

The Expository Sermon: Its Nature and Description

“What is an Expository Sermon”

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“A much larger use should be made of expository preaching than has been customary in our churches.”¹ These words uttered in 1872 by Henry Ward Beecher during a series of lectures on preaching to the theological students at Yale University are as timely now as they were almost a century and a half ago. Four years later his contemporary, John B. Hall, was invited to deliver the lecture series and attempted to describe the importance of expository preaching to the life of the Church in these words:

When the fire of Christian feeling is burning low on the altar of our hearts, far more than by any vivid pictures of divine things, or fervid exhortation, will it be kindled and fed by contact with the very word of God, set forth in its native force, and allowed to speak for itself.²

Tragically, the ‘fire of Christian feeling’ is indeed burning low on the altar of the contemporary post-modern evangelical church. What is most needed to rekindle those flames is a studied and determined return to biblical expository preaching on the part of her preachers. Thankfully, some evangelical leaders are calling for just such a return as is demonstrated by the following statement in a recent book on biblical worship:

“Expository preaching is central, irreducible, and nonnegotiable to the Bible’s mission of authentic worship that pleases God.”³ Nor is this a new invention on the part of

¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching* (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1872), p. 224.

² John B. Hall, *God’s Word Through Preaching*, The Lyman Beecher Lectures (New York: Dodd & Mead, Publishers, 1875), p. 75.

³ Albert Mohler, Jr., “Expository Preaching: Center of Christian Worship,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, eds. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J Ligdon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2003), p. 109.

concerned evangelical leaders. Concern for the centrality of expository preaching has been one of the defining marks of biblical orthodoxy.⁴ F. B. Meyer speaking at the turn of the 19th century made the following observation regarding expository preaching:

It is difficult to conceive of any process, therefore, which will more magnify the Scriptures, more unfold their truth, more explain their method, more saturate our congregations with their essence and spirit, than the habit of continuous exposition. It has been the practice of most of the preachers of the past, who have left their indelible impression both in speech and print on the life of the church, and it is still the secret of that freshness and fertility, which remind one of the River, that at every thousand cubits becomes deeper, and in the presence of whose life-giving waters the salt marshes were healed.”⁵

More recently, well known expositor Bryan Chapell made the same observation.

The ethic of expository preaching is plain. Because we believe that the power of spiritual transformation resides in the Word of God, the goal of the preacher is to say what God says. Expository preaching that solemnly commits the preacher to make the meaning of the passage the message of the sermon is the preaching method that most dependably achieves this aim.⁶

Perhaps no one makes the case for expository preaching more passionately and compellingly than John MacArthur by contending expository preaching is actually mandated by the belief in an authoritative, inspired, and inerrant Scripture.

The only logical response to inerrant Scripture, then, is to preach it expositionally. By expositionally, I mean preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible

⁴ John MacArthur makes precisely this point in an extended article defending the premise that inerrancy logically mandates expository preaching as the only method of preaching that should be utilized by orthodox preachers. John MacArthur Jr., “The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching,” *MSJ* (Spring 1990): pp. 4-15. Almost a century earlier, T. Harwood Pattison, Professor of Homiletics and Pastoral Theology in Rochester Theological Seminary would make a similar case. “More than any other way of preaching, the expository method has Scriptural precedent in its favor. Ezra standing upon his pulpit of wood (Neh. 8), which they had made for the purpose, with his group of elders supporting him, and opening the book of the law in the sight of all the people, and reading distinctly, and giving the sense, and causing the great open-air congregation to understand the words as he read them, is the ‘very first original and most ancient type and pattern of our best pulpit work in this day.’” T. Harwood Pattison, *The Making of the Sermon* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1902), p. 85.

⁵ F. B. Meyer, *Expository Preaching Plans and Methods* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), p. 130.

⁶ Bryan Chapell, “The Future of Expository Preaching,” *Preaching* (September – October 2004): p. 9.

passage is presented entirely and exactly as it was intended by God. Expository preaching is the proclamation of the truth of God as mediated through the preacher Putting it another way, what does it matter that we have an inerrant text if we do not deal with the basic phenomena of communication, e.g. words, sentences, grammar, morphology, syntax, etc. And if we do not, why bother preaching it? . . . The mandate then is clear. Expository preaching is the declarative genre in which inerrancy finds its logical expression and the church has its life and power. Stated simply, inerrancy demands exposition as the only method of preaching that preserves the purity of Scripture and accomplishes the purpose for which God gave us His Word.⁷

Given the importance assigned to the method of expository preaching by such astute and stalwart defenders, it is of primary essence for the health of the contemporary Church that her preachers return to such preaching. But, in order to preach expository sermons, one must first know what they are.

The Difficulty of Defining Expository Preaching

Almost all conservative men who have written on preaching in the last century agree that expository preaching has been and continues to be a valuable method for preaching the Scriptures. However, almost none of them agree on the same definition as to what constitutes an expository sermon. In fact, many of them observe that arriving at such a definition is notoriously difficult if not impossible. Perhaps the kindest statement comes from the pen of an early “dean” of preaching, John Broadus who said,

Various elaborate and unsuccessful attempts have been made to classify sermons. From the nature of the case no exact or scientific classification is possible; the various kinds will overlap and mingle in every conceivable way. Thus if sermons be distinguished into doctrinal and practical, it is evident that the doctrine should have a practical application, and the practical application a doctrinal basis; if they be divided into explanatory, illustrative, argumentative, and hortatory, it is obvious that all, or any two or three, of these elements may combine in such

⁷ MacArthur, “The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching,” *MSJ*, pp. 4 -5.

proportions that no one can be taken as distinctive of the whole discourse. And so it will be with every method of classification that has been proposed.⁸

Nor has the passing of time and the development of homiletics resolved the matter as can be seen by the frank, if not somewhat frustrated assessment rendered by Sidney Greidanus.

Biblical preaching has often been identified with expository preaching, especially in contrast to topical preaching. Unfortunately, some homileticians brought confusion into the terminology when they contrasted the categories of “expository preaching” not only with the category of “topical preaching” but also with that of “textual preaching.” With that complication, the term expository preaching took on so many misleading connotations as to make it practically useless Small wonder that the distinction between expository preaching and textual preaching has been called “an act not of discrimination but of confusion,” for with all of these additional connotations, the term expository preaching has lost its original, plain meaning—“to exposit the Word of God.”⁹

Attempts at Arriving upon a Definition

Donald Miller addressed the difficulty of defining expository preaching during a series of lectures given in 1958 at Southwester University in Georgetown, Texas. His basic premise was that until then, expository preaching had been defined in one of four primary ways, and that each definition was limited by its over emphasis on some aspect or characteristic ascribed to an expository sermon. The four primary definitions were associated with the length of the passage being treated, the method of the treatment itself (detailed analysis or verse by verse, clause by clause treatment), the explanatory emphasis of the treatment, or the consecutive handling of an extended portion of

⁸ John Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, rev. ed. by Charles Dargan (1898) (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1926), p. 306.

⁹ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), pp. 10-11. Greidanus cites several authorities in making his case that the term “expository preaching” has for all practical purposes become meaningless. Among them are James Daane, *Preaching with Confidence: A Theological Essay on the Power of the Pulpit*; William Thompson, *Preaching Biblically*; and Dwight Stevenson, *In the Biblical Preacher’s Workshop*. Full citation information for these additional sources can be found in Greidanus’ bibliography.

Scripture.¹⁰ Miller believed the limitations of defining expository preaching in these ways caused expository preaching to fall into disfavor and ultimately into disuse in the Church. In order to restore expository preaching to her primary and rightful place, he argued that all false definitions be swept away along with their limitations, and that they be replaced with the broadest of generalities; namely, that all preaching that is truly biblical is also truly expository.

Perhaps the first step in a renewal of true biblical preaching is to break the chains of contemporary association which equate the preaching of the Bible with a false conception of expository preaching. Although the word 'expository' in our time may be in disrepute, it is too significant a word to be sacrificed on the altar of misunderstanding. The time has come to restore it to its true significance.¹¹

The renewal of biblical preaching awaits a clear understanding that to be expository is not to be hampered with such limitations as the above definitions would impose on preaching. Truly biblical exposition is limited only by the broad principle that the substance of one's preaching should be drawn from the Bible. Granted this premise, then it follows that all true preaching is expository preaching, and that preaching which is not expository is not preaching.¹²

However, in reducing expository preaching to preaching itself, Miller ended up falling prey to his own criticism. By eliminating any limitations for an expository sermon, he in essence eliminated any meaning to or need for the category itself. But, Miller was right in observing the frustration created among discerning expositors by the plethora of different definitions of expository preaching.¹³ Perhaps the best and most cogent attempt at bringing order and understanding out of the lexical chaos that so

¹⁰ Donald G. Miller, *The Way to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), pp. 20-21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17. ¹²*Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹³ Another fairly well known treatment of categorizing the different ways of defining an expository sermon is that of F. D. Whitesell. He noted that expository preaching had been defined respectively as: 1) preaching a connected series of sermons through a book of the Bible (F. B. Meyer as an example), 2) by length of passage treated (A. Blackwood, T. H. Pattison as examples), 3) by its primary emphasis on explaining the text (Austin Phelps and R. Ames Montgomery as examples), 4) by the manner in which the text itself was treated (Unger as the primary example), and 5) the concept that any preaching that is biblical is by definition also expository. Faris Daniel Whitesell, *Power in Expository Preaching* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1968), P. viii-xiii.

frustrated Miller is the attempt to categorize the different definitions made by Harold Bryson in his book, *Expository Preaching*.

No homiletical term has received as many definitions with an apparent authoritative definiteness than expository preaching. Each definition seems to be correct. Because of the variety of definitions, ambiguity abounds about a clear, authoritative, workable definition of expository preaching.¹⁴

Categorizing the Definitions for Expository Preaching

Although Bryson's ultimate definition is flawed by his underlying premise,¹⁵ his categorization of existing definitions is an invaluable aid to organizing one's thinking in the formulation of a working definition that utilizes the good contributions while avoiding the shortcomings of past definitions. He posits three primary categories into which most definitions of expository preaching fall: *Etymological, Morphological, and Substantive*.

¹⁴ Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching: The Art of Preaching Through a Book of the Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), p. 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34-35. One disturbing element to Bryson's presentation is his concept that words do not in themselves possess authoritative meaning but rather only relative usages, and since usages vary by the users, one must understand the particular usage in view. In his thinking, the reason that expository preaching has become such a misunderstood term is that its meaning has primarily been derived from the usage of the term by theorists and seminarians and is therefore antiquated (p. 14). However, thankfully for the reader, it seems that Bryson does not fully apply this concept to his assessment of the different categories of former definitions. He does apply it with full force to his own definition which he derives after observing that the modern definition of expository preaching has been excessively concerned with the form (morphology) of the sermon rather than its content. He further differentiates between an expository sermon and expository preaching by noting that expository preaching is a series of sermons and an expository sermon is one of the sermons in that series (p. 34). His final definition, which in the opinion of this writer fall short, is as follows: "Expository preaching involves the art of preaching a series of sermons either consecutively or selectively from a Bible book. Each sermon within the series needs to expose a biblical truth, and each sermon may also have different homiletical forms and any amount of Scripture for a text" (p. 34). While these descriptions may accurately describe an expository sermon, his next statement reveals the fatal flaw to his definition, "Remember that a term's meaning is based on its usage; therefore, this concept of expository preaching does not declare all other ideas to be false and this one to be true. It represents only one definition among other definitions" (p. 34). In other words, in defining the term with these qualifiers, he is allowing other contradictory definitions to stand and in essence is nullifying any meaningful usefulness to his definition. It is the nature of definition to define something by limiting what it is and what it is not. Bryson's ultimate conclusion does not act as a definition and in fact, makes any authoritative definition impossible

The etymological definitions focus primarily on describing the intent of expository preaching as that of explaining the meaning of a specific portion or text of Scripture in order to make it clear to the hearer.

Such preaching would be proclamation that displayed or disclosed a view of the subject. If the spirit of the adjective's usage in written and spoken discourse is followed, expository preaching means etymologically a proclamation in which a subject is disclosed to view by means of explanation. Explanation is the dominant idea, and any other element such as interpretation, elucidation, declaration, description, or other element is subservient to the purpose of explanation.¹⁶

Etymological Definitions of Expository Preaching

An expository discourse may be defined as one which is occupied mainly, or at any rate largely, with the exposition of Scripture. It by no means excluded argument and exhortation as to the doctrines or lessons which this exposition develops. It may be devoted to a long passage, or to a very short one, even a part of a sentence. It may be one of a series, or may stand by itself. We at once perceive that there is no broad line of division between expository preaching and the common methods, but that one may pass by almost insensible gradations from textual to expository sermons. (John Broadus)¹⁷

However if a clear and unconfused definition is to be arrived at, the valid criterion, it would seem, is not the length of the portion treated, whether a single verse or a larger unit, but the manner of treatment. No matter what the length of the portion explained may be, if it is handled in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular Biblical writer and as it exists in the light of the over-all context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers, it may properly be said to be expository preaching. (M. Unger)¹⁸

Thus we define expository preaching as preaching that explains and clarifies a portion of Scripture (the sermon text), the truth of which has been discovered

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁷ Broadus, *Preparation and Delivery*, p. 322. Although this citation along with several others included heren appears in Bryson's *Expository Preaching*, they are cited in this paper from original primary sources unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸ Merrill F. Unger, *Principles of Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1955), p. 33.

through careful study, with a view to make appropriate application of the truth to those who listen. (James L. Heflin)¹⁹

Bryson's next category is the morphological one in which he places definitions whose primary characteristic has to do with the form of the sermon. Some definitions define expository preaching primarily by the length of the text addressed in the sermon, while other definitions focus more on the concept of continuity in the sense that expository preaching is the consecutive handling of an extended text or book of the Bible generally in more than one related sermon. Other definitions in this category focus primarily on the way a particular text is treated homiletically with the general idea being that the theme, the main points, and all the sub-points in the homiletic outline need to be derived from that text to the exclusion (at times) of other texts or portions of Scripture. Frequently definitions in this category differentiate between topical, textual, and expository sermons.

Morphological Definitions According to the Length of the Text

Explanatory discussion has its chief crown and glory in what is technically known as expository preaching. This preaching is based upon a somewhat extended section of Scripture. (Herrick Johnson)²⁰

Exposition is the technique of developing and presenting extended passages of Scripture in a practical manner, designed to produce a favorable reaction from the congregation. (Douglas M. White)²¹

A much more elusive term is 'the expository sermon.' In the broad sense, this sort of sermon is the unfolding of the truth contained in a passage longer than two or three consecutive verses. Often the unit is a single paragraph. Again, the chosen passage may be a chapter, or some other cluster of paragraphs.

¹⁹ Millard J. Erickson and James L. Heflin, *Old Wine in New Wineskins: Doctrinal Preaching in a Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), p. 170.

²⁰ Herrick Johnson, *The Ideal Ministry*, 2nd edition (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), p. 244.

²¹ Douglas M. White, *"He Expounded" A Guide to Expository Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1952), p. 66.

Occasionally the sermon has to do with an entire book of the Bible. As a rule the structure of the expository sermon follows the order of the ideas in the passage, but not slavishly. . . . According to the present book, therefore, any pulpit message which is based on a fairly long biblical passage is an expository sermon. (Andrew W. Blackwood)²²

Morphological Definitions According to Consecutive Treatment of Texts

We are now able, in light of these distinctions, to define Expository Preaching as the consecutive treatment of some book or extended portion of Scripture on which the preacher has concentrated head and heart, brain and brawn, over which he has thought and wept and prayed, until it has yielded up its inner secret, and the spirit of it has passed into his spirit. (F. B. Meyer)²³

By expository preaching, I mean that method of pulpit discourse which consists in the consecutive interpretation and practical enforcement, of a book of the sacred canon. (William Taylor)²⁴

Morphological Definitions According to Treatment by the Structure of the Text

An expository sermon is based on a Bible passage, usually longer than a verse or two; the theme, the thesis and the major and minor divisions coming from the passage; the whole sermon being an honest attempt to unfold the true grammatical-historical-contextual meaning of the passage, making it relevant to life today by proper organization, argument, illustration, application, and appeal. (F. Daniel Whitesell)²⁵

The expository sermon is one in which the text is the theme, and the discussion is an explanation of the text. (Austin Phelps)²⁶

An “Expository Sermon” derives its main points or the leading subhead under each main point from the particular paragraph or chapter or book of the Bible with which it deals. (Charles W. Koller)²⁷

²² Andrew W. Blackwood, *Preaching From the Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1941), pp. 38-39.

²³ F. B. Meyer, *Expository Preaching Plans and Methods* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912), p. 29.

²⁴ William M. Taylor, *The Ministry of the Word* (New York: T. Nelson and Sons, 1876), p. 155, cited in Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching*, pp. 19-20. Note: This source is out of print and was unavailable through conventional inter-library loan at the time of this writing.

²⁵ Faris D. Whitesell, *Power in Expository Preaching*, pp. vi-vii.

²⁶ Austin Phelps, *The Theory of Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1892), p. 31.

A sermon that explores any biblical concept is in the broadest sense ‘expository,’ but *the technical definition of an expository sermon* requires that it expound Scripture by deriving from a specific text main points and subpoints that disclose the thought of the author, cover the scope of the passage, and are applied to the lives of the listeners. (Brian Chapell, emphasis his).²⁸

And expository sermon is a discourse that expounds a passage of Scripture, organizes it around a central theme and main divisions which issue forth from the given text, and then decisively applies its message to the listeners. (Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix)²⁹

Bryson’s final category of definitions of expository preaching is the substantive category. By this he means that the primary emphasis of an expository sermon is to draw forth the accurate meaning of the Biblical text and explain it clearly to the hearers.³⁰

While differentiating from Bryson’s final definition for reasons described earlier, this writer adopts this category as a helpful way of identifying and defining the primary components of an expository sermon. The primary component of an expository sermon is an accurate and clear explanation of the text being treated, irrespective of length or homiletic presentation. While it is true that most expository sermons do derive their theme, main points, and sub-points from the text in hand that in itself is not the primary component. The primary component must always be the accurate, careful, and clear explanation of the single authorial meaning of the Biblical text being addressed.

²⁷ Charles W. Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962) p. 21.

²⁸ Brian Chapell, *Christ Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1994), pp. 128-129.

²⁹ Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), p. 29.

³⁰ Bryson, *Expository Preaching*, p. 22.

Although not addressing the topic of expository preaching directly, Alfred Garvie captures the importance of this emphasis in most moving words.

To the Christian Church is committed not only the task of preaching, but also the message to be thus delivered. The Christian preacher does not discover or invent the truth he imparts to others. Christian preaching is not merely one of the functions of a human religion, it is the continuation of the divine revelation, culminating in Christ, of which the Holy Scriptures are the record and the interpretation The common assumption in the Christian Church is that preaching will not be the power and wisdom of God unto the salvation of sinners and the perfecting of saints unless the preacher is himself convinced, and can convince his hearers, that he has a message from God to deliver, that his words are not of his own invention and imagination, but are by the inspiration of the Almighty, who hath given him the understanding clearly to discern and rightly divide the Word of Life The Christian preacher is not an explorer or adventurer, but a messenger.³¹

Substantive Definitions Addressing the Accurate Interpretation of the Text

By expository preaching we mean that in which a minister, having, by the aid of grammar, dictionary, and all proper helps, learned for himself what meaning the Holy Ghost intended to convey in the passage he has in hand, and then what uses we ought, in harmony with the rest of divine teaching, to make of it, and having filled his own understanding, and warmed his own heart with this truth, tells it to his people, with clearness, simplicity, force, and fervor. (John Hall)³²

The outstanding characteristic of expository preaching is that it uses the Bible as its source for its preaching; it seeks to give an exposition of a biblical passage. By contrast, nonbiblical topical preaching presents neither text nor exposition. Although it is possible to preach topical sermons that are biblical, in actual practice they often turn out to be flights of fancy which have little or nothing to do with biblical thought. Moreover, it is extremely difficult for the congregation to test topical preaching by the criterion of the Bible. But an expository sermon purposely seeks to set forth a biblical message on the basis of a biblical text. (Sidney Greidanus)³³

³¹ Alfred E. Garvie, *The Christian Preacher* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), pp. 14-15. Sadly, Garvie himself, while helpful in many areas, adopted the theological stance common to Neo-Orthodoxy and believed that the Bible was not the Word of God but merely contained the Word of God (p. 350).

³² John B. Hall, *God's Word Through Preaching*, The Lyman Beecher Lectures (New York: Dodd & Mead, Publishers, 1875), p. 71.

³³ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and The Ancient Text*, p. 15.

It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course, if by an ‘expository’ sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scripture, then indeed it is only one possible way of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, ‘exposition’ has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor prizes [sic] open what appears to be closed makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is ‘imposition’, which is to impose on the text what is not there. . . . The size of the text is immaterial, so long as it is biblical. What matters is what we do with it. Whether it is long or short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction, or falsification. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thought, but a master which dictates and controls what is said. (John Stott)³⁴

Expository preaching—the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers. (Haddon Robinson)³⁵

Expository preaching is the Spirit-empowered explanation and proclamation of the text of God’s Word with due regard to the historical [sic] contextual, grammatical, and doctrinal significance of the given passage, with the specific object of invoking a Christ-transforming response. (Stephen Olford)³⁶

Expository preaching is that mode of Christian preaching that takes as its central purpose the presentation and application of the text of the Bible. All other issues and concerns are subordinated to the central task of presenting the biblical text. As the word of God, the text of Scripture has the right to establish both the substance and the structure of the sermon. Genuine exposition takes place when the preacher sets forth the meaning and message of the biblical text and makes clear how the word of God establishes the identity and worldview of the church as the people of God. (Al Mohler)³⁷

³⁴ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Words: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 126.

³⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 2001) p. 31.

³⁶ Stephen F. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), p. 69.

The essential nature of expository preaching, then, is preaching that explains a passage in such a way as to lead the congregation to a true and practical application of that passage. (Walter Liefeld)³⁸

Expository preaching is the contemporization of the central proposition of a biblical text that is derived from proper methods of interpretation and declared through effective means of communication to inform minds, instruct hearts, and influence behavior toward godliness. (R. Richard)³⁹

In summary, the following minimal elements identify expository preaching: 1) The message finds its sole source in Scripture. 2) The message is extracted from Scripture through careful exegesis. 3) The message preparation correctly interprets Scripture in its normal sense and its context. 4) The message clearly explains the original God-intended meaning of Scripture. 5) The message applies the Scriptural meaning for today. (Richard Mayhue)⁴⁰

Arriving at a Working Definition

“The distinguishing mark of expository preaching, also called Bible Exposition, is the biblical interpretation communicated through the sermon.”⁴¹ Above all else, these words serve as a litmus test for all true expository preaching. Given the scores of definitions presented already in this paper, one is hard pressed to clamor for another definition that while doubtless in the mind of its author is an improvement above the

³⁷ Albert Mohler, Jr., “Expository Preaching: Center of Christian Worship,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, eds. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2003), p. 112.

³⁸ Walter L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 6. He goes on to articulate the following defining characteristics of an expository sermon: 1) it deals with one basic passage; 2) it has hermeneutical integrity by reproducing the significant elements of the passage in the same balance and with the same intention of the author; 3) it has cohesion; 4) it has movement and direction; 5) it has application that does not violate the purpose, meaning or function of the text in its original setting. (pp. 6-7).

³⁹ Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 2001), p. 19.

⁴⁰ Richard L. Mayhue, “Rediscovering Expository Preaching,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, eds. John MacArthur Jr., and the Master’s Seminary Faculty (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1992), pp. 12-13.

⁴¹ Robert L. Thomas, “The Relationship between Exegesis and Expository Preaching” in *MSJ* (Fall 91), p. 182.

others that preceded its arrival, is in effect as redundant or perhaps even inferior to its precedents. So, why the need for a personal working definition? The wording of the question reveals the answer. First, if expository preaching is all that we have claimed in this paper—if it indeed is the best and foremost method of preaching today, then one must personally commit to preaching messages that are truly expository. And, for this to happen, one must truly understand what exactly comprises such a message. Second, in addition to being a personal definition, it is also a working one. One that is constantly seeking to adjust its nuances to more accurately reflect the meaning of an expository sermon yet stay within the established and recognized hermeneutical and homiletical boundaries delineating expository preaching. To that end, the following definition is offered as the personal and working definition of this writer.

Expository preaching is the accurate and authoritative declaration of a portion of God's Word by a Spirit-empowered preacher who systematically teaches the biblical text, properly interpreted—historically, grammatically, normatively, and in a form appropriate to and derived from the text—for the purpose of motivating and equipping his hearers to respond in glad obedience to the appropriate demands and legitimate expectations derived from that text.

The component parts to this definition are important. First, expository preaching is a declaration of a portion of God's Word. This demands that the source of all that is preached be a defined portion of Scripture as opposed to some need in the life of the hearer or some issue relevant to the surrounding culture. Furthermore, the message is to be declared or proclaimed as God's authoritative truth for the determination of all of what one believes (faith), and for how one behaves (practice). Since the authority for this declaration resides in the Divine source of the text being preached, the declaration must accurately reflect exactly what God said in the text.

Second, in order to derive the accurate interpretation, the preacher must be committed to laboring over the Biblical text in order to discover the true meaning placed there by God through the original writer. This means that he will give himself to the study of the text in its historical and contextual setting. Furthermore, he will strive to seek the meaning of the text by giving careful attention to the propositions expressed by the words, phrases, clauses, and paragraphs of the text before him. And, he will do this in the original language in which the text was written. Finally, he will work to interpret the text according to its literal or normative usage. Although the final interpretation will be filtered through a larger theological grid set by the rest of the Scriptures, the final determination of meaning will be governed primarily by the specific text and its immediate context. This laborious process is necessary if what is preached is to have the authoritative and divine impact on the life of the hearer.

Preaching is not mere speech; it is an event. In true preaching something happens. Preacher and people are brought together by the living flame of truth, as oxygen and matter are joined in living encounter by fire. The eternal problem of the preacher is how to produce such a response. Techniques are studied and methods pursued which are designed to work in each succeeding generation. However praiseworthy these may be, preaching can never achieve its true end without a concentration on its message. 'Faith cometh from what is heard.'⁴²

A third component has to do with the shape of the message that results from the exegetical process. The homiletical shape of an expository sermon is to be derived as much as possible from the way the text presents the particular truth being presented. Given the belief that God designed the Scriptures to present truth in the particular manner found in the texts of Scripture, it seems best to let those texts themselves determine how best to arrange the structure by which the specific truth is presented. Additionally, the term "systematic" in the definition is also important. As one systematically presents the

⁴² Donald G. Miller, *The Way to Biblical Preaching*, p. 13.

truths that are laid out in Scripture in the order in which they are laid out in a particular book, the impact of the hearer will be the result of cumulative truth being presented week after week.

And this suggests the wisdom of taking to a larger extent than we do, chapters, or parts of chapters, and expounding them. We set out bits of Scripture in great beauty, like the separate tiles of a mosaic floor. Let us be expository to a greater extent, and the people will have the opportunity to see the pattern. We are liable to distort separate texts, and to misplace their messages. Let us help the people to look at groups of truths as they are set side by side by the Holy Ghost.⁴³

The fourth important component in this working definition has to do with the intent of the declaration. While application is not properly a part of exegesis, it is an important element in an expository sermon. The goal of all preaching is to bring about the God-desired, God-honoring, and Spirit-induced response to the legitimate demands and logical expectations derived from a proper interpretation of the text being preached. All true preaching has at its ultimate objective conformity to Christ and to His demands.

The final component in this definition is in large part what makes it a “working definition” that is always in progress, and that component has to do with a Spirit-empowered preacher. All else can be in place and yet if this component fail, the message is greatly hindered from doing the work God intends for it to do in the hearts of both the preacher and those to whom he preaches. In order for God to speak to His people He has chosen to do so by means of an inspired Word preached through a submitted, obedient, mouthpiece. F. B. Meyer, cited earlier emphasizes this component when he included this phrase in his definition of expository preaching, “... on which the preacher has concentrated head and heart, brain and brawn, over which he has thought and wept and

⁴³ John B. Hall, *God's Word Through Preaching*, The Lyman Beecher Lectures (New York: Dodd & Mead, Publishers, 1875), p. 68.

prayed, until it has yielded up its inner secret, and the spirit of it has passed into his spirit.”⁴⁴ Meyer went on to describe such a preacher (the father of Matthew Henry) in the following paragraph.

It was said of Philip Henry that he did not shoot the arrow of the Word over the heads of his audience in affected rhetoric, nor under their feet by homely expressions, but to their hearts in close and lively application. Such should be our aim in dealing with any part of God’s Word; we must apply it to each individual in the audience. Each bearer must be as one who stands on the seashore on a moonlight [sic] night. The waves of Scriptural teaching must break at his feet, and the paths of light over the waters must come to where he stands. We must preach to the people as well as before them. It has been well said that a good sermon should resemble a good portrait, in looking directly at each in the room and saying, I have a message for thee. It is not enough to expatiate lucidly or eloquently on a passage of Scripture; we must show each person that it has a message for him, that it belongs to him, that he must heed it and obey.⁴⁵

As it was with Philip Henry and with scores of others who gave themselves to this method of preaching, so may it be with us and with those who hear us week by week.

⁴⁴ F. B. Meyer, *Expository Preaching Plans and Methods*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

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