

14 The Church - Preaching (Part 2)

Introduction

How do you convince someone of the excellencies of a climbing rope? How do you convince someone that his desires should be for a climbing rope? You may tell of its construction. You may describe its strength. You may detail its resistance to wear. You may say all kinds of true and wonderful things about the rope.

But this person counter that he prefers hair ribbons. And he will begin to list all the things that make hair ribbons wonderful. They are so silky. They have dazzling colors. Soon he has his own list.

So how do you convince someone of the excellencies of a climbing rope unless you bring into the equation the fact that he is about to repel down the face of a mountain? He will never see why he should prefer climbing rope to hair ribbons until he is confronted with the reality of his situation.

That was my struggle this week as I was preparing this sermon on expositional preaching. I was simply going to give a definition and then supply reasons for why it should be the regular diet of the church. Someone else may prefer sermons that are flashy and short (10 minutes max). That impasse will never be overcome unless we share the same assessment of the world. So this message will be divided into two parts. First, I want to paint a picture of this world and so bring your attention to the cliff that we must repel down. With that in place I will, second, explain why we should prefer expositional preaching as the main diet of the church.

The Seriousness of the World

We live in a fallen world, but many times I think we forget that. We live in a fallen world but we create a bubble around ourselves. Our world is nice. We don't want the real world to trouble our comfortable mental state. There was a recent movie that depicted three men beating up one guy, and the camera pans upward to a window where someone else is watching. He slowly closes his shutters. He does not help, he does not call 911. He just closes the window because he does not want to be confronted with the reality of that world. He doesn't want to deal with it.

I know somebody personally who says almost as much. They say that there is too much negativity in this world and so they just need to think positive thoughts. While few people are so consciously oriented to blocking out the bad things, most westerners are that way practically. "Yes people are starving and disease is rampant and murder is on the rise and there is rape and injustice and child prostitution and torture, but I don't want to think about it. Let's just plan our next retreat and get back to concerning ourselves with only ourselves." That seems to be the way most of us live.

The Power of the Word of God

The answer to all of this is found in the word of God. It has great power. By God's word the universe was created. God literally spoke them into existence. There is a storm on Jupiter that is the size of 3 earths and has been going on for hundreds of years. Our sun is over 1000 times more massive than Jupiter and it is dwarfed by Anterus. Anterus is a star so big that if it sat where the sun sat, the orbit of earth would fit inside. God simply spoke these into existence!

Isa 55:11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Jer 23:29 Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

Psalms 119:9 How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.

Psalms 119:30 The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.

Hebrew 4:11-13 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Romans 10:14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

1 Timothy 3:16-4:5 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. I 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: 2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. 5 As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

You may have noticed a progression toward preaching. The world is deadly serious, and the Word of God is powerful to effect it. Therefore preaching ought to be serious.

The Place of Preaching

Allow me to read an excerpt from John Piper on this topic. He says it well.

God did not ordain the cross of Christ or create the lake of fire in order to communicate the insignificance of belittling his glory. The death of the Son of God and the damnation of unrepentant human beings are the loudest shouts under heaven that God is infinitely holy, and sin is infinitely offensive, and wrath is infinitely just, and grace is infinitely precious, and our brief life—and the life of every person in your church and in your community—leads to everlasting joy or everlasting suffering. If our preaching does not carry the weight of these things to our people, what will? Veggie Tales? Radio? Television? Discussion groups? Emergent conversations?

God planned for his Son to be crucified (Revelation 13:8; 2 Timothy 1:9) and for hell to be terrible (Matthew 25:41) so that we would have the clearest witnesses possible to what is at stake when we preach. What gives preaching its seriousness is that the mantle of the preacher is soaked with the blood of Jesus and singed with fire of hell. That's the mantle that turns mere talkers into preachers. Yet tragically some of the most prominent evangelical voices today diminish the horror of the cross and the horror of hell—the one stripped of its power to bear our punishment, and the other demythologized into self-dehumanization and the social miseries of this world.

Oh that the rising generations would see that the world is not overrun with a sense of seriousness about God. There is no surplus in the church of a sense of God's glory. There is no excess of earnestness in the church about heaven and hell and sin and salvation. And therefore the joy of many Christians is paper thin. By the millions people are amusing themselves to death with DVDs, and 107-inch TV screens, and games on their cell phones, and slapstick worship, while the spokesmen of a massive world religion write letters to the West in major publications saying, "The first thing we are calling you to is Islam . . . It is the religion of enjoining the good and forbidding the evil with the hand, tongue and heart. It is the religion of jihad in the way of Allah so that Allah's Word and religion reign Supreme." And then these spokesmen publicly bless suicide bombers who blow up children in front of Falafel shops and call it the way to paradise. This is the world in which we preach.

I spent all of last message trying to emphasize the importance of ideas and therefore the importance of doctrine, and therefore the importance of preaching. Our lives are short ladies and gentleman. Scripture describes the life of man as but a breath. Our lives are short and I have no interest in playing church. I want to do it for real. What's more, I believe that real Christianity must do it for real.

From the OT saints:

Heb 11:35-40 Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. 36 Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— 38 of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. 39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us

To Paul:

2 Cor 11:23-30 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and

often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? 30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

To John who was exiled to Peter who was crucified upside-down to Stephen who was stoned to James who was beheaded to Phillip who was scourged, imprisoned, and crucified to Matthew who was killed with an axe to James the Less beaten and stoned, Matthias was stoned, Andrew was crucified on a cross set at 45 deg to Jude who was crucified, Bartholemew, beaten and crucified, Thomas, run through with a spear, Luke was hanged, Simon was crucified. And we have only just touched on some OT saints and the apostles.

Ladies and gentlemen, you do not live lives like that if you are only interested in a peppy pick-me-up sermon and warm fuzzy therapeutic messages. Life is serious, Christianity is, literally, deadly serious, and therefore church and the preaching should be serious. Don't misunderstand me, I am not saying it always needs to be somber, but it needs to be serious. Sometimes it is somber when we deal with subjects like the death of Christ and the mortification of sin. But sometimes being serious includes being serious about joy. There is a fullness of joy in Christ that we should experience and we need to not settle for some superficial happiness. No we need to take this command seriously: "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice!" So don't confuse somber with serious.

All of that is just to reinforce the importance of doctrine, the seriousness of Christianity and therefore the importance of preaching well.

Expositional Preaching

Definition

Expositional preaching is the style of preaching that I think is most healthy for the regular diet of the church. "Expositional" has the same root as "expose." That is essentially what expositional preaching does, you expose the meaning of scripture. It is where you take the main point of the text as the main point of your sermon.

Nehemiah 8:7-8 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. 8 They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

That is an example of expositional preaching. They read from scripture and they gave the sense of it. They explained to people the meaning of the text. Allow me now to provide some contrast so that we are clear what expositional preaching is. I am borrowing here from Mark Dever's excellent book *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*.

Misconceptions

1. Expository preaching is not any sermon in which the Bible is opened. Just because the Bible is open or even quoted does not mean that the preaching is expository. Only if the point of the passage is used as the point of the message does a sermon qualify as expository.¹

A pastor can teach about good morals and just use scripture to illustrate his point. But the preacher can use anything for illustrations. He can use stories of adventures, stories from his own family, stories from Aesop's fables, stories from war or history or movies or any number of things. This is what many sermons are. They are the thoughts of the pastor illustrated by the Bible. That is exactly backward. We want the sermon to be derived from the Bible, and illustrated by something else.

A pastor can also use a verse to teach something that is absolutely true but is not the point of the text. 1 Timothy 1:17 says "To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever." A pastor can use this verse to teach us that God is immortal. That is absolutely true. But the main point of the text is to praise God. So just because the Bible is used does not mean that the sermon is expository.
2. Expository preaching is always a slow, verse by verse progression through a text. There are more ways to preach expository than plodding through one phrase or sentence at a time. The length of the text is immaterial to the question of whether or not the sermon is an exposition. As long as the point of the passage is used as the point of the message, a sermon qualifies as expository - length notwithstanding.²

Benefits for the Congregation

1. "The congregation is released from slavery to the preacher's hobbyhorse texts and topics."³ I feel the need to qualify this a bit. I think that topical sermons are ok from time to time. But the regular diet of the church should be expository. I am doing a topical series right now on the church. But this is not necessarily expository. Too many times, however, this is all that pastors do. They only preach what they feel like preaching. So the congregation is constantly subject to the hobby horses of the pastor. I do not think that is healthy. There are times when a pastor may need to address a certain topic in his congregation, but the bulk of the preaching should be expository.
2. Your own knowledge of scripture increases as you are exposed to the whole counsel of the word of God. If all we get is a snippet here and a snippet there, we will never get the full sense of what God was trying to tell us.

We may have little verses in our heads, but we don't know what Galatians is about or how Acts is structured. We don't know the major themes and movements of Mark. We

1. Mark Dever, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, available at <http://marks.9marks.org/Mark1/LessonB/Slide6of6>; accessed 4/18/10.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, <http://marks.9marks.org/Mark1/LessonE/Slide10>

don't understand the significance of Genesis to the rest of the Law. We are missing a lot of big picture things.

3. "Decreases their likelihood of being deceived by false teaching." Because you are getting a better feel for the structure of a book and flow of the argument and the mood of the writing, you will be far less likely to be led astray by false teaching which takes a verse out of context.

For instance, Jehovah Witnesses say that Jesus is not God and the point to a verse like Colossians 1:15 which says that "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." They glom onto the term "firstborn" and say something like "See he was the first created thing." But in so doing they get it exactly backwards.

When Colossians 1 it is rightly understood, far from being a proof text that Jesus was not divine, it actually becomes powerful proof of his divinity. He is the creator of the all things (v 16). He is the sustainer of all things (v 17). This section is actually structured chiasmically to highlight Jesus as the Supreme Lord of all. He is Lord of the first creation (things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities) and he is Lord of the second creation (the church). He is the image of God (v 15) in him dwells the fullness of God (v 19) in him "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (2:9). The whole context strongly demands the deity of Christ.

If Christians were more familiar with the actual point of Galatians and Colossians and such it would be harder for them to be led astray. Expository preaching aims to expose the actual point of a passage of scripture.

Along the same lines, it is less likely that the pastor will misspeak since he has been going through the passage a verse at a time. So he is unable to skip verses. He has to deal with difficult passages. He doesn't have to preach in verse each week, but he does have to deal with each verse. As he does this he will have the flow of thought from the previous weeks in his mind so he is less likely to preach something that is wrong.

In all of this we desire to see the thoughts of God. This is his book. We are his people. It is best for us to read his book as he has given it to us. Surely we do not disrespect anyone else as much as we disrespect God in this manner. When someone else gives us directions or gives us a recipe, or writes us a letter, or whatever it may be, do we not read it all from beginning to end? We need to make that the regular diet of the church.

So let us lean back over the cliff and hold tight to that rope. Make sure you are tethered to the rock with something solid, something strong, something durable.