

## Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

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### Developing Expository Preaching

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#### Introduction - a Crisis in Preaching

In evangelical churches across the UK the time given to preaching is generally becoming shorter. In services more time is often given to other things. In some churches the theological emphasis has shifted from understanding the revealed word to seeking what is seen as a more direct word. The range of understanding represented in the congregation is often very wide. Articulate voices are being raised, arguing that in a generation brought up on television and sound bites – with correspondingly short concentration spans – preaching has become an ineffective method of communication. And where there is preaching it is not necessarily very helpful.

Jay Adams' observation is that 'men and women (and especially young people) are being turned away from Christ and his church by dull, unarresting, unedifying and aimless preaching.' There are probably people in our churches who think of our preaching as 'boring and long' and sometimes tell us so! John Stott states that 'true Christian preaching (by which I mean biblical or expository preaching) is extremely rare in today's church.' Preaching will not survive in our churches by accident. It will only survive and prosper if we have clear convictions, a wise method of handling the Bible and men who love God and therefore love his word and his people.

#### Discussion points

- Attempt a definition of what we mean by 'expository preaching'? How does it differ (if at all) from topical, apologetic, or evangelistic preaching?
- Identify to what extent individual ministers feel preaching is under pressure and what they find undermining of confidence in preaching. You could then draw up a list of the main challenges we face.

#### Convictions

If we are to go on preaching it will be only on the basis of strong convictions that impel us to keep at the task of preaching<sup>1</sup> when the tide in our society and even in our churches is flowing against us. Some of the convictions we need are set out below.

- The Bible is God's authoritative and relevant word for us today. (Matthew 4:4 and 2 Timothy 3:15–17). In Romans 15:4 there is an important assurance: 'Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.' All these verses assert the authority of God's word and its relevance to us today.
- The example of Christ and his apostles. Teaching was central to the ministry of the Lord Jesus. Mark 1:38 indicates the priority he put on his preaching. The first priority of the church after Pentecost was to devote themselves to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). Paul describes his ministry in Ephesus in terms of teaching 'publicly and from house to house'. He declares, 'I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.' He warns about those who will distort the truth but commits them confidently 'to God and to the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among those who are sanctified.' (Acts 20:20, 26-27, 30, 32).

Teaching the Bible is not simply a matter of Sunday services. Peter Adam, after identifying thirty three verbs used in the New Testament to describe a great variety of forms of ministry of the Word, wisely writes, 'Those of who are committed to preaching need to be committed to a wider ministry of the Word as well... It is important to grasp this point clearly or we shall try to make preaching carry a load which it cannot bear; that is, the burden of doing all the Bible expects of every form of ministry of the Word... Our ministry may be pulpit-centred, but it should not be pulpit-restricted for such a ministry of the Word will suffer severe limitations'. (Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, IVP 1996, pp. 59 & 75)

The explicit commands to pastors and teachers in the church. Paul's words in 1 Timothy 4:13–16 and 2 Timothy 4:1–5 indicate the expectation that God's servants will be faithful in preaching and teaching even though the climate of our times will become increasingly hostile to us doing so.

### **Discussion points**

- Was the preaching of Jesus 'expository'?
- Share what verses/passages have especially encouraged and strengthened you in keeping at the task of preaching the Bible.

### **Our method in handling the Bible**

Using and quoting the Bible is no guarantee of the value of what is said. Satan is quite happy to quote the Bible and use it for his own ends (see Matthew 4:6).

Peter, writing in 2 Peter 3:16 about Paul's letters comments, 'his letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.' We have all heard bad preaching. Some has been simply dull and unapplied. On other occasions the message of the sermon has had little or no connection with the text of the Bible, and may have promoted false theology. But not only have we heard bad teaching, we are all quite capable of it ourselves! We will not preach faithfully and helpfully without care, prayer and effort. In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul commands, 'Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.' The conviction of this study guide is that careful expository preaching is vital for the health of our churches.

Expository preaching is aptly summed up by Alec Motyer as 'a display of what is there'. Our job is not to be clever magicians who produce a message out of thin air but to be faithful servants who explain and apply what God has already put before us in the Scripture. Charles Simeon of Cambridge wrote, 'I do not sit down to impose a sense on the inspired writers, but to receive one as they give it to me. I pretend not to teach them, I wish like a child to be taught by them...My endeavour 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 the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.' If we take this task seriously it is both a release, because I do not have to invent anything, and a discipline, because I must work very hard at being faithful to what is there.

### **Key Features of Preparing to Expound the Bible**

- *Look for the 'big idea'*. Everything is in the Bible for a reason. Jay Adams writes, 'You must never preach on a passage until you are certain you understand why the Holy Spirit included that passage in the Bible.' We need to observe carefully what God has put before us. Martin Luther graphically likened the process of understanding the Bible to picking apples: 'First I shake the whole tree that the ripest may fall, then I climb the tree and shake each limb, and then each branch and then each twig and then look under each leaf.'
- *Be aware of context*. John Stott writes, 'Every word of the Bible is true only in its context. Isolated from its context, it may be quite untrue'. In Matthew 4:6 Satan correctly quoted Psalm 91:11-12, but divorced those verses from their context, ignoring the condition expressed in the verse before and the promise in the following verse. Every passage of Scripture comes in the context of the progressive history of salvation, in the context of the specific book which has a particular purpose and is set in an particular historical and cultural situation, and in the context of the passage itself. Remember that Scripture never contradicts itself and comparing Scripture with Scripture will help us to understand each passage properly.

- *Avoid fanciful interpretations.* John Calvin wrote wisely, 'Let us know, then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning; and let us embrace and abide by it resolutely. Let us not only neglect as doubtful but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead us away from the natural meaning.'
- *Take the literature and the language seriously.* Preaching from law, poetry, apocalyptic, a parable, a proverb, an epistle or a narrative requires some understanding of that type of literature. There are often things to be aware of in the text of the Greek or Hebrew that may not be evident in our translation. The closer we can get to the original text God inspired, the better. We do not have to be great experts ourselves because we can generally learn what we need from the commentaries. This will spare us from inaccurate handling of the text.
- *Apply.* Romans 15:4 indicates that the ancient Scripture was always written with *us* in mind. The heart of application is not moving out of the text but looking more carefully at it and asking ourselves: 'What it is there for?' We do not so much *make* the Bible relevant as show that it *is* relevant by applying its principles appropriately to our hearers. Always we need to be aware of our hearers and their world, as for example, Jesus was in all his parables and Paul was when he spoke in Athens in Acts 17.

#### **Discussion points:**

- Accepting that there is no perfect sermon and we are all learners, what aspects of the suggestions for expository preaching have you found most helpful in your experience?
- Are there any other principles which you would want to add?

#### **The Men who Preach**

Although the Bible is an infallible and perfect word, God's general means is to use human agents to explain it. When Ezra read out the Book of the Law in Nehemiah 8 we read in verses 7–8 of the Levites who 'read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read'. When the Ethiopian eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53 Philip asked him 'Do you understand what you are reading?'. He replied, 'How can I, unless someone explains it to me?' (Acts 8:30–31). On the road to Emmaus Jesus himself concealed his identity in order to give time to explain all that the Scriptures said about himself. The disciples had the Scriptures but needed the voice of explanation.

Those who preach should not do so lightly. In James 3:1 we are warned: 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.' In 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 Paul likens the task of those who teach to that of builders and warns us that 'each one should be careful how he builds' in the light of the fact that 'the builder's work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.' Our most important audience is not the people we see but the God we serve, hence in 2 Timothy 3:15 Paul urges Timothy to 'present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth'. There is always a danger that teaching and preaching makes us feel proud and self important or that we preach one thing but live another. Paul told Timothy to 'watch your life and doctrine carefully' (1 Timothy 4:16). Richard Baxter wrote, 'Take heed to yourselves lest you unsay with your lives what you say with your tongues and be the greatest hindrances of the success of your own labours... we must study as hard how to live well, as to preach well.'

The great consolation of the preacher is that God is committed to use weak and inadequate people and he is sufficient for each of us. Paul beautifully combines realism about us and confidence in God in 2 Corinthians 4:7: 'We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.'

#### **Discussion points**

- What are the most obvious snares in being someone who preaches regularly and how do we overcome them?

#### **Possible Bible Studies**

The above notes are discussion starters rather than a definitive examination of expository preaching. It may be helpful to include a study of one or two passages.

**How Satan uses the Bible:** Matthew 4:6 and Psalm 91:11-12

- \_ What might we learn from the fact that Satan knows the text of Scripture?
- \_ Examine carefully how Satan abuses the Scripture he quotes.
- \_ What particular warning for us should we learn from this incident in our handling of the Bible?
- \_ How does the Lord Jesus' use of Scripture differ from Satan's?

**How Jesus uses the Bible:** Luke 24:25-32

- \_ How would we explain why Jesus conceals his identity (verse 16) on the journey to Emmaus?
- \_ What was the problem these disciples had when it came to the Scriptures? Could it be ours?
- \_ How does Jesus teach us to regard the Old Testament?
- \_ Jay Adams says, 'Preach Christ in all the Scriptures: he is the subject matter of the whole Bible. He is there. Until you have found him in your preaching portion you are not ready to preach'. In the light of the above passage would you agree with Adams?

**Further reading**

There are a great number of books on this subject but these are some of the most helpful.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching And Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton 1971

John Stott, *I Believe In Preaching*, Hodder and Stoughton 1982

Jay Adams, *Preaching With Purpose*, Zondervan 1982

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, Scripture Union 1982

Haddon W. Robinson, *Expository Preaching*, IVP 1986

Ed. Christopher Green and David Jackman, *When God's Voice Is Heard*, IVP1995

Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, IVP 1996