Expository Preaching Essay

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Expository preaching is a term that has succumbed to the pressures of the relativistic world that we live in. It has taken on a vast number of definitions, partly due to the cultural influences to redefine concrete terms and partly because of a period of church history, at least among Baptists, that produced a generation of preachers who were not educated in seminaries affirming the infallibility of Scripture. This has led to a de-emphasis on the Scripture and a high view of the preacher’s opinion and experience. All of this has led to a number of prominent, evangelical preachers, who do hold to a high view of Scripture, coming out and seeking to restore the biblical definition of preaching, which happens to be expository preaching.

The definition of expository preaching and its components are two different matters. First, expository preaching is preaching that derives its main, propositional points from the text of Scripture. What is meant by the text of Scripture is the smallest logical unit of thought presented in the text. For example, most expository preachers hold to the verbal-plenary view of Scripture, treating every aspect of the text, including grammar and wording as important. For this reason, one cannot take single verses and preach them without at least referring to the surrounding context. Expository preaching is also preaching in which each of the propositional points seek to apply the one intended meaning of the text by bridging the gap between the worlds of the biblical audience and the preacher’s congregation. In other words, expository preaching honors authorial intent and does not seek to gerrymander with the text. While there may be many applications of a truth taught in a particular text, there is only one meaning, and the expository preacher will seek to draw out that truth, applying it to his audience. To define expository preaching in one sentence, I would say that expository preaching presents the truths of Scriptures in an applicable manner, honoring the authorial intent of Scripture and bridging the cultural gap.
between the biblical world and today with transcendent truths that are applicable to all people through the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the preacher.

Having defined expository preaching, what are the theological implications of this form of preaching? These theological implications are concerns that drive a need for a proper definition of what biblical preaching really is. First, the preacher must take seriously the words found in Revelation 22:18-19,

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”¹

In keeping with our definition of expository preaching, it should be noted that this Scripture reference it directly related to the Book of Revelation, but we also find similar statements in the Old Testament in passages such as Deuteronomy 4:2. In 2 Peter 1:21, we are taught that Scripture was God’s idea, and though man recorded and spoke the Words of Scripture, God breathed them out (2 Tim. 3:16). They are God’s Words to us, and the principle still holds true that we are not to alter them.

This theological implication manifests itself in three ways. First, we are not commissioned to give our opinions on the matters of life; therefore we should preach the Word of God and not our opinions. Second, we must take seriously the responsibility to preach the entire counsel of Scripture, since God spoke all of these Words for our benefit. We need to be certain that we do not entertain certain hobby horses in preaching, but instead we need to preach all of the doctrines given in Scripture, including the difficult ones. There should be no chapter skipping so as to avoid a controversial or challenging portion of Scripture. Instead we must stand

¹ Scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise specified.
boldly on the authority of God’s Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit proclaim His truths. Finally, we must take serious our responsibility to feed the flock of God with the food that He has given (Matt. 4:4, Jn. 21:17). What this means is that in addition to feeding the flock the unaltered Word of God and the entire counsel of Scripture, we also must be sure that our sermons are not using Scripture as simply a launching pad for fancy illustrations or stories. The Scripture is the message and must be front and center.

Regarding other practical considerations in expository preaching, one must be careful to take certain precautions and remember certain things when preaching a message. First, we are not simply imparting knowledge to our congregation of the Scriptures, but we are also seeking to apply that truth to their lives. Therefore we must make sure that we apply these biblical truths by giving propositional statements that are application oriented. In keeping with the idea that we preach all of Scripture, we must be sure not to neglect preaching from the Old Testament, while we remain in the New Testament. We are to preach from both Testaments, because God is the God of yesterday, today, and forever! We also must be sure that we have studied and exegeted our congregation well. We cannot properly apply Scripture if we do not know our flock. One of the major issues that must be handled correctly in preaching is the clear presentation of truth, such that the congregation is not left scratching their heads and wondering where the preacher came up with a particular conclusion. We must make sure that our congregation can clearly see where in the text we are deriving a point from. We also need to not neglect the different learning styles of people in our congregation. Therefore, we must make sure that we use proper illustrations that engage the whole person with the truth that has been presented and explained in Scripture. Finally, we must not commit the error of turning away a willing listener with a poor introduction or failing to properly conclude a message with an
unprepared and inadequate conclusion. We are to be sure that we draw in the person to the best of our ability in the introduction. In the conclusion, we should clarify and restate the main point of the sermon and point everything back to the cross of Christ.

These practical considerations for expository sermons bleed over into the elements of an expository sermon. One can usually find all three of the following elements in an expository sermon. First, after stating the propositional truth the text seeks to impart, the preacher’s task is to explain what the text means and demonstrate how the propositional truth was derived from the text. This process is known as explanation. This is perhaps the most crucial part of the message. Without it, people are left wondering how a particular point of truth came from the text. Second, the preacher must illustrate what he is trying to say. This is not necessarily an element in every point of an expository sermon, because the line can often blur between the application and illustration of a point or between the illustration and explanation. This leads to the final component of an expository sermon, application. Without application, the listener has gained more knowledge of the Bible, but they are left wondering how they might take that truth and make it a part of their lives so that it transforms them. The bookends on an expository message are the introduction and conclusion, which as stated previously draw the listener into the message and bring everything in the message to resolution. While many expository sermons use a very linear approach, proceeding from explanation to illustration and then application, this is not always the case. These components might be interwoven in the message, bouncing back and from one component to another.

The final consideration that should be given to expository preaching is what defines it from other styles or methods of preaching. There certainly is no shortage on people who proclaim to have the best approach to changing lives, but we must make sure that our
approach is biblical. The first aspect of expository preaching that makes it different from other styles is that it is text driven, as opposed to being people driven. This does not mean that people are not a concern of expository preaching; rather it means that expository preaching is first concerned with teaching what God has proclaimed and with honoring what He has to say about preaching, rather than being more preoccupied with what interests people. This comes from a high view of Scripture, which must be an essential part of one’s beliefs to practice expository preaching. Expository preaching is also application oriented. There are some who would call themselves expository preachers because they use the text in their sermons, or even give a running commentary throughout. However, this is not the same as applying the truths presented in Scripture after having properly demonstrated how that truth came from a particular text. Another element of expository preaching that makes it different from other types of preaching is that it teaches the congregation how to study their Bibles. When a person can see how a preacher derived a point of application from the text and what questions were asked of the text, it teaches Bible study techniques, whether intentional or not. Other forms of preaching that are heavily centered on the preacher’s opinion cannot do this. Expository preaching is also concerned with teaching biblical doctrine as opposed to the preacher’s opinion. This is a striking difference between many of the other forms of preaching and expository preaching. Finally, one of the most important differences about expository preaching is that it is dependent on the Holy Spirit to bring about conviction and change. According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, it is the Holy Spirit who uses the Word of God to convict and change lives. Without expository preaching, we take away the central tool that the Holy Spirit uses to convict people and change their lives. Therefore, let us with boldness declare the Word of God and be true to the text through expository preaching.