

Why bother with Expository preaching?

Someone once said that if you do not preach expository sermons then you run the great risk of preaching impositionally, that is you start imposing your ideas and your bias on people instead of God's word.

J I Packer defines expository preaching as “the preaching of the man who knows Holy Scripture to be the living word of the living God, and who desires only that it should be free to speak its own message to sinful men and women; who therefore preaches from a text, and in preaching labours, as the Puritans would say, to “open” it, or, in Simeon's phrase, to “bring out of the text what is there...”¹

This means that the preacher first unpacks the Bible's meaning as carefully and as clearly as he can and applies it to himself and then to his congregations. In this way, the preacher always remains under the authority of the Bible. He allows it to instruct him, correct him and shape his thinking before he even puts pen to paper (or finger to keyboard).

In this way, the Bible remains in the driver's seat of the sermon, it dictates the content of our message. Unfortunately in some churches, it is the preacher who is in the driver's seat, the Bible is either found in the passenger seat where it pops up for a quick word now and then or worst of all, the Bible is not there at all.

Expository Preaching

God's Word
↓
Preacher
↓
Congregation



Dangerous Preaching

Preacher
↓
God's Word
↓
Congregation



There are many other types of sermons that are preached in churches. Topical preaching which systematically reviews topics such as prayer, grace or trinity. Biographical preaching which takes the life of someone in the Bible and draws lessons from it. These may be helpful if done occasionally and as long as they are primarily anchored and drawn from specific passages in the Bible within their contexts.

Increasingly today, many churches preach need driven sermons which answer the felt needs of the congregation such as the need for security or prosperity or health using various promises from different parts of the Bible.

¹ J I Packer , “Expository Preaching: Charles Simeon and Ourselves”, Churchman 074/2 1960, http://www.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/CMan_074_2_Packer.pdf pg 1

The problem with these approaches is that when the preacher exhorts the congregation, he will never preach more than he already knows. But more dangerously, the preacher will often choose passages to back up points that he has already decided upon. In this way, the Bible becomes no more than a proof text for the preacher. Instead of his thoughts being shaped by Scripture, he merely uses Scripture to support his thoughts.²

This was exposed most frighteningly to me when I visited a church and the preacher made point after point using passages which were totally out of context and even worse, used different versions of the Bible to best suit his message when one version disagreed with him. The sermon was primarily drawn from motivational and self-help material but then dressed up in the language of the Bible to legitimize it. This was not God speaking his word through the preacher but the preacher merely speaking his ideas and dressing them up as God's word.

The preacher had failed in his divine responsibility to preach God's word. He had used God's word unfaithfully and carelessly. He had not heeded the warning that Paul gave to Timothy:

¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. 2 Tim 2:15

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

4 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. 2 Tim 3:16-4:4

We must preach the Word. We must correctly handle the word of truth. The Bible must remain in the driver's seat in our churches and our sermons must be faithful to it so that the authentic voice of God can be heard.

As Mark Dever says in his book "what is a healthy church?", "...God intends the church to learn from both Testaments, as well as from every genre of Scripture-law, history, wisdom, prophesy, gospels and epistles. An expositional preacher who moves straight through the books of the Bible and genres of Scripture, I believe, is like a mother who serves her children food from every food group, not just their two or three favorite meals".³

References:

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HW Robinson, "Expository Preaching: Principles & Practice (IVP, 1980)

² HW Robinson, "Expository Preaching: Principles & Practice (IVP, 1980), Pg 20

³ M. Dever, "What is a Healthy Church?", (Crossway Books: 2007), pg 64.

