

A Brief History of Expository Preaching

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Preaching has always been an essential element within Christianity. At times, a certain culture or period may affect and change the nature of preaching. At other times, preaching has changed the culture. Usually, there is a reciprocal influence.

Knowing how men preached in former days will better equip preachers today. The contemporary preacher should learn from and adapt what has been handed down by the great preachers and their preaching from the past, while avoiding the poor and tragic examples of preaching in its long history. A young preacher will be wise to examine the grace and glory of preaching God's Word through the eyes of its champions.

1. The Biblical Period

- a. Preaching found in the Bible can be divided up into: revelatory and explanatory
- b. Moses is an early example of a revelatory preacher (Deut. 31-33).
- c. Joshua offered revelation and explanation in his final sermon (Joshua 23,24)
- d. David and Solomon are considered preachers, often communicating in song
- e. The prophets often preached a message of repentance, faith and obedience to God
- f. Jesus Christ is the ultimate preacher and provides a perfect model for preaching:
 - * He communicated both revelation and explanation (Matthew 5-7)
 - * He spoke with authority (Matthew 7:29)
 - * He made careful use of the Scriptures (Luke 24)
 - * He lived what he taught (Luke 2)
 - * He adapted his messages to his audience (Mark 12:37)
 - * He preached with boldness and was not afraid to confront culture (Matthew 10)
- g. Peter and Stephen provide excellent examples of evangelistic expository sermons (Acts 2, 7)
- h. Apollos was a gifted expositor (Acts 18:24-28)
- i. Paul's epistles are given to us as exposition to the church. Paul is also a model preacher:
 - * He consider his role in life to be a preacher of Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1)
 - * His aim was to reveal Christ and the glory of the cross and resurrection (Philippians 3)
 - * He made careful use of Scriptures (Galatians 3)
 - * He made use of rhetorical elements in his messages (Acts 17)
 - * He made application of Scriptural truth to each audience (Romans 12-15)
 - * He taught others to preach (2 Timothy 4,6)

2. The Early Christian Church, A.D. 100-476

- a. After the apostles, the church fell into several centuries of decline in biblical preaching
- b. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper were changed to convey saving grace
- c. The office of bishop was elevated beyond Scripture to connote apostolic succession
- d. The influence of Greek philosophy led many away from accurate, literal interpretation
- e. Justin Martyr and Tertullian composed sermons in defense of Christianity (120-190)
- f. Cyprian argued against false doctrine (190-250)
- g. The fourth century (350-430) gave us our most important early expositors: Augustine and John of Antioch (Chrysostom) who fearlessly preached verse-by-verse homilies.

John of Antioch, *"You praise what I have said, and receive my exhortation with tumults and applause, but show your approbation by obedience; that is the only praise I seek"* [Taken from Philip Schaff, *A Selected Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 9:22]

3. The Medieval Period, A.D. 476-1500

- a. The medieval period became the sparsest era for biblical preaching
- b. There was widespread illiteracy and those who could read Latin lived in monasteries
- c. Scholasticism and Aristotelian logic caused speculation in interpreting Scripture
- d. The allegorical method of interpretation was commonly used, rather than a literal one
- e. Thomas Aquinas gave glimpses of expository teaching
- f. John Wycliff urged that preaching be biblical (1130-1384)
- g. William Tyndale (1494-1536) pressed for the literal interpretation of Scripture
- h. John Huss (1373-1415) became a biblical preacher
- i. Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) began to incorporate exposition in his preaching
- j. Erasmus's Greek New Testament (1516) made a way for the intense study of Scripture

William Tyndale, *"The Scriptures have but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, where unto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way."* [Taken from Tyndale's, "The Obedience of a Christian Man", *Doctrinal Treatises* (Cambridge, 1848), 303]

4. The Reformation Period, A.D. 1500-1648

- a. The Great Reformation saw the re-birth of expositional preaching, calling for *Sola Scriptura*
- b. The reformers confessed that the Scriptures alone had the authority to rule the church and life
- c. Martin Luther (1483-1546) led in the reformation of the church in Germany:
 - *He preached expositional sermons
 - *He wrote expositional commentaries
 - *He confronted non-biblical practices within the church
 - *He published a German translation of the Bible
- d. Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) led the reformation in Sweden, influencing the later Anabaptists
- e. John Calvin (1509 - 1564) led the reformation from France
 - *He was the most significant expository preacher of the Reformation era
 - *His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* provided a biblical theology for the church
 - *He wrote numerous expositional commentaries on the Bible
 - *His style was to explain the Scriptures with brevity and clarity
- f. John Knox led the reformation in Scotland

Martin Luther, *"the soul can do without all things except the Word of God"* [From Luther's "A Treatise on Christian Liberty," *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947), 23]

5. The Modern Period, A.D. 1649-Present

- a. The post-reformation produced a diversity of biblical preaching
- b. The Puritans are known for their detailed, biblical teaching, preaching and writing:
 - *The pulpit was moved to the center of the church sanctuary
 - *Their sermons became the central element of the worship service
 - *Puritans, like William Perkins and Richard Baxter taught expositional preaching
- c. The First Great Awakening came by way of preaching:
 - *John Wesley and George Whitfield gave topical, evangelistic message
 - *John Gill and Matthew Henry were Bible expositors (1662-1771)
 - *Jonathan Edwards was a deep thinking, God-centered expositor
- d. The Nineteenth century is considered the "Golden Era" of biblical preaching:
 - * Robery Murray McCheyne (1813-1843) Maybe Scotland's most brilliant preacher

- *John C. Ryle and Alexander Maclaren (1816-1892) were expositors in Great Britain
- *Charles Spurgeon (1826-1910) is considered the “prince of preachers”
- *Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844) a reformed evangelistic preacher similar to Whitefield
- *John Broadus defined expository preaching for America (1827-1895)

e. The Twentieth century produced a number of significant expository preachers:

- *H.A. Ironside (1876-1951)
- *Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895-1960)
- *J.M. Gray (1881-1935)
- *W.A. Criswell (1909-2002)
- *G.C. Campbell Morgan (1863-1945)
- *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981)
- *James Montgomery Boice (1938 - 2000)

William Perkins identified the principles of a biblical sermon, *“To read the text distinctly out of the canonical Scriptures; to give the sense and understanding of it, being interpreted by the Scripture itself; to collect a few and profitable points of doctrine out of the natural sense; to apply the doctrines, rightly collected, to the life and manner of men is a simple and plain speech”* [Taken from Perkins, *The Works of the Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, M. William Perkins*. vol. 2 (Cambridge: 11608) 2:762]

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *“I would say without hesitation that the most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching, it is obviously the greatest need of the world also.”* [Taken from Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 9]

These voices from the past should encourage and motivate us to maintain the course in biblical exposition. God has revealed himself by way of Scripture and it is our responsibility in the present era to pass on the word of God’s truth to the church.