

## The Whole Counsel of God: Expositional Preaching and Teaching

This paper aims to set out the benefits of expositional preaching and teaching. Before we begin, it may be useful to define in detail what is meant by the term ‘expositional’.

In the simplest terms, expositional, or expository, preaching can be defined as ‘...a kind of preaching that expounds upon the meaning of a particular text or passage of Scripture.’

Clear, then, that the sermon that is expositional in nature will have as its main focus the Biblical text, its meaning, and its application. Charles Simeon, a British preacher in the early nineteenth century said this of his preaching,

‘My endeavor is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.’

Simeon provides fantastic working guidelines for those of us called to a teaching ministry. Helm goes on to write that our world needs to know just how far we have fallen from our original purpose, but that there is a Saviour who has ascended higher than we ever can, and He wants to take us with Him. He goes on to ask how we can do this, what does this look like? His answer is simple and straightforward, ‘The answers are found in expositional preaching. Expositional preaching is empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape

and emphasis of the sermon to...the Biblical text...it brings out...what the Holy Spirit put there...’.

To further conceptualise what is meant by the term expositional preaching, Chuck Smith in ‘Calvary Chapel Distinctives: The Foundational Principles of the Calvary Chapel Movement’ states ‘...this is a worthy definition of expositional preaching - to read the Word, give the sense, and cause people to understand the meaning.’. This definition, in particular, is simple, straightforward, and concise. It also has the fillip of being distinctively Biblical, see Nehemiah 8.8.

To further expand on this, Dr. Nathaniel M. Van Cleave states,

‘The expository sermon takes from the text not only a subject and main divisions but also all the subdivisions...No idea can be introduced into the expository sermon that does not come from the passage of Scripture upon which it is based.’.

Here Dr. Van Cleave provides not only a solid definition, but a segue into discussing the positives. He has touched upon a great positive of the expository sermon or lesson; the text is the driving force, not the pet likes and dislikes of the preacher or teacher. When we begin to preach on what *we* think, we stray into the area of eisegesis - putting our ideas into the text and finding part-texts to fit our ideas - rather than pure exegesis - what is the text saying? Our ideas may be easier to swallow for some, but we risk tarnishing the sterling reputation of the Word of God when we try to be overly relevant to the people and focus less on being faithful to the text and its message.

As a Calvary Chapel pastor I would be inclined to seek the example of those before me when forming opinions and practices on preaching, and this can be found, more times than not, clearly articulated in the aforementioned book ‘Calvary Chapel Distinctives: The

Foundational Principles of the Calvary Chapel Movement.' Chuck Smith states that a distinctive goal of a Calvary Chapel would be to take the flock through the whole counsel of God.

In terms of a positive justification for teaching this way - expositionally through the entire Bible - Smith writes that it allows us to teach through the problems our people face in a straightforward way without seeming to single them out. Preaching topically, which certainly does have its proper time and place, surely leaves us open to the accusation that we have chosen our topic based on the lives of those we are preaching to. Even if this is not done consciously, it may be done subconsciously. Whereas, when we are teaching expositionally through the whole counsel of God, this leaves no room for accusatory remarks as to personalising messages to fit the people, rather, the Holy Spirit organises and guides and shapes the life of the church and its teachings for the edification of the people there.

As previously mentioned, there are appropriate times to utilise sermon types other than the expository. Referring back to Van Cleave, he states that a topical sermon may be desirable when the Bible does not adequately or thoroughly speak on one particular topic, or when the preacher wishes to present an unfamiliar doctrine, therefore needing to conceptualise and provide historical context by referring to multiple texts. Special occasions, too, may benefit from a topical sermon. Services held on Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Christmas - to name but three such occasions - could well benefit from a topical sermon. However, the contrasting thinking would be that the Bible can be expositoryly preached on those days, too. No sermon type is without detractors, but to add my own thought, topical sermons stem from an opinion we already have on a given topic, otherwise we would simply

not feel the need to preach on that topic. This can be where we stray into personal preference rather than pure Biblical truth. As Kelley and Hoagland state,

‘This can be dangerous because I can decide on a topic, Google it or look in a concordance or Bible dictionary for the best passage to support my opinion, then build my sermon off of that. I can do all this without any careful exegetical study on the passage I am using.’

When we seek to make ministry decisions such as our style of preaching there are a myriad resources to consult, but by far the best commentary on the Bible, life, and ministry decisions one can find is surely the Bible itself. The living and active Word of God speaks to this choice of preaching style, as it does to the vast majority of decisions we have to make in life, whether that be specifically or in principle. With preaching, we need first look no further than the Apostle Paul, personally sent out by the Lord Jesus Christ to preach and teach about the Good News (Acts 13.2, 22.21, Philippians 1.17).

Perhaps the standout passage as to the teaching and preaching style, and philosophy, of Paul is to be found in Acts 20. We read,

‘**24** But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and **the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus**, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. **25** And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. **26** Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, **27** for **I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.**’

(ESV, emphasis added)

Paul here then is very clear on the fact discussed above; that he received his commission and call to ministry from the Lord Jesus Himself, and that this included teaching and preaching through the whole counsel of God. This, at first glance, seems to corroborate the generally accepted claim that Paul taught the whole counsel, but seems lacking in the justification that Paul taught expositively. However, closer inspection of Scripture regarding Paul shows otherwise. In 1 Corinthians 2.1-2, Acts 17.2-3, and Acts 18.11 we read,

‘1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 **For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**’ 1 Corinthians 2 (ESV, emphasis added)

‘2 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days **he reasoned with them from the Scriptures,** 3 **explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead,** and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ."’ Acts 17 (ESV, emphasis added)

‘11 And he stayed a year and six months, **teaching the word of God** among them.’ Acts 18 (ESV, emphasis added)

Closer inspection of Acts 18.11 shows us that Paul taught ‘*Logos Theos*’, the Word of God, among the people. The definition of ‘*Logos*’ never includes part truths, or a portion of

what is said or conveyed, rather, the whole counsel, the full truth. Neither is anything added, subtracted, or changed. Consequently, by simply defining the words being used by the Biblical writers, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we can say that Paul taught the full counsel of God, in a manner that we would today call expositional.

Clear to see, then, that Paul sought to teach the whole counsel of God, seeking to make it understood, and seeking to impose no ideas into his teaching that are not found in Scripture. This lines up well with the aforementioned definition of expositional preaching and teaching given by Van Cleave.

To further galvanise our thoughts on expositionally preaching the full counsel of God, Paul validates his experiences in Acts through his epistles. In 2 Timothy he writes,

‘14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it 15 and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 **All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness**, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.’ (ESV, emphasis added)

Paul’s explicit teaching is that the whole counsel of God, all Scripture, is given by God and therefore valuable to teach and preach from. If we consider the other side to this coin, not teaching the whole counsel of God, we are neglecting that which we are told is breathed out by God. It is possibly my own shortcomings, but I simply cannot imagine

declaring myself a believer in Jesus, submitting to His call to ministry, accepting this great call and privilege to preach and teach the Word of God, then not utilising every last ounce of it.

As a pastor-teacher, Ezekiel 3.18 is a verse I take very seriously,

‘If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.’  
(ESV).

If we take the idea that the whole counsel is not needed, or that we can simply choose our text based on a whim or pet doctrines, what would happen if we never chose a particular text, or expounded upon a particular doctrine? How would we ensure that God is not wanting to speak to His people through a particular text that I am not willing to preach or teach? First and foremost, this would leave me in contempt of Almighty God, but, this would also leave me not able to declare to the people that I have comprehensively and thoroughly warned them of their ways and pointed them back to God. This leaves me, as Ezekiel states, responsible; ‘his blood I will require at your hand’.

Surely, then, the only way to comprehensively fulfil the call to pastoral-teaching ministry is to declare the full counsel of God, and by doing this we can, with a clear conscience before God, say we have given warning and that we have spoken to warn the wicked of their ways in a bid to turn them to the Lord.

For perhaps the ultimate Scriptural example of the benefit of expositional teaching, and for an endorsement of it, we need look no further than Jesus. In Luke 24 we read of Jesus Himself teaching Scripture,

‘27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, **he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures** the things concerning himself.’

‘32 They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, **while he opened to us the Scriptures?**"’

‘44 Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." 45 **Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,**’ (ESV, emphasis added)

As born again, fully regenerate believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, His works, and His person, surely there need be no further endorsement of the expositional style of preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God than this; God Himself, God the Son, Jesus Christ, teaching in this way. What a privilege for those with Him to hear Him teaching this way, and what a clear and concise signpost for us to follow in our own ministries.

It is clear to see that there is a strong Scriptural case for expositional preaching, both from interpreting passages such as those referenced in Acts and the epistles, and from carefully observing the teaching ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whilst it would be too

narrow-minded and dogmatic to declare expositional preaching the only way one must preach and teach, there is certainly a strong case that the conscientious pastor seeking to declare the whole counsel of God to his people will, for the majority of the time, teach in this manner.

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