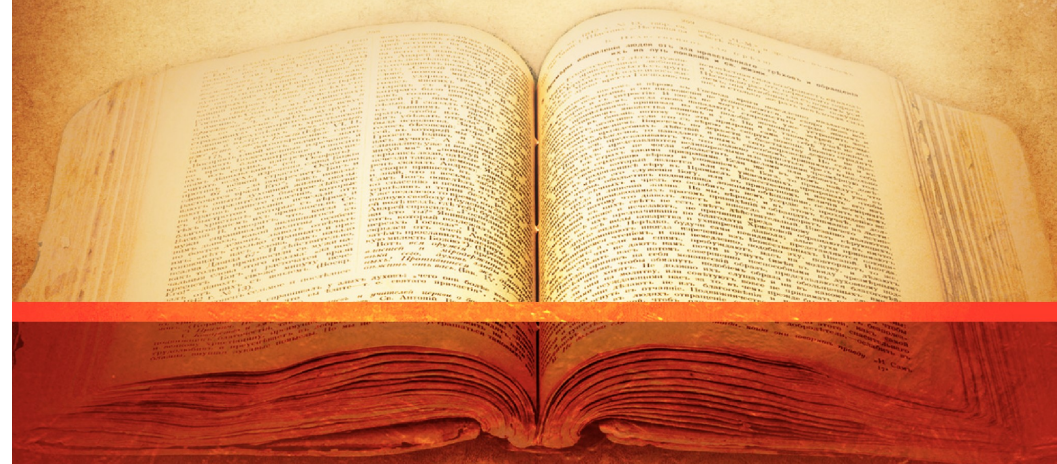


Does it Matter HOW the Bible is Preached?

*A Biblical Mandate for
Expository Preaching*



DR. JOHN FERNANDEZ

Chapter One

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

While nearly universal agreement among professing Christians exists on the need to preach the Bible there is a great debate concerning *how* it should be preached. **Expository-preaching** focuses on the Scriptures alone, explaining what the biblical author meant and then authoritatively applying that meaning to the hearers with the intent of their obedience to God. Christ and the Apostles modeled and mandated this type of biblical preaching. It has been largely abandoned in this generation. Steve Lawson explains,

A new way of “doing” church is emerging. In this radical paradigm shift, exposition is being replaced with entertainment, preaching with performances, doctrine with drama, and theology with theatrics. The pulpit, once the focal point of the church, is now being overshadowed by a variety of church-growth techniques, everything from trendy worship styles to glitzy presentations and vaudeville-like pageantries. In seeking to capture the upper hand in church growth, a new wave of pastors is reinventing church and repackaging the gospel into a product to be sold to “consumers.”¹

The Exposition of Scripture has been removed from the pulpit and replaced by substitutes such as psychological preaching. Rather than explaining and applying what the Bible says, pastors are preaching the latest pop psychology sprinkled with bible verses. Dr. John White several years ago noted this alarming trend:

Until about fifteen years ago psychology was seen by most Christians as hostile to the gospel.

Let someone who professes the name of Jesus baptize secular psychology and present it as something compatible with Scripture truth, and most Christians are happy to swallow theological hemlock in the form of “psychological insights.”

Over the past fifteen years there has been a tendency for churches to place increasing reliance on trained pastoral

counselors. . . . to me it seems to suggest weaknesses in or indifference to expository preaching within evangelical churches. . . . Why do we have to turn to the human sciences at all? Why? Because for years we have failed to expound the whole of Scripture. Because from our weakened exposition and our superficial topical talks we have produced a generation of Christian sheep having no shepherd. And now we are damning ourselves more deeply than ever by our recourse to the wisdom of the world.

What I do as a psychiatrist and what my psychologist colleagues do in their research or their counseling is of infinitely less value to distressed Christians than what God says in His Word. But pastoral shepherds, like the sheep they guide, are following (if I may change my metaphor for a moment) a new Pied Piper of Hamelin who is leading them into the dark caves of humanistic hedonism.

A few of us who are deeply involved in the human sciences feel like voices crying in a godless wilderness of humanism, while the churches turn to humanistic psychology as a substitute for the gospel of God’s grace.²

Martin Luther once said, “*The pulpit is the throne for the Word of God.*” Yet, the pulpits in the vast majority of evangelical churches today no longer serve this purpose. Dr. Merrill Unger’s warning fifty years ago is even timelier today:

To an alarming extent the glory is departing from the pulpit of the twentieth century. The basic reason for this gloomy condition is obvious. That which imparts the glory has been taken away from the center of much of our modern preaching and placed on the periphery. The Word of God has been denied the throne and given a subordinate place.³

There are two characteristics of most non-expositional Preaching today.

1. It is man-centered.

Its ultimate focus is man’s happiness not God’s glory. It challenges Christians to be better husbands, wives, parents and people not because God commands it and to please and glorify Him, but because it will make them happier and more fulfilled. In

this kind of preaching God is virtually absent as the motivation for living. He is coach not King, the method not motivation for living. The trademark of this preaching is what it leaves unsaid: the centrality of the lordship of the person of Christ. In seeking to please men more than Christ it often avoids offending the listener at all cost, failing to recognize the divine truths which are the most offensive to man are the most necessary to bring him to a right relationship with God (1 Cor. 1:23-26).

2. It is superficial.

Man-centered preaching is by necessity superficial preaching. It selects only those words of the Bible which would please people, avoiding scripture that would offend the audience. *God loves you*” (John 3:16) is in; *“God’s wrath is revealed against all ungodliness”* (Rom. 1:18) is out. The ‘Prodigal Son’ (Luke 15) is in, the ‘Rich Man and Lazarus’ (Luke 16) is out. The sin and depravity of man, God’s holiness, wrath, judgment, and sovereignty are ignored, truths which are central to the gospel are ignored. Paul declares the gospel saves anyone who believes (Rom. 1:16-17), then explains that gospel by teaching man’s sin, depravity, condemnation (Romans 1:18- 3:20) and the doctrine of justification by faith alone (Romans 3:21-4:25). He didn’t delete from his preaching anything God had revealed in His Word. To have done so would be dishonoring to God and disastrous to men. It would leave men with partial and therefore inaccurate understanding of the Gospel of God, hence believing the false gospel left still in their sins. Paul’s preaching was not superficial because God’s Word is not superficial. Non-expository preaching often dishonors God by editing His revelation. How? By simply ignoring the parts of it deemed offensive to man..

Since superficial preaching is not devoted to unfolding and applying the meaning of the text of scripture, it minimizes or ignores essential biblical truths God revealed to save and sanctify man.⁴ While claiming to be biblical because it is *from* the bible, it for the most part *does not explain* the Bible. This is contrary to what Jesus and the Apostles modeled and mandated in their preaching (Matthew 5-7; Acts 2:18-40; 20:20-27; 1 Cor. 1:23-26). Paul forbid superficial preaching (Galatians 1:9-11; 2 Tim. 4:1-4), warning that this virtual editing of God’s Words would void it’s power to save and transform sinners (1 Cor. 1:23-25).

The faulty preaching of today mirrors the way one would preach Aesop’s Fable’s. Aesop (620-560 BC), was a slave and storyteller who lived in Ancient Greece. His fables’ such as *The Tortoise and the Hare* were intended to amuse and advise, not rule the reader’s lives. The fables remain popular for moral education of children today. Apollunius of Tyana, the 1st century A.D. philosopher is recorded as having said about Aesop: *“...like those who dine well off the plainest dishes, he made use of humble incidents to teach great truths, and after serving up a story he adds to it **the advice** to do a thing or not to do it.”*⁵

The current trends of preaching make great Aesop-preaching but terrible Bible- preaching. They would work well with ancient fables but not the infallible Word of the Living God. **He commanded His word to be preached in totality (The whole counsel of God - Acts 20:20-27), with clarity (Explaining exactly what He meant – 2 Tim. 2:25) and authority (Calling for the obedience of the listeners - Luke 6:46).**

Chapter Two

WHY IS IT CRUCIAL THE BIBLE IS PREACHED IN AN EXPOSITORY MANNER?

1. It matters *how* the Bible is preached because Obedience to God is at stake.

It is a big deal *how* the Bible is preached because God has mandated not only *that* His word must be preached but *how*. Therefore, to preach His Word in a way other than what He has mandated is disobedience to God. God has mandated His word be preached by expositing it. ‘Exposit’ is related to the word ‘expose’. ‘Exposition’ means “the act of setting forth or explaining, the act of presenting to view; displaying.”⁶ Expository preaching seeks to unfold and give clear understanding of what the biblical author meant and then make authoritative application of this meaning to the audience with the goal of their response of loving obedience to God. It could be defined as “*Explanation with the goal of application.*”⁷ We will note later that Expository preaching was modeled and mandated by Christ and the Apostles. To not preach the Bible expositionally is to disobey Christ. This disobedience may be intentional or due to ignorance but either way is contradicts Christ’s command.

2. It matters *how* the Bible is preached because the health of church is at stake.

- Expository preaching is crucial because *how* the Bible is preached determines to a large degree whether God uses His word to transform human lives.

The Bible is God’s instrument to regenerate, sanctify and cleanse human hearts (1 Peter 1:22; John 17:17; Eph. 5:26). It is the divine scalpel penetrating and purifying the deepest recesses of the thoughts of a man (Heb. 4:12). It is God’s equipping agent providing each Christian everything he/she needs to overcome sin (Psalm 119:9-11; 2pet. 1:3-4) and live a righteous life of love, joy and peace that glorifies and pleases God (2 Timothy 3:17) even in the worst of circumstances.

Expository preaching in the early Church was the primary means by which God brought His Word into the hearts of His

people to transform them (Acts 2:14-40; 3:11-4:4; 5:42; 13:16-49). Paul testifies in 1 Corinthians that his preaching was accompanied by God’s power to save and sanctify his hearers (1:21-24; 2:4). He didn’t simply say he preached the Bible; he describes *how* he preached it. He preached it *fully*, even that which seemed offensive (1:23-24); *clearly*, not in cleverness of speech or oratory (1:17); and *exclusively*, focusing on the truths of scripture and nothing else (2:4).

- Expository preaching is crucial because its absence leaves the church spiritually sick.

Michael Fabarez in his book, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, reports the following startling trends: “A recent Barna Group Report notes the divorce rate among Born-again Christians is nearly the same as non-Christians. Focus on the Family reports that no region of the nation has a higher divorce rate than the Bible belt. Planned Parenthood’s Alan Guttmacher Institute reports that one in five women having abortions is a professing born-again or evangelical Christian. According to a Zogby poll, Internet pornography sites have been visited by nearly 18 percent of surveyed born-again Christians – just two percent below the national average.”⁸ Only 9% of those who claim to be born again believe there is absolute truth based on the Bible.⁹

Why isn’t the Bible, though preached throughout evangelical churches, performing its supernatural sanctifying work in Christians? Has it lost its power? Is it no longer true God’s Word will “*Not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it*” (Isaiah 55:11)? No! The Bible though still in Churches, is not transforming churches in large part because of the absence of the *expository* preaching of it.

Preaching that is not expositional causes Christians to hear sermons *from* the Bible without *understanding* the bible. Therefore they are hearing about God but not understanding God. These sermons are often void of the explanation of the *Word of God*, so they don’t stir Christians to *obedience to God*, which results in no *transformation by God*.

Christians may blame culture and others for their ungodliness

but those are secondary causes. The primary cause is Bible neglect. The ultimate cause of a lack of transformation is a lack of Bible believing among ‘Bible Believers’. This lack of Bible *believing* is often due to lack of Bible *receiving*.

Just as the primary cause of a man not being cured of pneumonia may be his neglect in taking the doctor prescribed medicine that would heal him, so the ultimate cause of Christian’s spiritual sickness is often his not ingesting the divinely prescribed medicine to heal and sanctify them: The Bible. His Word, when believed and obeyed out of love for Him, is a powerful antibiotic to all the corrupting influences of sin and the world (2 Peter 1:3-4). It sanctifies (John 17:17), causes Christ’s life to be experienced in us (John 14:21,23; Gal. 2:20), shows us when we are in sin off God’s path (“rebuke”), how to get back on it (“correction”), how to stay on it (“instruction”) and how to be outfitted to live a life pleasing to God in any circumstance (“equipped for every good deed”), (2 Timothy 3:17).

Dr. Walter Kaiser diagnoses the ultimate cause of the church’s sickness when he says,

It is no secret that Christ’s Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, “junk food”; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously a world-wide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God (Amos 8:11) continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church.¹⁰

Faulty Bible preaching is as easy to identify as a primary cause of the church’s sickness as is a faulty sprinkler system being the primary cause of a dry lawn. How can you tell the sprinkler system in your lawn’s not working? It doesn’t take a degree in hydrology. Where there’s green grass it’s working, where there’s brown, dry grass it’s not. Why? The sprinkler

system is the conduit for life-giving water. When it’s working the water does its inevitable work. It is obvious wherever the system is restricting the delivery of water. The Bible, when delivered to the hearts of men, is the conduit of God’s life-transforming power. The spiritually barren lives of God’s people reveal they are getting minimal water. God’s word is not reaching the soil of their hearts. Does expository preaching guarantee everyone hearing it will be spiritually transformed? No. People can reject God’s word or receive it only superficially (Matt. 13:18-23). However, the absence of expository preaching *guarantees* barrenness! The epidemic number of ungodly Christian’s in Bible believing churches testifies to that. ***When God’s pattern of preaching is avoided, God’s power through preaching is voided.***

3. It matters *how* the Bible is preached because the glory of God is at stake.

Jesus revealed how God glorifies Himself in the world when He said, *“Sanctify them (Christians) in thy truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. . . . by this will all men know that you are My disciples by the love you have for one another”* (John 17:17,18; 13:35). The world is often not impressed with Christ because of the lack of love and unity among Christians. There is a tradition that Ghandi, who lived with Evangelicals for a time, once said, *“I would have become a Christian if it had not been for Christians.”* Because of ungodliness among those who profess to know God, Paul said the name of God was *“blasphemed among the Gentiles”* (Romans 2:24). God sanctifies His people as they believe and obey His Word. Expository preaching is the primary means of bringing that Word to the hearts of His people. Biblical preaching is a catalyst to God-glorifying godliness in Christians.

Does it really matter HOW the Bible is preached? Yes! To further answer this critical question we first need to answer another question.

Chapter Three

WHAT IS EXPOSITORY PREACHING AND HOW COULD I RECOGNIZE IT IN A CHURCH?

There are three essential ingredients of expository preaching.

1. It is Text-based.
2. It is Christ-centered.
3. It is Obedience-driven.

A word of clarification. Expository preaching is not defined by the size of the passage preached. It can involve a sermon of one verse or entire chapters of scripture. It is not defined by a particular format such as preaching verse by verse through a book of a Bible (though that is the most common format of expository preaching). Expository preaching occasionally can be topical, dealing with several scriptures that speak to the same issue. Yet the focus of the preaching remains the explanation of the meaning of verses in their context, making application based on an understanding of what the biblical author meant and calling the listeners to obedience to God's Word.

Merrill Unger summarizes this point as the essence and foundation of exposition

No matter what the length of the portion explained may be, if it is handled in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular Biblical writer and as it exists in the light of the overall context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers, it may properly be said to be expository preaching. . . . It is emphatically not preaching about the Bible, but preaching the Bible. . . . In other words, expository preaching is bible-centered preaching.¹¹

1. Expository preaching is text-based preaching.

The reason we say 'text-based' instead of 'Bible-based'

preaching is to remove possible confusion. Expository preaching is not simply preaching *from* the Bible, it is *explaining* the text of the Bible. Expository Preaching is, in essence, *Biblical* Preaching. **What does Text-based preaching involve?**

- **Text-Based preaching has A High view of Scripture. Every word is God-breathed and inerrant.**

"All Scripture is inspired (literally 'God-breathed') by God" (2 Tim. 3:16). Augustine once said, "*What Scriptures says, God says.*" Since God chose to reveal Himself to us in specific words, its essential the preacher explain them! Anything less and God's people will not understand God's will! John MacArthur notes this when he says,

The only logical response to inerrant Scripture is to preach it expositionally. By expositionally, I mean preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented *entirely* and *exactly* as it was intended by God. . . what does it matter that we have an inerrant text if we do not deal with the basic phenomena of communication: words, sentences, grammar, morphology, syntax, etc.? And if we do not, why bother preaching it?¹²

God did not waste words. He was not slipshod or casual about how He communicated. Therefore the preacher must be careful to say *only* what the Bible says. "*If anyone speaks he should do so as one speaking the very words of God*" (1 Peter 4:11a, NIV). If a preacher does not have a high view of the Bible, he will have a low view of preaching it accurately. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "*The sermon is not a discourse in which I develop my own thought; it is not my word but God's own word.*"¹³ John Calvin noted, "*The office of teaching is committed to pastors for no other purpose than that God alone may be heard there.*"¹⁴

- **Text-based preaching has A Confident view of scripture as being sufficient to save and transform human lives.**

Jesus makes clear the powerlessness of human strategies and abilities to accomplish any true change. *“Apart from Me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5). He has ordained that His Spirit will work through His word to save and transform His people (1 Pet. 1:22; John 17:17). *“It is the spirit who gives life, the flesh profits nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”* (John 6:63). The ministry of the early church reveals they understood this. Preaching God’s Word was the central priority of the Apostles and Elder (Acts 6:1-3), and they did so as the Lord had modeled: by explaining what it meant and calling their hearers to respond in obedience (Matt. 7:21-27; Acts 2:18-20; 3:11-4:4; 13:16-69).

Steve Lawson accurately gets to the cause of the lack of expository preaching:

At the heart of this crisis is a lost confidence in God’s power to use His Word. While many hold to the inerrancy of Scripture, some pastors seem unconvinced of its sufficiency when preached to bring about God’s desired results. They reason that biblical preaching is outdated and irrelevant. In some churches drama, dialogue, film clips, and similar means are taking the place of solid Bible exposition. . . these lesser means of communicating biblical truth must always take a backseat to truly biblical expository preaching, which remains to the day the supreme avenue that God ordains for conveying His truth to the world. Pastors would do well to revisit the ministries of God’s servant in the Scriptures and heed their examples as proclaimers of God’s Word.¹⁵

- **Text-based preaching has An Exclusive view of Scripture as the sole content of their preaching.**

Those who preach expositionally limit the goal of their preaching to the texts of scripture. They are intentional about **not** preaching human philosophies (Col. 2:8; 1 Cor. 2:1-3); stories, myths, and speculations (1 Timothy 1:3,6-7). They are careful to *not* neglect preaching what God has said

in all Scripture, even texts that may be difficult to understand or accept (Acts 20:7; Gal. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:1-4; 2 Peter 3:15), and though the listener’s may not want to hear it (1 Cor. 1:21-25)! Michael Fabarez sums up well the necessity of preaching which focuses on scripture alone:

True expository preaching derives its content from the only concrete information source given by God. . . . The Bible is what we are attempting to communicate. We should look to it for the source of our message, the substance of our message, and the structure for our message. It is powerful to change lives in accordance with God’s will.¹⁶

- **Text-based preaching has A Stewardship view of Scripture.**

The Expository preacher knows God has commanded him and will hold him accountable to preach His Word faithfully, accurately and centrally in his ministry regardless of its appeal or reception by the listeners.

“As good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God” (1 Peter 4:10-11).

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the Word of truth. But avoid world and empty chatter. . . .” (2 Timothy 2:15-16)

“I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate to themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.” (2 Timothy 4:1-4)

- **Text-based preaching has A Literal, Grammatical, historical interpretation of Scripture.**

What the Bible says, God says. To preach what the Bible says the preacher must *understand* what it says. To understand what it says he must understand what the *biblical author meant*. His words, phrases, grammar and historical setting must be understood. God gave his Word carefully and He commands those that preach it study it carefully to proclaim it accurately (2 Tim. 2:15). The Expositor's sermon is the result of careful exegesis seeking to understand the biblical text in its context and in the literal, normal, plain sense the author intended and which the original reader would have understood it. This method of interpretation (hermeneutics) is called the literal, grammatical, historical approach and was modeled by Jesus and the Apostles.

Jesus preached Jonah was literally in the fish 3 days and that God literally created Adam and Eve and brought them together in marriage (Matt. 12:40; 19:5-6). He refuted the Sadducee's denial of the literal resurrection by explaining (expositing) Exodus 3:6 pointing out the significance of the tense of the verb when God said to Moses, "*I am (present tense) the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but the living*" (Matt. 22:32).

Peter's preaching was based on an interpretation that understood the literal, precise meaning of Psalm 16:8-11. He noted that David (who had since died and was buried) spoke of Christ not himself when he said God would "not allow His Holy one to *undergo decay*" (Acts 2:24-31).

John Stott drives home the necessity of preaching that explains what the biblical author meant, not the preachers own meaning:

The first obligation is faithfulness to the biblical text. You and I have to accept the discipline of thinking ourselves back into the situation of the biblical authors – their history, geography, culture, and language. If we neglect this task or if we do it in a halfhearted or slovenly way, it is inexcusable. It expresses contempt

for the way in which God chose to speak to the world. Remember it is the God-inspired text that we are handling. . . . So the worst blunder we can commit is to read back our twenty-first century thoughts into the minds of the biblical authors, to manipulate what they said in order to conform to what we would like them to have said and then to claim their patronage for our opinions.¹⁷

- **Text-based preaching has A Submission to the sovereignty of Scripture.**

The expositor lets the Bible have its say. He does not impose on the text what it does not say even if its teachings are difficult or offensive. The expositor comes humbly to the scriptures submitting his views and desires to its teaching. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "*He does not start with his own thoughts but with the text.*"¹⁸

John Calvin in his preface to his commentary on the book of Romans noted the importance of this saying, "*It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.*"¹⁹

2. Expository preaching is obedience-driven preaching.

Obedience-driven preaching is similar to application-driven though not identical. Obedience always involves application but application does not always involve obedience. Application is acting on what God says. God calls us not to mechanically, ritualistically do what He says (e.g. the Pharisees) but to do what He says from a heart of loving obedience to Him. It's possible to apply what God says yet with a disobedient heart. God is glorified as we, seeking to please Him, lovingly obey His will, not simply act it out.

- **Obedience to the Bible is God's means of transforming His people.**

Christ's life of love, joy, peace and purity (The fruit of the Spirit) is promised to every Christian who believes and obeys God's Word (John 14:27; 15:10-11). Faith always is rooted in God's word (Rom. 10:17), always involves obedience (Heb.

3:17-18; Ja. 2:17) and always is the catalyst of God's people, even in dire circumstances experiencing the life of Christ within them (1 Peter 1:8; Romans 15:13; Acts 4:25-31; Gal. 2:20). Therefore preaching without the goal of obedience to God's word is to leave the hearer's cut off from God's power! The most unloving thing a preacher can do is to give his listeners information without demanding application. Therefore Expository preaching is obedience-driven preaching.

- **Obedience is the goal of biblical preaching because it was the goal of the biblical authors.**

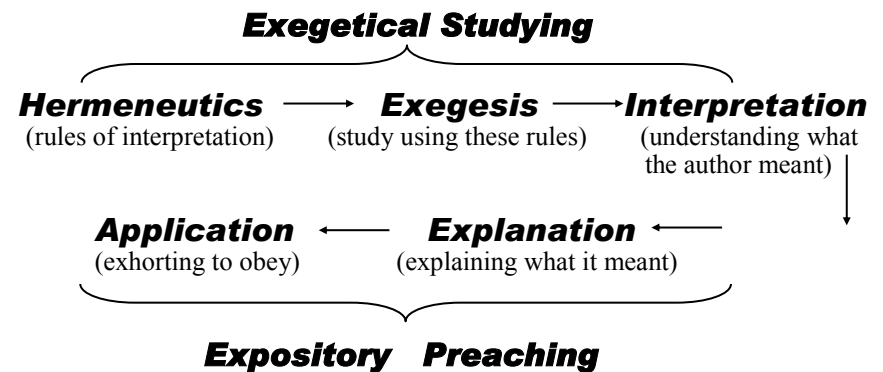
Moses' sermons pleaded for obedience to God's Word (Deut. 28-30). Jesus, at the conclusion of His Sermon on the Mount, pleaded with his hearers to *act* upon his words lest they be like the man who built his house upon the sand and the wind and waves came and it fell (Matt. 7:24-27). He stressed in His Great Commission that the goal of his disciples would be to teach others *to obey* all that I have commanded you (Matt. 28:19-20). Paul, not content to only proclaim Christ, also travailed like a woman in labor over the Galatians "*until Christ is formed in you*" (Gal. 4:19). In mentoring Timothy, who was pastoring and preaching to the church at Ephesus, He reminds him that "the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). James warned against the futility of being hearers and not doers of the Word (1:23-25). The writer of Hebrews warned of the perpetual spiritual immaturity of those who do not practice what they are learning of God's word (Hebrews 5:11-14). John warned of the danger of false assurance of salvation evidenced by the absence of obedience to God's word (1 John 2:3-4). Clearly, obedience was, and is the ultimate goal of preaching God's word.

- **The nature of Scripture demands application.**

All scripture is not only inspired by God but by nature designed and profitable for "teaching, reproving, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate equipped for every good deed" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore application is assumed and demanded of every text.

- **Application must flow from understanding of the text.**

Application must be based on *explanation*. Paul's exhortations to holy living were rooted in his prior explanations of divine truth (Rom. 12:1; Eph. 4:1). *Explanation* must be rooted in accurate *interpretation*. This is accomplished by studying Scripture using sound rules of interpretation (hermeneutics) seeking to understand the biblical author's word in a literal, grammatical historical context. The following figure illustrates these necessary steps to proper application:



3. Expository preaching is *Christ-centered* preaching.

All Evangelical Christianity affirms that it practices Christ-centered preaching. Even Christendom outside Evangelicalism makes that claim. Greek Orthodox scholar George Florovsky asserts this saying, "*Ministers are commissioned and ordained in the church precisely to preach the Word of God . . . namely the gospel of Jesus Christ*"²⁰ Roman Catholic author Domenico Grasso makes the claim that "*The object and content of preaching is Christ.*"²¹ **Claiming Christ-centered preaching does not make it so.** Christ-centered preaching is not simply mentioning the name of Christ in a sermon or tacking his name at the end of an altar call.

What is Christ-centered preaching?

A. Christ-centered preaching recognizes the ultimate goal and fulfillment of all scripture is Christ (Luke 24:27; 1 Peter 1:12).

It relates all scriptures as ultimately pointing to the need for, and provision of, God's redemption through the death of Christ. Jesus opened the eyes of the Emmaus disciples so they could understand the Scriptures when He "*explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*", telling them "*all things which are written about Me in the Law of the Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled*" (Luke 24:27; 44). Jesus did not mean every biblical text directly mentions Him but that every biblical text finds its ultimate meaning, fulfillment and application in Him.

This is why Paul said he only preached "Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2), and why he characterized his preaching as "The word of the Cross" (1 Cor. 1:18). He didn't mean every message he preached was a recapitulation of the death of Christ. In Acts 20:27 he says he preached "the whole counsel of God" which would have included doctrines such as God's sovereignty and decrees. What he meant was that the ultimate point and meaning of all scriptures, including the whole counsel of God, was the redemption that was available in Christ.

Chapell brings further clarification to Christ-centered preaching:

We must relate even seed-form aspects of a text to the mature message they signal or for which they prepare us in order to interpret fully and rightly what the passage means. You do not explain what an acorn is, even if you say many true things about it (e.g., it is brown, has a cap, is found on the ground, is gathered by squirrels), if you do not in some way relate it to an oak tree. In a similar sense, preachers cannot properly explain a see (or portion) of biblical revelation, even if they say many true things about it, unless they relate it to the redeeming work of God that all Scripture ultimately purposes to disclose. In this sense, the entire Bible is Christ-centered because his redemptive

work in all of its incarnational, atoning, rising, interceding and reigning dimensions is the capstone of all of God's revelation of his dealings with His people. Thus, no aspect of revelation can be thoroughly understood or explained in isolation from some aspect of Christ's redeeming work.²²

B. Christ-centered preaching points people to Christ alone as the *enablement* for godly living.

Chapel again makes a good point concerning this:

No passage tells us what we can do or should do to make ourselves holy (as though we could lift ourselves by our own bootstraps to divine approval). The Bible is not a self-help book. Scripture presents one, consistent organic message. It tells us how we must seek Christ, who alone is our Savior and source of strength, to be and do what God requires. To preach what people should be and do yet not mention Him who enables their accomplishment warps the biblical message. God's redemptive work is integral to every biblical passage's proper *exposition*.²³

C. Christ-centered preaching points to glorifying God through Christ as the *motivation* for all godly living. It is God-centered not man-centered.

Jesus modeled for us God-centered motivation when He said in the garden, "Not My will but Thine be done" (Luke 22:42). Paul said "*Do all things for the glory of God*" (1 Cor. 10:31). He revealed His motivation for living when he said, "*Therefore we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him*" (2 Cor. 5:9). Paul preached with the motive of pleasing God not man when he said, "*For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ*" (Gal. 1:10).

Edmond Clowney notes this when he says,

The Scriptures are full of moral instruction and ethical exhortation, but the ground and motivation of all is found in the mercy of Jesus Christ. We are to preach all the

riches of Scripture, but unless the center holds, all the bits and pieces of our pulpit counseling, or our thundering at social sins. . . all fly off into the Sunday morning air. . . Let others develop the pulpit fads of the passing seasons. Specialize in preaching *Christ*.²⁴

Christ-centered preaching preaches the glory of God in redeeming sinners deserving of His wrath (Eph. 1:6,12). It preaches all that God says regarding the sinfulness of man and Christ's death as the only basis for man's justification with God (1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 1:8-10). John Piper drives home the essential difference between man-centered and God-centered preaching when he says,

here is the age-old difference between the way natural man sees the problem of his relation to God and the way the Bible sees the problem of man's relation to God. Man-centered humans are amazed that God should withhold life and joy from his creatures. But the God-centered Bible is amazed that God should withhold judgment from sinners. One of the implications this has for preaching is that preachers who take their cue from the Bible and not from the world will always be wrestling with spiritual realities that many of their hearers do not even know exist or think essential.²⁵

How do we know Christ-centered preaching is required?

A. Christ-centered preaching is mandated because the Old Testament law was given to point to Christ not simply provide moral guidance.

Paul makes it clear the law was given to point people to their need of righteousness (and therefore their need of Christ as savior) not as a basis of righteousness (Gal. 3:19,21-24). Chapell's comments make this clear:

When Paul writes to the Galatians what the purpose of the Mosaic Law was to lead the people of God to Christ, we not only learn why God provided the commands but also understand why a sermon that only exhorts believers not to steal is incomplete. As was every tenet of the Law, the

eight commandment was more than a moral standard. It is also a theological lens picturing the frailty of the soul. Old Testament believers were to understand their need of faith in the Redeemer based on their inability to keep any divine imperative perfectly (Gal. 2:15-21). Exposition of the Law that fails to make this point advances an implicit legalism and misses the explanation that the Bible itself offers for God's commands. . . Comprehensive explanation of what God requires falls short of adequate exposition if it fails to say why God set the standard (*italics mine*).²⁶

B. Christ-centered preaching is mandated because Jesus refers to Himself as the focus of scripture.

He points to Himself as the central focus and fulfillment of all scripture (Luke 24:27). He explains Old Testament passages as pointing to Himself (e.g. Luke 4:18-27; Matt. 11:10). He said the central work of the Holy Spirit would be to "*Glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you*" (John 16:14).

C. Christ-centered preaching is mandated by Paul's model of preaching.

"Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ by [power of God and the wisdom of God]" (1 Cor. 1:22-24).

"For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5).

"And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2).

D. Christ-centered preaching is modeled by Peter's sermons in Acts (Acts 2:21-40; 3:11-26).

Chapter Four

HOW DO WE KNOW THE BIBLE IS TO BE PREACHED EXPOSITONALLY?

The practice of expository preaching is rooted in the Bible itself. This is evident in several ways.

1. Expository Preaching is mandated by the nature of scripture.

The nature of Scripture demands its careful exposition. Each of the words of scripture are the result of the creative breath of God through the agency of human authors. “All Scripture is inspired (lit. God-breathed)” (2 Tim. 3:16). Jesus makes it clear that even the various letters, which make up the words of Scripture are inspired. He refers to the minute dots and markings of the letters that distinguish one Hebrew letter from another when he said “not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18). Every letter of every word of the Law (the Old Testament Scriptures) would be fulfilled. This indicates God communicates through and therefore attaches great significance to, the *specific words* of scripture. Since the foundational method and aim of expository preaching is to understand and make known the significance of the *words* which make up the Word of God, only expository preaching gives due attention to the inspired nature of scripture. MacArthur notes this when he says,

The only logical response to inerrant Scripture is to preach it expositionally. By expositionally, I mean preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented entirely and exactly as it was intended by God. . . . Putting it another way, what does it matter that we have an inerrant text if we do not deal with the basic phenomena of communication: words, sentences, grammar, morphology, syntax, etc.? And if we do not, why bother preaching it? . . . Should not our preaching be biblical exposition, reflecting our conviction that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God? . . . Should not that magnificent truth determine how we preach?²⁷

2. Expository Preaching is mandated by the model of Preaching in the Bible.

A. Moses expounded God’s Word.

He wrote down the words God gave him on Mount Sinai and then read them to the people (Ex. 24:3). His reading to the people resulted in their declaration that they would obey it (Ex. 24:7). This implies they understood what was being read to them. Such an understanding by the people, with such importance attached to it, must have been arrived at through a process of Moses not just reading God’s Word but also explaining and clarifying it. He tells Israel repeatedly that He has taught (explained, instructed to give them understanding) them God’s statutes and commands (4:1,5,14) and that they were not to “*add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it*” (Dt. 4:2). This indicates the exclusivity of Moses teaching (expositing) ministry to the Word of God. Nothing outside it as to be added to it (and by implication, taught).

This process of explanation is also indicated in Exodus 19:3-8 where Moses reminds the Hebrews of God’s prior deliverance of them and by God’s grace He “*bore them up on eagles wings*”. This is Moses’s explanation of the meaning of the text. He clarifies what God’s prior help of Israel meant. Further evidence that Moses did not just read the Words of God but explained or expounded to Israel, is the pattern of covenants in the Ancient Near East at this time. In Moses day according to Peter Craigie, in his 1976 commentary on Deuteronomy, covenants or suzerainty treaties of the ancient near east in Moses day are strikingly similar in form to that given to the Hebrews through Moses. In those covenants first there is a writing out of the terms of the covenant. Secondly, there is a ceremonial reading of the covenant in a solemn assembly at which time; central to the ceremony is the expounding of the stipulations of the covenant.²⁸

The book of Deuteronomy itself also records several of Moses sermons to the Hebrews as they prepare to enter the Promised Land in which expositions the Law by reminding them of what God says, their responsibility to obey and the results of it. He exhorts parents to exposit the word to their children by explaining to them what God’s past works and promises mean (Deut. 6:20-25).

B. The Old Testament prophets expounded God’s Word.

The prophets such as Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah and Isaiah received from God direct revelation concerning His will for his

people. They were expository in the sense that they preached and proclaimed nothing but God's word. They heralded it, pleading for a response of obedience from Israel. Their ministry was simply to make crystal clear to the people exactly what God had said while urging obedience to Him. This is the essence of expository preaching.

C. Ezra exposed God's Word.

In Nehemiah chapter eight Ezra, the scribe, gathers restored Israel in Jerusalem after the exile. He reads to them the entire Law and explains it (8:1,8). His ministry is that of making known to God's people the full extent and exact meaning of the scriptures. His ministry is prototypical of expository preaching.

D. Jesus exposed God's Word.

Central to Jesus' ministry was his preaching. He preached in synagogues, in the open countryside, as he traveled and in the temple. He constantly quoted the scriptures (Luke 4:16-19) and then explained them as being fulfilled by himself (4:20-23). This explanation and interpretation of the Scriptures is the essence of exposition.

He understood and explained them literally. For example, He quotes Genesis 17:17 to prove that God raises the dead. "I *am* the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob". Though these patriarchs had died, the proof of their being yet alive was this verse. Jesus drives this home when he says, god is not the God of the dead, but the living" (Mt. 22:32).

The Lord also interprets Scripture with Scripture such as when he alludes to Daniel 7:10 in explaining that His coming will be on clouds of glory (Mt. 24:30) and references his coming to being like "the days of Noah" (Mt. 24:37-39).

The Lord's pattern of preaching by reading or quoting scripture then giving clear explanation of its meaning, followed by a call to repent and heed is repeated throughout the gospels such as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7); His sermon to his disciples (Matt. 9:35-10:42); His Olivet discourse (Matt. 24-25) and His sermon on the parables (Matt. 13). His model of preaching was clearly expositional. He explained the scriptures in their literal sense and pointed his hearers to respond in obedience to them.

E. The Apostles in Acts exposed God's Word.

The preaching ministry of the Apostles was central to the Church (Acts 2:42; 5:42; 6:1-3). But *how* did they preach? They quoted passage after passage from the Old Testament and then explained what each passage meant. In Acts chapter two, Peter quotes and explains how Joel 2:28-32 (Acts 2:16-23); Psalm 16:8-11 (2:25-31); and Psalm 110:1 (2:34-35) are fulfilled by Christ. The essence of this sermon is the explanation of Scripture, taken literally and Christologically. This is expository preaching.

Peter's other sermon in Acts three as well as Paul's sermon's reflect the same format of careful, literal, Christological explanation of Scripture (Acts 13:16-41).

F. The Apostle Paul taught and urged expository preaching in his epistles.

Paul certainly could have modeled and taught a different method of preaching other than expositional yet he was careful to explain exactly how he preached. It was not using man's philosophies or wisdom (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1-3). It was limited to the Gospel of Christ in all its saving facets (1 Cor. 1:21-25). It was focused on making known the Word of God (1 Thess. 1:3-10; 2:13). It refused to accommodate to the desires of the audience but steadfastly expounded the entire Word of God and only the Word of God (Acts 20:7; 2 Tim. 4:1-4). It relentlessly called its hearers to obedience to the Word not simply knowledge of it, all for the glory of God in Christ as God's people through their obedience are conformed to Christ.

3. Expository Preaching is mandated by its divine effects.

The ministry of expository preaching in scripture was accompanied by divine effects. It was often the means of repentance and revival under the preaching of the prophets (Jonah 3). It resulted in revival under Ezra and John the Baptist. It was the central strategy and divine means of the Church's explosion of growth in Acts 2, 3, and 13. It has historically been the means of revival throughout church history such as the Great Awakening in America.

4. Expository Preaching is mandated because it is the basis of knowing and worshiping God.

God reminds Israel through Moses, how He revealed

Himself and made Himself known to them at Mt. Sinai.

*“Then the Lord **spoke** to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which He commanded you to follow and then **wrote** them on two stone tablets. And the Lord directed me at that time to **teach you** the decrees and laws **you are to follow** in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You saw no form of any kind the day the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire. Therefore watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape (Deut. 4:12-16a).*

God makes it clear in this passage that it is not the sight of Him that is the means of Israel experiencing His presence but rather their learning and responding obediently to His Word. Hughes Old notes this well: *“The ministry of the Word is the means of opening up and maintaining communion with God. . . . This is one of the central themes in the Law of Moses. This is why worship of God by means of idols is unacceptable.”*²⁹

God’s means of people knowing and worshipping Him correctly is through the revelation of Himself in His Word and his means of bringing this Word to people is through the teaching and preaching of it, such as was done by Moses. Moses’ divine charge was to make known to people the Words of God (By Exposition) so that they would enter the joy of worshipping Him. This is the foundational reason why expository preaching is not optional but crucial. God is known and worshipped through His preached Word as it is believed and obeyed and for it to be believed and obeyed God mandates that it be explained and applied (which is expository preaching).

Not only is knowledge and worship of God tied to understanding His word through preaching but communion and fellowship with him is tied to this as well. The Words of God to Moses became the basis for His covenant with Israel and it was the keeping of this covenant that was the basis of God’s communion and blessing to Israel (Deut. 4:39; Ex. 19:3-8). So it is in the New Testament. God’s people, though saved by grace through faith in Christ, will not experience communion with Him apart from knowing and obeying His Word (John 14:21; Hebrews 3:12-4:13). Expository preaching not only explains God’s word

for His people but with divine urgency pleads for obedience to it for the glory of God and gladness of His people.

5. Expository Preaching is mandated because it is His means of saving and transforming His people.

“Now faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. . . . How will they hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:17,14)? This passage reveals the centrality of the Word of God to faith, and the centrality of preaching to making that Word known to people. Faith is rooted in knowledge of, and response to, the Word of God. The divine means of God calling those to faith in Him is therefore the preaching of His word. That is why the New Birth is said to be a result of the Word of God (1 Peter 1:22).

In light of the absolute necessity of the clear authoritative preaching of God’s word for salvation, In light of it being indispensable for worship and fellowship with God, nothing could be more of a priority than expository preaching. It is biblically mandated and theologically crucial. MacArthur says it well:

For those of you who want to preach the Word accurately and powerfully because you understand the liability of doing anything less; for those of you who want to face the Judge on the day of reckoning and experience the Lord’s pleasure with your effort; for those of you who are eager to let God speak His word through you as directly, convictingly, and powerfully as He gave it; and for those of you who want to see people transformed radically and living godly lives, there is only expository preaching.³⁰

Footnotes

¹Steve Lawson, *Famine in the Land* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2003), 25.

²John MacArthur, *Preaching: How to Preach Biblically* (Nashville: Nelson Pub. 2005), xiii-xiv.

³Lawson, 82-3.

⁴Joel Osteen, quoted on Larry King live said though he believed the Bible taught salvation by faith in Christ he would not preach that Moslems and Jews who *rejected* Christ were not saved. He exemplifies preachers today who ‘edit’ God’s word by refusing to preach parts that could be offensive. Transcripts available at: <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/20/lkl.01.html>.

⁵Wikipedia, *Aesop’s Fables*

⁶*Webster’s American Dictionary*, College edition, New York: Random House, 2000.

⁷Dr. Keith Essex, Quoted from his doctoral class ‘Hermeneutics and Exposition’ at The Master’s Seminary, 2007.

⁸Michael Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives* (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 2002), xiii.

⁹George Barna, *Revolution*.

¹⁰Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 7-8.

¹¹Merrill F. Unger, *Principles of Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 33.

¹²John MacArthur, 18.

¹³Fabarez, 14.

¹⁴Fabarez, 14.

¹⁵Lawson, 57-58.

¹⁶Fabarez, 15.

¹⁷Article by John Stott, “A definition of Biblical Preaching” in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching* ed. by Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Zondervan Pub.: Grand Rapids: MI, 2005) 26-27.

¹⁸D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preacher*. (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 1971)

¹⁹John Calvin, *Commentary on the letter to the Romans*

²⁰Quoted by Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 1-2.

²¹Greidanus, 1.

²²Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 276.

²³Chapell, 277.

²⁴Fabarez, 117.

²⁵John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 30.

²⁶Chapell, 283.

²⁷MacArthur, 17-18.

²⁸Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Church*. Vol. 1, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1998) 28-29.

²⁹Old, 25.

³⁰MacArthur, xviii.

Published 2009

Grace Church of Napa Valley

3765 Solano Ave.

Napa, CA 94558

[Www.gracenapa.org](http://www.gracenapa.org)

Sunday Worship

9:00 or 10:40 am

Grace TV

Cable Channel 28

Saturdays at 8:00 pm

TEL: 707.255.4033