

On Expository Preaching

by Ray C. Stedman

THE WORD OF POWER

The greatest contribution the Church can make today to a troubled and frightened generation is to return to a consistent and relevant preaching of the Word of God! All Christians would agree that what is most needed in the present age is a loosing of the power of God among us, but what is often forgotten is that the proclamation of His word has always been God's chosen channel of power. "He sent his word and healed them," the psalmist declares. And it is not so much preaching from the Bible that is needed, as it is preaching the Bible itself---in a word, expository preaching!

WHAT IS EXPOSITION?

Exposition is preaching that derives its content from the Scripture directly, seeking to discover its divinely intended meaning, to observe its effect upon those who first received it, and to apply it to those who seek its guidance in the present. It consists of deep insight into and understanding of the thoughts of God, powerfully presented in direct personal application to contemporary needs and problems. It is definitely not a dreary, rambling, shallow verse-by-verse commentary, as many imagine. Nor is it a dry-as-dust presentation of academic biblical truth, but a vigorous, captivating analysis of reality, flowing from the mind of Christ by means of the Spirit and the preacher into the daily lives and circumstances of twentieth century people.

I first came to understand and value expository preaching from the writings of G. Campbell Morgan, the Prince of English expositors in the early decades of the 20th century. I ran across his books while trying to teach an evening Bible study class of sailors at Pearl Harbor during World War II. I learned from him not only how to discover the patterns of thought-development in a biblical passage, but how to organize those patterns into contemporary presentations that would touch directly upon the issues of life today. In 40 years of preaching and teaching I have never been able to match Morgan's beauty of language and richness of literary allusions, but I have had him continually before me as a model to follow.

Other expository preachers have added touches of their own uniqueness to my learning process. Dr. Harry Ironside of the Moody Church of Chicago left his mark upon me through a summer spent with him as his chauffeur, secretary, and constant companion. From him I learned simplicity of style and warmth of illustration. Campbell Morgan's successor at Westminster Chapel, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, also greatly raised my appreciation of the Bible's relevancy and authority. I was privileged also to know with some degree of intimacy such expositors as J. Vernon McGee, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Richard Halverson, Stephen Olford, John R. W. Stott, Frances Schaeffer, and J. I. Packer. These all have, in one degree or another, taught me lessons of preaching power.

PREPARING TO PREACH

Upon coming to Palo Alto in 1950 I began immediately to preach through books of the Bible, working my way through Sunday after Sunday until I had finished the whole book. I have tried to keep an even balance between the New Testament and the Old, usually alternating from one to the other. This has great advantages over textual preaching in that it forces one to handle the difficult themes of Scripture as well as the more popular ones. Further it keeps truth in balance since it follows the pattern of Scripture itself in mingling several themes in one passage; and thus makes possible the apostolic goal of "declaring the whole counsel of God." If

a series grows so long it tends to weary the congregation, I do not hesitate to break it off in favor of another, but will come back later and finish the original series. Since for years now all our messages have been put into print, when a series is finally finished it is a complete coverage of the biblical book and is available as a unit for private or group study.

My method of sermon preparation has evolved from this concept. Having chosen which book of the Bible I will preach through, taking into consideration the needs of the congregation, the level of doctrinal instruction they may yet lack, and the spirit of the times we may be passing through, I then begin to read the book through several times in various versions. My objective is to create a general outline of the book as a guideline to my preaching. I note the broad divisions of the book, and the major changes of subjects. What I want is a bird's-eye view of the whole. For instance, my division of the gospel of John is very simple: Prologue, 1:1-18 - The Manifestation of the Messiah, 1:19-4:54 - Growing Unbelief, 5:1-12:50 - The Unveiling of the Church, 13:1-17:26 - The Murder of the Messiah, 18:1-19:42 - The New Creation, 20:1-21:25.

I then choose a section from the first division upon which to base my first message. The section should be short enough to be manageable in the time available (30-40 minutes) but yet constitute a single main theme. I next check out all lexical or linguistical problems that may be present, and read the historical background for customs or color that needs explaining or emphasizing. Then I begin work on a detailed exegetical outline of the passage. Outlining permits me to put textual truth into my own words, and yet reveals clearly the logical development of the author's thought. This outline is the backbone of my message. It may take several hours of work to produce, but it is essential in order to maintain clarity and faithfulness to the text.

WHERE COMMENTARIES COME IN

After I have completed this outline, then (and only then) do I read commentaries or other messages on the passage. This reading constitutes a check upon my own exegesis and permits me to make changes or add insights (with due acknowledgment) to my own work. At this point I have probably put 8 to 10 hours of work into my text, but have only reached the half-way point of preparation. The exegesis is now complete. I know what I am going to say, but I do not yet know how I am going to say it.

I turn then to the work of presentation. Here I begin to form what I call my preaching notes. They are based upon the exegetical outline I have made, but I must now select what to include and what to leave out. Here also I add in the illustrations which will make the text stick in people's minds and hold their attention until the end is reached. I think through how best to introduce the passage, usually with a personal story or reference to some current event. I must choose which themes to enlarge upon and which only to touch upon and then pass on. My notes will reflect all this and lead me logically and climactically to my predetermined conclusion. I will take these notes to the platform with me, but I try to know them so thoroughly that I need only the briefest glimpse from time to time to keep me on track. I believe it is very important to maintain eye contact with my audience while I am preaching.

THE PREACHING EXPERIENCE

I try to have my preparation complete by Friday afternoon, or at the latest, Saturday morning. I need to let my notes alone for at least half a day before preaching, while I prepare my body and heart with rest and prayer and other work. Following this approach, through the years I have gained a growing sense of the grandeur of preaching. I have seen many examples of its power to transform both individual lives and whole communities. I have increasingly felt a divine compulsion to preach, so that I know something of Paul's words, "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel!" But even more--I feel a deeply humbling conviction that I could never be given a greater honor than the privilege of declaring "the unsearchable riches of Christ." I often hear in my inner ear the words of the great apostle: "This is how one should regard us; as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God!" A servant of Christ! A steward of the mysteries! I can think of no greater work than that.

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