

PREACH

the Word

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Are You an Expository Preacher?

How would you answer that question? I always assumed my answer would be “yes.” However, one day, a congregation member whose opinion I valued highly commented about how little expository preaching he heard in our circles. Unfortunately for my ego, my own pulpit was not exempt from his critique. I was more than a little surprised—as well as being a bit defensive! I was convinced that what I had been taught and was practicing was expository preaching.

Our repeated discussions led me to read a book that he gave me as a gift: *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* by Dr. John MacArthur, Jr. (Word 1992). In conservative evangelical circles MacArthur is a widely-read proponent of expository preaching.

In reading the first chapter of that book, the real issue dawned on me. Listen to MacArthur define the three basic types of sermons.

Discussions about preaching divide it into three types: topical, textual, and expository. Topical messages usually combine a series of Bible verses that loosely connect with a theme.

Textual preaching uses a short text or passage that generally serves as a gateway into whatever subject matter the preacher chooses to address. Neither the topical nor the textual method represents a serious

effort to interpret, understand, explain, or apply God's truth in the context of the Scripture(s) used.

By contrast, expository preaching focuses predominantly on the text(s) under consideration along with its (their) context(s). (p. 9)

My initial reaction was that MacArthur had caricatured what we do when he spoke of textual preaching. Even though we typically preach on pericopes, I was ready to insist that what we do is “expository preaching” on that text. But as I thought about his definition, I finally understood part of what my faithful friend had been trying to tell me. While MacArthur’s definition of textual preaching is a caricature of the method I had been taught, perhaps too often it was an accurate appraisal of what I actually did in my sermons.

Spirit’s Telic Note

At times, I would too quickly hit upon an idea or striking phrase in the text from which I would compose a catchy theme and parts. Then I would be off, literally *off* from preaching the real message (telic note) of that text. Of course, then, I would not be *expounding* my text at all. At such



Getting to the heart of a text . . .

times I was in fact wrestling that text into submission to the direction *I had determined* that my sermon should go. Of course, such wrestling with a text is a crime of homiletical battery against the real telic note of that text. The end product was a sermon that would shortchange God’s people. I would declare that I was preaching *on* a particular text, when I was only preaching *near* it.

And I have a hunch that I am not alone in my crime. Have you ever joined me in holding before God’s people a weak caricature of what we were trained to do? I am not suggesting that we preached heresy. Our sermon may have been 100% Biblical. It may have been 100% sound in distinguishing law and gospel. But the sad fact may be that on some Sundays we have sent our hearers home without a better knowledge of that text. In fact, their knowledge of what that text was truly

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about may actually have been reduced. While we profess to expound Scripture, MacArthur's definition of "textual preaching" often may all too accurately describe our preaching. Have we treated our text as little more than "a gateway into whatever subject matter the preacher chooses to address"?

How do we fall into that? One reason is another caricature, this time of what it means to rightly divide law and gospel in our preaching. Indeed, without a proper division of law and gospel, we obscure the real message of Scripture. (For instance, much of MacArthur's book made for compelling reading, but a woeful lack of understanding about this distinction was repeatedly evident.) However, sometimes do we seek to maintain that clear distinction by forcing onto our texts one of several well worn "law and gospel templates." While we can do this and remain technically faithful to Scripture's law/gospel emphasis, won't we be failing to grasp the fresh and unique approach to proclaiming specific law and gospel which that particular text holds before us?

A second problem may be another "good thing gone bad." Preaching the church year offers a wonderful annual review of Christ's life for us and our life in him. But the danger of preaching on a pericopic selection—"that which is cut around"—is that we forget to "sew" that text back into its context so that the ebb and flow of salvation history, and therefore the unique setting and background of that text, is not lost.

Perhaps a third reason for imitating the "textual preaching caricature" comes when we begin our study of the text merely for the professional

purpose of writing a sermon. The first question floating through our minds is "what am I going to say for twenty minutes this Sunday?" We are then in danger of missing the important first step, which is to discover what our holy and gracious God has to say to *our own hearts*. When we substitute "what does God's Word say to me" with "what am I going to say about this text," we place obstacles in the path of the most vital one-on-one encounter in sermonizing.

Finally, the last reason for offering something less than true exposition may be the time pressures we often feel. To expound a text means taking the time to mine the depths of God's Word in its original language. It means taking the time to meditate, ponder, pray and wrestle with that Word, pleading with God for the wisdom he promises to give to those who ask him. It means taking the time to formulate a theme that is more than a catchy title but catches the Spirit's telic note in that text. It means seeking to discover that text's natural flow of thought so that you capture that in a logical outline. It means taking the time needed to find truly fitting illustrations in the pictures of the text, in the wider context of Scripture, or in the current events of your people's lives. It means taking the time to express specific law and gospel in the unique vocabulary of that text. All of that takes time. Lots of it. In the crush of other duties it is quicker and easier to give the text a lick and a promise.

How can I do such great things?

As the people leave the service, we may even hear "good sermon pastor." But could it be that we may have only filled their stomachs with momentarily satisfying sweetened

milk when the text had some solid meat just begging to be served?

But it does not need to be this way, brothers! First of all, God has seen fit to equip us all through our ministerial training with a working acquaintance with the beauty of the original languages into which God saw fit to wrap his inspired Word. Don't apologize for spending the time needed to use those tools. Inform your elders and your church council that real meditation on the Word takes many hours over the course of several days. Ask for their help to allow that to be a priority in your schedule. Remind them, if necessary, that more of God's people are fed with the Word more regularly through the sermon than through any other avenue of the church's ministry. Remind them also that the Word of God clearly proclaimed and aptly applied to the hearts of God's people often solves personal and congregational problems before they require the pastor's time and attention. I'm convinced you will often find them more supportive than you could have imagined.

Secondly, treasure those hours of intense Scripture study because of what you will gain from them. The most important hearts to be addressed in the sermon process are our own. Forget at first about "what am I going to say." And while you will always want to jot down every thought that comes to mind, don't be looking specifically for theme and parts. Don't worry yet about exactly how you are going to arrange the thoughts of this text to keep the proper distinction between law and gospel. All that will come in due time. What matters most in those early hours of study is that this text's specific law cut us to the heart and led us to exclaim, "God have mercy

Let Scripture Int

on me, a sinner.” What matters most of all in those hours of study is that we marvel anew at the specific gospel of that text which heals our every wound, clothes us in righteousness and empowers us for lives of willing service. After all, isn’t it really here—not at the time of delivery—that genuine enthusiasm in preaching is born? Real enthusiasm in the pulpit comes when we have discovered the unique and personal message of law and gospel in that text. Then our problem won’t be: “what am I going to say?” Rather, we will be saying with Peter and John, **“We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”** Such law preaching won’t be condescending self-righteousness, for we will speak as those whose own hearts have felt the law’s sharp cuts. Such gospel preaching will not seem to be mindless reciting of well worn phrases, for we will be speaking words of living comfort as those still basking in their warmth. Such law/gospel preaching will not come across as using a predetermined template arbitrarily pressed into service.

Next, let Scripture interpret Scripture. Seek with the meticulous care of a neurosurgeon to reattach that pericope to its surrounding tissue from which it was “cut.” Study the context of the chapter from which your text was taken. Refresh your knowledge on the sweep of that entire book of the Bible. Don’t be so enamored with the magnificent redwood trees of your text that you miss the massive forest into which the Spirit planted them! Capture in your mind’s eye the whole beautiful vista of the unique spot in salvation history into which the Spirit planted your text.

Then, as you live and breathe that text, you are ready to encapsulate in theme and parts the Spirit’s telic note. Then you are ready to capture the

text’s natural flow of thought and style of expression as you work through the agonizing but absolutely vital step of expanding your outline. Then you can flesh out your sermon in the words and pictures of that text that have been forming and reforming in your mind. The end result is a sermon that refuses to settle for a passing glance at that text. The end result is a sermon that draws God’s people into a fuller appreciation of the ways in which this text shows us **“how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”**

Does this all sound like the impractical ravings of an institutionalized former parish pastor who has forgotten real life outside the classroom? I have not forgotten that there are times when God removes the time needed to give a text such attention. Then our faithful God will have to provide another way. But God preserve us from so compromising the goal for which we strive in our preaching that we routinely settle for far less than the best God’s Spirit can accomplish through us!

Brothers, I have also not forgotten the vastly different sensation of stepping down out of the pulpit when I was convinced that I had shortchanged God’s people, or when, instead, God had seen fit to bless my time spent in his Word so that he could bless his people through a clay jar like me! Not just for the sake of our own conscience, but for the sake of those bought with the blood of God, it is for the latter that we pray and wrestle. May God shape us more and more into thorough expounders of his saving Word!

Richard L. Gurgel

“Can You Use This?”



An illustration heard in morning devotions at the seminary this year:

Our loving God is like a grandfather who likes to play with his grandchildren at every possible opportunity. One day the children’s mother tells this grandfather that the children have been very naughty and must stay in their playpen. They cannot come out and play. Unwilling to be deprived of the children’s company the grandfather says, “All right. If the children cannot come to me, then I will go to them.” So he climbs into the playpen to be with the children he loves.

We cannot come into the Lord’s presence. He sees our sin, and his holiness will not allow us into his company. So our loving God says, “Since the children I love cannot come to me, I will send my Son to them.”

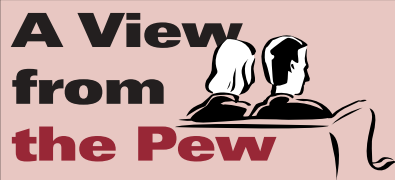
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DID YOU GET YOUR VIDEO YET?

If not, please contact WELS Commission on Worship <worship@sab.wels.net> 414-256-3226. Copies were mailed to active pastors on April 16. If you did receive it, make sure to fill out the accompanying questionnaire and send it back today. The Preach the Word subcommittee will be meeting soon to read them and find out how we may best serve you. Thanks in advance!

Wayne A. Laitinen
Chairman
Preach the Word



Dear Pastor,

I like to feel comfortable when I am listening to your sermons. Most of the time I do. There are a number of reasons for that.

First, I am comfortable when I hear you use vocabulary with which I am at ease. There was a time in the past when I listened regularly to a preacher whose language was so flowery and, in many instances, archaic, that I thought I was listening to a Shakespeare play. The other extreme was listening to a preacher who always managed to use the latest ad slogans and street slang in his sermons. He was very clever and interesting to listen to, but there were any number of times when his glib speech robbed the Word and his sermon of dignity. There has to be a middle of the road in there somewhere. I appreciate it when you fill your sermons with a language that is up-to-date without being tasteless and crude.

Second, I enjoy your sermons when the language is simple and direct. I find that it is the easiest to listen to sermons when sentences are short and constructed simply. Sometimes, especially when you get excited, a sentence tends to run on and on. Your mouth follows your racing mind, trying to say all kinds of things before you run out of breath. As your face gets red and your voice begins to strain from lack of wind, I find myself gasping for breath too, hoping that you finish your sentence before you faint from lack of oxygen. It is not a comfortable feeling. Fortunately, it doesn't happen real often.

Third, I like to listen to your sermons when the language is vivid and attention-getting. I think such language tends to contain action verbs, rather than state-of-being or passive verbs. Vivid words tend to be verbs and nouns without all kinds of modifiers—concrete words that carry illustrations with them, conveying visual images to the mind.

I realize that constructing sermons filled with this kind of language takes time and effort. As usual, I appreciate it when you make the effort, and I like the result.

Your appreciative parishioner

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