible context, the relevance and intended application of this particular passage becomes increasingly clear.

An Example of Context

It may be helpful at this point to use an illustrative example, to demonstrate how the expository method can develop and deepen the understanding of a whole book and enrich our experience of its message. In this case a single phrase, when carefully explored, opens up a much wider vista.

Studying to preach Ephesians 1 quickly brings one to a key phrase in verse 3. The context is the beginning of the great ascription of praise to God, 'who has blessed us in