

Expository Preaching: Time for Caution

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In a number of circles today 'expository preaching' is in vogue, and it is being urged on preachers as the way to preach. If this means that the preacher's one business is to confine himself to the text of Scripture, and to make the sense plain to others, there is nothing more to discuss; who can disagree save those who do not know that the Bible is the word of God. But 'expository preaching' has often come to mean something more. The phrase is popularly used to describe preaching which consecutively takes a congregation through a passage, or book of Scripture, week by week. This procedure is compared with the method of preaching on individual texts that may have no direct connection with each other from one Sunday to the next. The latter is discouraged in favour of the 'expository' method.

Why has this view of 'expository preaching' become comparatively popular? There are several reasons. First, it is believed that the practice will raise the standard of preaching. By a consecutive treatment of a book of Scripture, it is said, the preacher is taken away from any hobby-horses, and congregations are more likely to be given a broader, more intelligent, grasp of all Scripture. The preacher is also delivered from a constant search for texts - he and the people know what is before them. These reasons are perhaps confirmed for younger preachers by the fact that at our main conventions and conferences the well-known speakers commonly deal with one passage in a few addresses, and when these find their way into print they are taken as models of the best way of preaching. Published sermons of any other kind are few and far between for publishers definitely favour the 'expository' on the grounds of their popularity.¹

In our view, however, it is time that the disadvantages of this view of preaching are at least considered:

1. It assumes that all preachers are capable of making effective sermons along these lines. But men have different gifts. Spurgeon was not unfamiliar with 'expository preaching' (listening to sermons in his youth he had sometimes wished the Hebrews had kept their epistle to themselves!), and he decided it was not best suited to his gifts. There is reason to think that being an effective 'expository' preacher is not such a common gift as some seem to think. Even Dr Lloyd-Jones was twenty years into his ministry before he slowly introduced 'expository' series.

2. The argument that the 'expository' method is the best means to cover most of the Bible is too largely connected with the idea that the foremost purpose of preaching is to convey as much as possible of the Bible. But that idea needs to be challenged. Preaching needs to be much more than an agency of instruction. It needs to strike, awaken, and arouse men and women so that they themselves become bright Christians and daily students of Scripture. If the preacher conceives his work primarily in terms of giving instruction, rather than of giving stimulus, the sermon, in most hands, very easily becomes a sort of weekly 'class' - an end in itself. But true preaching needs to ignite an on-going process.

3. Significantly, the churches - particularly in Scotland - once distinguished between 'the sermon' and 'the lecture.' The word 'lecture' was not used in any pejorative sense, it simply meant what is now commonly meant by 'expository preaching,' namely, the consecutive treatment of a passage or book. The commentaries of John Brown of Broughton Place, Edinburgh, originated in this way. So did Lloyd-Jones' work on Romans - he called those expositions 'lectures'; the difference between a sermon and a lecture, in his view, being that a sermon is a rounded whole, a distinct message - complete in itself -- whereas the lecture on Scripture is part of something larger and on-going. In contrast with his Romans, Lloyd-Jones conceived the contents of his Ephesians as sermons, and anyone comparing his procedure in these two series (the first done on a Friday night, the second on a Sunday morning) can quickly see the difference. This is not to devalue his Romans, the purpose was different.

4. At the end of the day, the best preaching is preaching which helps the hearers most, and in that connection the track record of the consecutive 'expository' method is not impressive. It has never proved popular in the long term, and the reason for that, I think, is clear: a sermon needs a text as the basis for a memorable message. The text may be remembered when all else is gone in the mind of hearers. Sometime, it is true, a text may be a paragraph rather than a verse - a Gospel parable or a narrative, for instance -- but if, as often happens with 'expository preaching,' a series of verses is regularly made 'the text', then a whole series of ideas get into the sermon and, clear over-all lessons (such as one may see in Spurgeon's sermons) are lost. The preacher has become only a commentator. Sometimes he even ceases to give out a text from the passage he intends to take. But people could commonly get the same help, and perhaps

¹ I am not necessarily deploring this. There are good reasons why the 'expository' appeals on the printed page, but is dangerous to conclude that what is best for readers is also best for hearers. Reading and listening are two different things.

better, by taking up a book teaching the same section of Scripture. But, it may be said, 'Is not Lloyd-Jones's Ephesians both expository and textual preaching? He enforces only a few leading thoughts at one time, and yet proceeds consecutively - why cannot others do the same?' The answer is that Lloyd-Jones did bring the textual and the expository together in his Ephesians but this is exactly the type of preaching that is not within the gift of most preachers. Too many tyros have tried to preach verse-by-verse through major books of Scripture with near-disastrous results. It is arguable that this is one of the reasons why 'reformed' preaching has, in more than one place, been criticised as 'heavy' or plain 'dull'. The less ambitious, who also adopt the 'expository' mode, make no attempt to use single verses for their texts and that is the danger that too easily turns preaching into a running commentary.

5. Evangelistic preaching does not best fit the 'expository' mode; in fact, where the 'expository' is exclusively used, true evangelistic preaching to heart and conscience commonly disappears. It may be said, that if that is true it is the fault of the man, not the passage, for is not all Scripture given by inspiration of God and profitable? Surely, it is objected, all Scripture may be used of the Spirit of God to awaken and reach the lost? It may, but it is clear from Scripture that there are particular truths most adapted to speak to non-Christians (witness our Lord's example) and that it is these truths, and the texts that best epitomise them, which have special and regular prominence in most effective evangelistic ministries. The men most used in the conversion of sinners in the past have known what these texts are - Whitefield, M'Cheyne, Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones and a host of others knew. Today there is some danger of their being forgotten. When did you last hear a sermon on 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul'?

This is not an argument that the whole concept of consecutive preaching through a passage is wrong, simply that it must not be allowed to have an exclusive place in pulpit ministry. Let each preacher find what he is best able to do, and let it be ever remembered that, whatever the method of presenting the truth, it is men filled with faith and the Holy Spirit who are needed most at this hour. More than correct teaching is needed: we need messages that will move congregations and even sway communities.

Lest anyone should think the above observations are novel, I close with the opinion of one of the greatest preachers of the last century, R.B. Kuiper. His biographer points out that he refused to allow the term 'expository' to be applied only to sermons given in serial form on passages or books of Scripture. The word should apply to all exposition of Scripture worthy of the name. He continues:

'It follows that it is a serious error to recommend expository preaching as one of several legitimate methods. Nor is it at all satisfactory, after the manner of many conservatives, to extol the expository method as the best. All preaching must be expository.... He was also objecting to the commonly held opinion that only a running commentary on an extended portion of Scripture (a chapter, perhaps) could be called expository preaching. The running commentary type of preaching has certain glaring faults, according to Kuiper. The exegesis tends to be superficial, since so much material has to be covered. And such sermons often lack unity, so that the hearer has no clear idea as to just what the sermon is about.'²

Whatever method the preacher adopts, the following words of Kuiper are relevant for all:

'A simple and conversational, yet forceful delivery commands both respect and response. Enthusiasm inspires. Logic is convincing, the illogical confusing. As preachers let us have a heart. Let us stop wearying our audiences. Let us make our preaching so absorbingly interesting that even the children would rather listen to us than draw pictures and will thus put to shame their paper-and-pencil-supplying parents. But we may as well make up our minds that an absolute prerequisite of such preaching is the most painstaking preparation.'³

² Edward Heerema, R.B. Prophet in the Land (Jordan Station, Ontario [Paideia, 1986], pp.138-9.

³ Ibid., p.204.