
Expository Preaching in a Post-modern World

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It was the British intellectual Bertrand Russell who said that science is about what we know, and philosophy and theology about what we don't know. That definition identifies Russell as a modernist. He believed that there was an absolute reality external to the human mind and that the rational processes of the human mind were sufficiently congruent with that reality to give us reliable knowledge of it. Such knowledge was the business of science. It defined a domain of public Truth with a capital T, Truth which only a fool did not believe because science had proven it. Anything which could not be verified by the rigorous methods of science was not knowledge at all in the strictest sense of the word, but private speculation, imagination, superstition, prejudice, ideology, religion etc. As far as such unproveable ideas were concerned, one must learn to live with uncertainty and it was the task of philosophy to enable us to do that.

The point is well illustrated by a famous story invented by GE Lessing. A father has a magic ring which he must bequeath to one of his three sons. Because he loves them all equally and does not want them to accuse him of favouritism, he makes two imitation rings, so that each can have a ring when he dies. The result is that each of the sons thinks his own ring is the magic one and the others are not. An argument develops so they go to Nathan the Wise who offers this judgement: "Let each think his own ring is true, but in the meantime show forth gentleness and heartfelt tolerance".¹ The sentiment is typical of post-enlightenment modernist thinking. There is such a thing as objective truth...for the magic ring does exist. But since neither logic nor science can establish what that truth is, uncertainty must be accepted. The only valid position one can adopt over magic rings is sincere respect for other people's opinions.

Out of this seedbed grew the kind of liberal pluralism that is characteristic of western democracies. The distinction between objective facts as verified by science and subjective opinions for which no such verification is possible is the essence of modernism. But Russell and the school of philosophy he represented is now a dinosaur which is threatened with extinction. Confidence in the objectivity of science has been slowly but surely slipping away throughout the twentieth century, and with it confidence in the accessibility or even the existence of any absolute Truth external to the human mind. The emergence of virtual reality in the computer world is powerfully symbolic of what is happening to western culture as a whole today. Truth is now increasingly regarded as something self-manufactured and provisional. It no longer seeks to constrain consent with the imperious assertion: "This is fact...believe it". It issues instead the much more modest invitation: "This is a nice idea...why not try it for size?" Post-modernism has arrived: a way of thinking which denies not only *religious* objectivity, but *rational* objectivity too. Post-modernism is thus relativist and subjectivist. It has brought with it a new kind of pluralism. No longer do the three sons

each “think” their own ring is the magic one and the others are false. Now they are disposed to think instead that there is magic in all of them, or that maybe the magic does not adhere in the rings themselves but in the psychic act of believing them to be so. Post-modernism has rejected the critical method and Cartesian scepticism of scientific rationalism, and embraced instead the eclectic gullibility of New Age.² Believe in anything you like: magic rings, mystic crystals, poltergeists, reincarnation, UFOs, transcendental meditation...if it helps you to feel more emotionally integrated, if it develops your imagination, if it puts you in touch with your innate spirituality...then go for it. Post-modernism rejects all authoritarian grand-unified theories of Truth with a capital T, and offers instead the philosophical equivalent of LEGOLAND, in which all are free to gather whatever pieces they like and build them into their own Do-it-yourself Disneyworld to play in. How is the Christian preacher to respond amidst this tidal wave of cultural revolution?

I. What is expository preaching?

Some, in my view, use this term far too broadly, to embrace any preaching that engages directly with the biblical text. But, for an evangelical like me at least, all preaching should surely aim to do that. If a sermon is not explicitly grounded in the text of Scripture, is it a sermon at all? Wherein lies the divine authority that distinguishes it from any other form of monologue? It is only the Bible on the lectern that distinguishes a pulpit from a soapbox. It is possible, I suppose, to imagine an apologetic address that defended Christian theism, or an ethical address that argued for Christian morality, without actually quoting the Bible. It is even possible to imagine an evangelistic address that proclaimed the gospel kerygma without, actually quoting the Bible. But such sermons would be artificial to say the least, and potentially misleading. For the onus of true preaching is to call the listener to recognise the divine Word that informs the preacher’s words. And in practical terms that means demonstrating that what is being said is grounded in Scripture.

The adjective “expository” then, if it is to fulfil any useful purpose in qualifying preaching, must mean more than simply “explicitly biblical”. But if some use the word too broadly, others use it too narrowly, to define some particular style of preaching.

For instance, expository preaching sometimes means preaching on a single text or a kind of verse-by-verse running commentary on the passage. Still others define exposition by reference to some role model, perhaps John Stott or Martyn Lloyd-Jones. According to this school, preaching is expository or not to the degree that it sounds like the work of one of these pulpit giants. In the case of Lloyd-Jones’ acolytes, this may even extend to an affected Welsh accent! I want to suggest that, properly speaking, expository preaching is not a matter of style at all. In fact, the determinative step which decides whether a sermon is going to be expository or not takes place, in my view, before a single word has been actually written or spoken. First and foremost, the adjective “expository” describes the method by which the preacher decides what to say not how to say it. As John Stott has said, the task which faces any preacher is to fuse the “two horizons” of the biblical text and the contemporary world in the experience of the listener. Preaching which is expository is marked by two distinctives in this respect.

a. Expository preaching gives both horizons equal weight

They receive equal consideration in preparation and equally inform the sermon when it is finally delivered. Thus, a sermon that concentrates wholly on problems or interests of the contemporary culture with only tangential reference to the text of Scripture, while it may count as preaching if it is seeking to communicate orthodox Christian truth, is not expository preaching, because the Bible is not sufficiently central to it. On the other hand, a sermon that concentrates wholly on the biblical text with little or no insightful application to the contemporary scene, while it may count as Bible teaching, is better termed exegetical rather than expository. For an expository sermon must have a “prophetic” dimension. It is a living word for a particular time and place, targeted on the life situation of the audience.

An expository sermon, then, seeks to merge the two horizons in an even-handed and symmetrical fashion, giving equal attention to both. By modelling a dialogue between the two it aims to help listeners to integrate the Bible with their own experience. The pastoral goal of exposition is to enable the listener to develop a unified field of knowledge based on a faith relationship with the personal God who reveals himself in Scripture. Instead of living in schizophrenic compartmentalisation between the Bible and the world, expository preaching seeks to exemplify and encourage the spiritual integration of these two horizons.

b. Expository preaching always begins with the biblical text

It would be possible of course to begin on the horizon of the contemporary world. This is, in fact, precisely where topical preaching does begin. The preacher identifies some contemporary issue or question and then scans the Bible for relevant material. This approach has its merits; indeed there are times when circumstances force it upon us. We may feel, for instance, that we must preach a sermon that responds to some particular moral issue or national crisis, and deliberately look for a text with that in mind.

The weakness of topical preaching, however, is that it allows the world to control the agenda. The Bible may want to address issues to which our contemporary culture is not even sensitive. Indeed, it is in the very nature of us fallen human beings that we habitually embrace wrong answers because we insist on asking the wrong questions. If we constantly allow the preoccupations of our world to be the launching-pad for our preaching we will certainly miss many vital things that God may want to say to us. Important things will be filtered out by the sieve of our selective enquiry, or the balance of Scripture will be distorted as we stretch it on the Procrustean bed of our preconceived ideas.

This of course raises the vexed question of pre-understanding. A generation ago, there was much talk of the “New Hermeneutic”. We cannot go into all its technicalities here, but in its own way, it raised the question of how we read texts. Exponents of the New Hermeneutic have made much of the fact that whenever we come to the Bible, whether as expository or topical preachers, we invariably bring a whole package of assumptions in our minds. All human learning involves us in fitting new information and experience into the pattern of knowledge that we have already acquired for ourselves. Only with great intellectual difficulty and psychological reluctance do we accept the need for a radical revolution of that cognitive paradigm. So it is inevitable that we shall read the Bible through eyes that are prejudiced by our existing world-view.

All this must be accepted, I think. But we do not have to make a virtue of a necessity! Expository preaching, by forcing us to examine with integrity every passage of Scripture, allows the Bible to challenge our pre-understanding, suggesting new questions that we had not thought of asking. This is what Anthony Thistleton, among others, has called the “hermeneutical circle”, though “spiral” might be a better metaphor, since “circle” suggests our hermeneutics may not get anywhere! Our understanding of the Bible always proceeds by a cycle of what mathematicians would call “iterative approximation”, that is: by repeated exposure to the text, we get closer and closer to the mindset of its divine author, just as repeated conversation deepens our understanding of a friend. Each time we read the Bible, we come to it with a pre-understanding that has been revised by our previous encounters with it. To use Paul’s words, our thinking is less and less moulded by the world, and we are more and more transformed by the renewal of our minds.

But we subvert this learning process fundamentally if we perpetually allow the world to set the agenda of our Bible study, as topical preaching necessarily does. It is, in my view, the noble distinctive of expository preaching, which vindicates its reputation as the kind of preaching that ought to be the staple diet of the Church, that it gives *initiative to the Word*. By its very methodology of beginning on the horizon of the text, it challenges the influence of human tradition and cultural assumption, exposing the Church to continual reformation according to the Word of God.

So expository preaching is not a style of preaching, but a method of determining the content of preaching. The expository method consists in systematically asking of each book, each chapter and each verse of the Bible these two questions: “*What is God’s intention in this portion of the Bible?*” and “*What is its relevance to our contemporary culture?*”. Notice the first deals with the meaning of the text and the second with its relevance to the world. Out of the answers which the preacher finds to these two enquiries, the sermon is constructed.

Don’t misunderstand. These two questions do not constitute necessarily or even ideally the structure of the sermon. Contrary to the stereotype, an expository sermon does not have to begin with the words: “My text this morning is...” It may well serve the expositor’s purpose far better to introduce the sermon by reference to the horizon of the contemporary world, just as a topical preacher would. These two questions, are preliminary to all decisions about sermon style. An expositor may decide, for instance, to make substantial use of narrative form in the actual delivery of his material. The key issue is that the agenda for the sermon was decided by the text itself.

2. How should post-modernism affect preaching?

a. Expository preaching must of necessity challenge the assumptions of post-modernism because of its methodological commitment to seeking the intention of God in the biblical text

I mentioned earlier the way the so-called New Hermeneutic had drawn attention to the role of the pre-understanding of the reader in the interpretation of a text. Post-modernist literary criticism has taken this sensitivity to reader-response much further. Something called “deconstruction” has come to the fore. It is quite a complex idea.

Deconstructionist scholars, of whom Derrida is the most influential, argue that the only meaning that any text has is the meaning the reader assigns to it. (Such meanings, of course, shift over time. We all operate with some general pictures of reality, which we can call a “paradigm”. These paradigms change through the centuries, as when a geocentric view of the world was replaced by a heliocentric view in the wake of Copernicus and Galileo). So we are imprisoned by the socially imposed constraints of our language – “paradigm-shifts” in response to a transcendent and absolute word “from outside” are inconceivable. Whatever intention authors of texts may have had (or thought they had) when they wrote a piece of literature, it is inaccessible to the reader and therefore irrelevant to the hermeneutic task. It is pointless to ask: “What does this text mean?”, as if there were a correct answer to such an enquiry. The only question we are empowered to ask is: “What does this text mean to me?”, or perhaps “to the community of which I am an individual representative?” Exegesis as it has been developed by scholarship, both conservative and liberal, over the last several centuries, is then an illusory discipline. There is only eisegesis. We cannot read out of a text the author’s intention. We can only read into a text our own subjective response.

At this point, it is important that conservative Christians do not fall into the trap of a neurotic overdefensiveness. Deconstructionism does have its moderate proponents who are very far from seeking to make nonsense of the biblical text by suggesting that it will bear any meaning the reader wants to give it. It has to be admitted that some of the genres used by the Bible, parable for instance, invite a high degree of reader involvement. It is part of the author’s intention to leave the text “open” in this way. However, it cannot be denied that, pressed to its logical extreme, deconstructionism denies the meaningfulness of all human communication, not least the books of the deconstructionists themselves. Expository preaching, by its very methodology, challenges such nihilistic scepticism. It insists that God intends to say and do things through the Bible. It is his Word. And that authorial intention is intelligible to and effective in the reader through the normal methods of interpretation which we apply to make sense of verbal communication generally. True, words can be misunderstood. True, the cultural and linguistic gap between the Bible and the modern reader increases the risk of such misunderstanding. But these admissions do not mean that there is no objective meaning in the text or that this meaning is inaccessible. No, words work...and God’s words work best of all.

The expository preacher has to believe this by definition. In so far as an expository sermon succeeds, it undermines a fundamental plank in the post-modernist mindset. For it alerts the listener to the transcendent reality of a God who chooses to reveal himself through the inspired Word. He may have turned a blind eye to the idolatrous speculations of subjective opinion and imagination in the past. But now he commands the whole human race to obey that Word and participate in the “paradigm-shift” of repentance, bowing the knee to him as he truly is.

b. Expository preaching must engage with the concerns of post-modernism because of its commitment to contemporary relevance

It would be a mistake, however, to think of post-modernism as an ideological enemy of the expositor. There is one respect in which post-modern ideas can and must

enrich expository preaching. As I said right at the start, post-modernism is a reaction against rationalism. Over against the cerebral and logical mindset that would disparage human emotion and imagination in the name of scientific objectivity, post-modernism affirms the value of intuitive and subjective modes of human awareness. There can be no doubt that such a corrective reaction was necessary. Science and technology were in danger of reducing all the mystery and magic of existence to molecular formulae and mathematical equations. They were in danger of so emphasising the material reality detectable by our five physical senses, that they killed the soul of western culture. Movements bearing names like romanticism, existentialism and now post-modernism are all legitimate protests against this anti-spiritual reductionism. We live in a world today where, increasingly, people demand subjective involvement with truth rather than cognitive information about it. Expository preachers cannot speak with relevance to such a post-modern audience unless they take this new situation on board.

In this respect it is vital that we listen humbly to the criticisms of those who argue that expository preaching has been in the past too wedded to rationalistic modes of interpretation. The intention of God in Scripture is certainly to impart objective knowledge of himself, but his intention goes far beyond that. Speech not only conveys information, it has other force and purpose. This may be to encourage, to warn, to challenge; it may be to make us weep, or laugh, or frown. But whatever it is, it is part of the speaker's intention. Any Bible exposition will have failed then if it locates the intellectual content of the text, but neglects to communicate the whole atmosphere and purpose which attaches to it. *Good exposition invites the listener to feel with the text as well as to think with it.* And, in a post-modern culture, we neglect that subjective dimension at our peril.

c. Post-modernism, then, represents both a threat and an opportunity for expository preaching

The threat is that in its implacable hostility to the disciplined application of reason, and its scepticism about the accessibility of ultimate Truth, it may undermine our confidence in the expository method. The preacher may abandon exposition and go in search of other ways of using the pulpit that seem more in tune with the culture. As New Age drags our culture back into the Dark Ages of myth and magic, we may even be tempted to return to the allegorical spiritualising of the biblical text that so fascinated some of the medieval preachers. And the authority to define Christian doctrine may be invested once again in the Councils of the Church rather than in the perspicuity of the Word. Such a drift the expositor must resist. Other forms of preaching may well seem more avant-garde, but in its methodological reliance on the conviction that God has spoken intelligibly to our world, expository preaching is an absolutely indispensable weapon in the Church's testimony to truth with a capital T.

But post-modernism brings also a great opportunity: the opportunity for expository preaching to do justice to the whole force and purpose of the biblical text. Why is so much of the Bible narrative and poetry? It is because God intends to communicate to the heart as well as the mind. The task of the expositor is to find ways to communicate that heart involvement to a world that is once again hungry for it.

3. What can we learn from sermons that fail here?

There are it seems to me two kinds of sermon which purport to be expository but which fail seriously in these two matters. The first fails sufficiently to address the threat post-modernism poses. The second fails to seize the opportunity it presents.

a. The mental-arithmetic sermon

In this sermon, the preacher prepares thoroughly and well. The intention of the text is rigorously investigated and its relevance to the contemporary world insightfully identified. The trouble is that when it comes to actually delivering the sermon, the preacher hides all evidence of that hard interpretive work. Maybe this is done out of intellectual modesty, or out of the anxiety that fears to go over people's heads, or because the clock approaches noon! But, for whatever reason, like someone who is brilliant at mental arithmetic, the preacher gives the right answer but neglects to show any of the working by which the answer was arrived at. Thus, the congregation is rarely invited to examine the text for itself. Tricky ambiguities in the text are not discussed. Scholarly controversy in the commentaries is never acknowledged. In short, the preacher never explains the route taken to the interpretive judgements upon which the sermon is based. A well-informed listener may well be able to pick up clues that confirm that the preacher carefully worked out the interpretation. But, to an ill-informed listener, the sermon sounds suspiciously subjective and arbitrary. The preacher hasn't indicated any need to convince the listeners that this reading of the text is a responsible one. And in so doing, there is a danger that the preacher may be subtly reinforcing the post-modernist presuppositions of his audience.

There are many today who read their Bible as if it were a zen-text from which they get warm fuzzies, without any consideration being given to the question of whether these are appropriate fuzzies or the same fuzzies as anybody else ought to get. Post-modernism is a breeding ground for heretical cults too, many of which exploit Christian vocabulary but in a way quite different from its biblical meaning. A Church fed on mental-arithmetic sermons will be ill-equipped to resist such trends and cults. Expository preaching, when it is done well, has the side-effect of developing in a congregation good Bible-reading skills. By the model of rigorous interpretation which it provides, it educates the people of God in responsible hermeneutics. But this means taking time to explain to the audience not only what the text means but how we have come to that conclusion. The mental-arithmetic sermon neglects to do that and thus fails to address a major element of the threat which post-modernism poses to the Christian faith. It is no longer enough to feed our people. These days we must also show them how to cook.

b. The propositional paraphrase sermon

This sermon fails too, in my view, not because it surrenders to the post-modernist threat but because it fails to rise to the post-modernist challenge. Some preaching is very close to expository, but a different initial question is put to the text. Instead of asking: "What is the intention of God in this passage?", the preacher asks: "What doctrine does this passage teach?" or: "What lessons does it contain?" or (most dangerous of all!): "Where does this passage fit in my systematic theology?"

This kind of preaching has a long tradition in evangelical churches and is particularly common in conservative circles with a strong ideological commitment to a particular confessional stance or interpretive model. There is, of course, great value in doctrine. A sound systematic theology is an indispensable aid to determining the canonical meaning of a text. It prevents the preacher ascribing to the text a meaning which would be contradictory to the plain meaning of other texts, and thus gives substance to our conviction that the Bible, in spite of its many human sources, is nevertheless one book with a single author and a coherent message.

However, by substituting “doctrine” for “intention” in the expository method, what I call the “propositional paraphrase sermon” fails to seize the homiletic opportunity which a post-modern world presents. It is very likely to lack emotional engagement with the text. There will be little sensitivity to literary genre. Apocalyptic, poetry, narrative, parable, all are flattened to the prosaic level of a theology text-book. No attempt is made to do justice to the lyrical, dramatic, ironic aspects of the text.

In the stereotypical model of such a sermon which we have all heard and practised, three propositional points are offered, each one pinned to a different part of our proof text. But this is potentially as reductionist as the chemist who says that Shakespeare’s Macbeth is just paper with printing. Our propositional points may be true, but they fail to do justice to the divine intention because they ignore aspects of the text whose purpose is not to inform. In philosophical terms, we have approached the text as modernists, applying science to deduce its objective facts. But we have failed to do justice to the openness of the text to subjective involvement on the part of the reader. It is at this point, perhaps, that the Afro-American tradition of preaching has something to teach us. I am certainly not advocating emotionalism. A good wordsmith can evoke tears or smiles without the need for any hysterical exhibitionism on the platform. And such communication skills we must develop and use responsibly, if we do not want our expositions to be dismissed as dull.

There are things about post-modernism that disturb me profoundly. If the pendulum does not start swinging back soon it may destroy all the intellectual gains of the scientific revolution. In my worst nightmares I see the fires that burned Rome consuming the libraries of Oxford and Cambridge and the Western world plunged once again into a new Dark Ages. But of course, Augustine preached the best sermons and wrote the best book of his life by the flickering light of those flames! So too for us, there is opportunity in the twilight of modernism to rediscover that integration of truth and passion which is the mark of the real expository preacher.

References

- ¹ Lessing’s parable of the rings has a much wider scope, as well, but we are taking just one aspect of it here.
- ² The phrase “Cartesian scepticism” is used with reference to the French philosopher of the early 17th century, Descartes. One thing that he did was to try to use reason to establish the fundamental truths about God, ourselves and the world.

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Address originally given at the 1996 National Preaching Conference, Florida, USA*
