

Benefits and Pitfalls of Expository Preaching

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What exactly is expository preaching? It is preaching that draws the message from the biblical text, clearly and methodically, honouring the sense of the text, and the style of communication employed. Before looking at classic examples from sermons of C H Spurgeon, here are some of the benefits and common mistakes of consecutive expository preaching.

Firstly, if the preacher works through a book of the Bible week by week it becomes obvious to everyone that the Word of God is the supreme authority for all that is taught. The preacher is clearly in captivity to the Bible. He begins at the beginning of a chapter, and this governs the whole course of his teaching. Everything he asserts is derived and argued from the Scripture, and that is a tremendous testimony to the exclusive authority of the Word in all matters. Perhaps the openness so often seen among God's people to human gimmicks and ideas (including the current boom in counselling techniques derived from atheists) is partly due to a lack of consecutive expository preaching.

It is an extra help, though not essential, if such preaching can be carried out in the traditional way, from a large, visible pulpit Bible. This is seldom done today, which is rather a shame, because a pulpit Bible certainly reinforces the realisation that God's Word is the sole source of the message. But with or without this, consecutive expository preaching is the greatest witness to biblical authority.

A **second** virtue of consecutive expository preaching is that it helps the preacher to suppress his personal opinions. Because he is dominated by the Scripture, and bound to follow its presentation of information and its arguments, the preacher's personal style of reasoning should be helpfully subordinated to that of God's Word.

A **third** virtue of consecutive expository preaching is that it obliges the preacher to present everything that is in the Scripture. By nature, most preachers will tend to emphasise a certain group of subjects and to neglect others. But by proceeding through a book they are bound to address every topic that presents itself, and so preach on a comprehensive range of vital themes.

A **fourth** virtue of consecutive expository preaching is that it shows the people of God the plan and the purpose of a whole Bible book, which would probably not happen if the preacher darted from book to book selecting individual sermon texts. Think of the immense advantage to the people of God of becoming familiar with the overall scheme of entire books of the Bible. It is a very great help to private study.

Consecutive expository preaching also enables the preacher to bring out the themes that often run through one or more chapters. He pays more attention to the context, and this delivers him from many mistakes. Would the so-called 'holiness movement' have developed if its proponents had been consecutive preachers? Would they not have hesitated to preach sanctification-by-faith when they saw that the whole chapter or passage was speaking about justification?

The pitfalls

There are even more virtues in consecutive expository preaching, but there are pitfalls also, and the first that I would mention is that it can be conducted too slowly. Some preachers are rather proud of the inordinate length of time they take over a book of the Bible. 'I was in such-and-such a book,' they say, 'for seven years.' This may be a great pity, and more than many people can take. I hesitate to say this, because there have been famous and greatly-used preachers of the past who have been

very slow in working their way through books.

If, however, you are a reader of John Owen, or certain other famously long divines, you will have noticed that they varied their approach considerably. Owen's commentary on Hebrews for example (derived from his preaching) is virtually a complete systematic theology. He constantly pauses to develop a doctrine. A certain verse or group of verses will open up a full treatment of a subject.

You could say that he did not really spend years preaching through Hebrews, but repeatedly interrupted his series to digress into themes, thus mixing exposition with topical preaching. It is rather sad that preachers of lesser stature try to follow the Puritan example without the digressions, grinding through books at minimal pace.

Frequently the Puritan preachers will feature in their sermons long sections of practical help, listing, for example, all the hindrances to cultivating a particular virtue, and then all the helps. These counsels are often brilliantly presented and sit like strings of jewels adorning the exposition.

Slow and over-detailed exposition usually causes hearers to miss the wood for the trees. Many years ago a very well-known preacher had completed an extremely long series of sermons on a passage focusing on the Holy Spirit. I remember asking a group of people who had heard these sermons what they thought about a very basic aspect of the Spirit's work, and they did not know how to answer. Having heard many detailed expositions, they could not answer a simple question. The whole topic had been dissected so minutely, and so elaborately, that obvious aspects were lost in a mass of quality observation. This can happen very easily when consecutive expository preaching is overstretched.

A form of priestcraft

Slow-paced consecutive preaching can even become a form of priest-craft. So much material is presented that people are left floundering, and they say to themselves, 'I would never know any of this, but for this preacher. It's barely worth reading the Bible for myself, because I lack this capacity for microscopic examination of the text.' This is surely not a good outcome.

The preacher's task is not only to expound the Scriptures, but to enable hearers to read them more meaningfully for themselves, and not to discourage them with exhibitions of over-detailed exegetical expertise.

Another disadvantage that often accompanies expository preaching (whether consecutive or not) is that the method of the preacher somehow steamrollers down the method of the Holy Spirit. The preacher comes at the text in a certain logical way, examines it, and then lays out his points, his applications, scarcely noticing what the style of the text is. He treats it as a didactic passage even if it is an historical narrative or a parable, or a graphic miracle. The preacher puts everything through his expository 'mincing machine' regardless, and his presentation is exactly the same in every sermon. He has failed to follow or adjust to the method of communication employed by God. Expository preaching can easily degenerate into a bullying, mechanical process, even a clinical procedure, stripping out the story-form or other diversity of presentation featured in the text.

A rather obvious fault with consecutive expository preaching is that it is not much good for preaching regular, persuasive, evangelistic sermons. If you have three preaching opportunities a week, two on the Lord's Day, one of the latter should be dedicated to the persuasive pressing of the glorious tender of salvation. In this the consecutive method presents difficulties.

I made the very obvious mistake about forty years ago of preaching evangelistic sermons consecutively through the Gospel of Luke. When I reached the end of the series I discovered to my horror that I had used up almost all the parables and miracles of Christ in one year. For several years, it

seemed, I would have to maintain an evangelistic ministry without being able to use a miracle or parable. I had ‘spent’ them all.

It is better in evangelistic preaching to ‘helicopter’, as they say, selecting texts from throughout the Word that are redolent with soul-stirring reasoning.

Another common fault of consecutive expository preaching is a lack of application, or indulging in ‘add-on’ application not actually derived from the passage (and often quite trivial). This is common with preachers who have been taught the modern hermeneutical scheme (derived from 19th-century German rationalism) now taught in so many seminaries. This uses humanistic technical methods that ignore the divine authorship of the Bible and its own interpretative rules. The pastoral potential of a passage is eclipsed, and an entirely inadequate process called ‘principiplizing’ tacked on to the end of the process to devise an application. Advocates of this horrific hermeneutical method in recent times include Walter C Kaiser. I have attempted a brief evaluation, with a description of the Bible’s own guidance on its interpretation, for preachers, in *Not Like Any Other Book*.

Excess recapitulation

Yet another difficulty that we hear complained of is the habit of some consecutive preachers to recapitulate too much. Every sermon must begin with a résumé, lasting at least ten minutes, of the previous week’s exposition, making a rather tiresome start to the message. Some reminder of what has gone before is wise, but more than two or three sentences leads to hearer-fatigue. We have heard of preachers who attempt a recapitulation of their entire series before commencing the new study.

I would like now to turn to an example of applied expository preaching from C H Spurgeon, which could never have been preached if the defective modern techniques just referred to had been employed. Here is a great example of true spiritual intelligence, gleaning from the text God’s intended message to the soul. The text being expounded is Psalm 23.4 – ‘The valley of the shadow of death’ (reproduced recently in the book *Classic Counsels*, Wakeman Trust). Let Spurgeon provide a masterclass in expository thoughtfulness.

While the verse may be applied to different kinds of trial, and supremely to the final trial of life, Spurgeon expounds it in reference to depression, and he opens the sermon with a very brief introduction about deeply oppressive feelings. Spurgeon has a number of amazing sermons on grief or depression, this being one of them.

Here are the points he drew from just a few verses, which demonstrate the thoughtfulness which should characterise every expounder. We do not have liberty to be fanciful, but we must just think, and think hard, praying over the text, seeking its implicit headings. We must not impose on the text things that are not there, but seek to recognise all the counsel that undoubtedly is.

By careful reflection, Spurgeon observes a series of simple, sometimes obvious, but always profound factors, the first being that this valley is a gloomy place. The light and warmth of the sun – of assurance and joyful feelings – are shut out. This, of course, is elaborated upon, and the sermon begins with reality and sympathy, the problems being described.

The second point immediately introduces a note of practical warning: the valley is a dangerous place. Someone may protest that this is not in the text, but of course it is. It is obvious, when we think, that this is a place where there are robbers and wild animals, even snakes. Times of depression are times when all kinds of temptations will be suggested to the mind which may lead to sin, especially the sins of despondency, or doubting God, or outright unbelief, or self-pity. This valley is a dangerous place to be in, and while we may be in it through no fault or sin, yet we must be aware of the dangers. Danger is in the text as the evil which we could well fear, and this is true exposition,

applied from the very beginning. I have read a review of this sermon, which said it was merely devotional. Merely devotional! This is true exposition.

The third point of the sermon is that the terrible valley is a place shrouded in mystery, because the sufferer cannot always know what the gloom or sorrow is about. It is no help drawing a sword against a shadow. A joy-killing feeling has descended, and you cannot tell why. But David said to himself – ‘there are no mysteries with my God, and he will lead me through.’ Faith must light her lamp with the golden oil of promise to see a path through gloom and mystery.

Spurgeon’s fourth point is that the valley is a lonely, solitary place. Now it is not explicitly mentioned in the psalm that the traveller is alone, but it is obvious. Severe grief or depression is a deeply personal experience, and there is no one on earth who can take the pain away.

But then fifthly Spurgeon asserts that it is an often-travelled place. It is the valley of the shadow, but it is the vital pass through the hills, and many people must tread this route, one by one. It is lonely, yes, but it is often walked. The sufferer is not the only one to know this pass of fear and gloom. But the Scripture knows all about it, and has counsel for it.

Then Spurgeon proceeds to his sixth point – it is not an unhallowed place. We don’t have to sin in it. We can remain pure in the midst of depression. No sin is necessarily occasioned by sorrow; it is a matter of what we do with it, and how we react to it. Though not specifically mentioned, this point is inherent in the psalm, and it is recognised by the thinking expounder.

It is a point that introduces Spurgeon to presenting the attitude of the pilgrim going through the valley of the shadow, and his first sub-point here is – the believer remains calm. This also is implicit in the text: ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.’ In great sadness and in depression we must avoid any kind of panic. We must walk especially quietly and steadily, not attempting to run. In such a condition we don’t take radical decisions, or dramatic initiatives. Avoiding upheaval, our assignment is to proceed steadily through the pass, and this is also implicit in the psalmist’s language – a point accessible to the thinking exegete.

A second sub-point is the steady progress of the pilgrim, who says, ‘Though I walk through the valley’. Faith does not panic to get out of the gloomy valley, but proceeds steadily with all its duties and obligations, trusting God for strength. (And this is a most profound and practical item of counsel.)

Spurgeon’s third sub-point is to show that the pilgrim speaks in expectation of successfully passing through the valley. He will emerge the other side, and so he endeavours to look ahead. He does not allow his thoughts to imagine that he may be lost in that place. The spiritual hopefulness and anticipation of faith is so important, and must be clung to.

This leads to the fourth sub-point, that the pilgrim renounces fear: ‘I will fear no evil.’ And he prays and determines not to give way to self-pity and fearful pessimism. His reasoning is that ‘thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.’

Spurgeon amplifies this, and it becomes clear that in sadness the best thing to do in prayer is to remember the practice of affirmation and, regardless of feelings, to affirm great truths before the Lord, and praise him for them.

This summary of Spurgeon’s message is cruelly abridged, losing the meat and leaving just the headings, but hopefully it will serve to show that prayerful thoughtfulness is the essence of exposition. There are certainly technical rules to be carefully observed, but reflection and searching out the intended application to souls are key elements.

Drawing out the point

In the example just reviewed, the preacher did not dream up headings and then pin them on to the passage. He drew his headings from the passage, and ministered to real spiritual needs.

I cannot resist referring to a prayer-meeting sermon of Spurgeon's which provides what must be the supreme masterclass in exposition. He takes only a little portion of a verse from Acts 17.3-4, and the least promising part. The passage is about Paul and his preaching at Mars Hill, and it concludes with the words: 'Howbeit certain men clave unto him, and believed . . . and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.'

Spurgeon's title is simply – 'A woman named Damaris.' Someone had evidently remarked that as no one knew anything about Damaris, it was not possible to preach a sermon about her. That set Spurgeon thinking, and in due course he did preach a sermon about her, and it is a remarkable piece of exposition.

If you were to apply the modern evangelical hermeneutic to this text, you could discuss the context and the occasion, the preaching on Mars Hill, and the rejection of Paul by the Athenians. You could tell people about the great pride of his hearers, and that some scoffed, and some were courteous and polite; and very few people were saved. Concerning Damaris, you would find very little to say, except that she was a woman, and that it is useful to have a name. You could possibly explain what the name Damaris meant, but your rationalistic, technical method of expounding would show you nothing else.

A charismatic preacher might note that Paul obtained small results, and assert mistakenly that from henceforward he relied on signs and wonders to bolster the power of the preaching of the Gospel.

Spurgeon, however, shows how to expound this seemingly unpromising text. Nothing is known about Damaris, but here is his first point. It is that all converts are very precious in evil times, and so, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke mentions Damaris. The myth of the Fox and the Lioness is used to illustrate the value of a single convert. The fox had many cubs, while the lioness had only one. The fox therefore gloated over the lioness, pointing scornfully to her single offspring. 'Ah,' said the lioness, 'but he's a lion.' Damaris was a child of the infinite and eternal God, a true believer, not a worldling, nor a shallow, nominal believer.

Spurgeon proceeds to note that she was not ashamed to confess Christ. Where in the text does it say that? Spurgeon would reply that she must have done, otherwise, how would Luke know her name? How would anyone know she was a convert if she had not presented herself, and made herself known, confessing Christ?

From this Spurgeon spoke of how she swam against the tide, as true converts always do. The Holy Spirit works in their hearts, and while other hearers are scoffing, the true convert is ready to stand out, and to pay the price for so doing.

He then speaks of how believers are valued by the Holy Spirit, and how saved men and women are equally precious. In a society where women were looked down on, Damaris is ennobled, being immortalised by biblical mention.

Spurgeon also speaks about her obscurity, showing that this does not diminish her value in God's sight. Be very happy, he says, to be an obscure believer, for (like her) the obscure have the same marks of grace as the most prominent. She is spiritually beautiful, stamped with a new nature, and used by God, as all true converts are.

Gleaning implied points

Yet again someone may protest that this is not in the text. How can Spurgeon know that she was used by God? Of course she was, Spurgeon would reply, because her name is in the Bible, and who knows how many socially obscure Christians down the years have been encouraged on that account. Being dead, she yet speaks, and is still of service, even as she lives on high, in glory.

The final point of Spurgeon's address (there were nine or ten points in all) is an exhortation not to desire to be known or conspicuous. Do your holy war, he urges, by stealth, quietly and modestly, whether a preacher or a church member. He gives many comforts and much counsel, with weighty comments, but this sketchy outline will again show the thoughtfulness of real exposition. The preacher asked himself, 'Why has the Holy Spirit put this phrase in the record – "a woman named Damaris"?'

Let us not go to the commentaries first, but rather think. On the whole, commentaries are not very forthcoming in making application. This is almost entirely the preacher's business. He is on his own. Of course it will bring the Word into disrepute if we use our imagination in an unbridled way. This is one of the reasons why good but misguided people have adopted the restrictive rules of the modern hermeneutical method. They have heard so much fanciful preaching that they want to tie preachers down. But their remedies obscure the spiritual message of the Bible and its deep wells of truth.

At this point I would summarise the bones of an evangelistic message I gave not long ago from James 4.14 – 'For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.'

I am sure that many preachers will have taken the same route with this text. Surely the Holy Spirit has employed the word 'vapour' for us to think about. The sermon could therefore begin with the great question, What is life? What a question for an evangelistic sermon which is hopefully going to persuade people to think about the purpose and destiny of life! Life is a mist; or a breath.

'Features' of vapour

A vapour or a cloud is shapeless. What an approach to the subject! There is nothing firm about life without God; no defined character. There is no realisation of the soul. Men and women are merely water and elements that may be burned up and reduced to a little ash.

The preacher may challenge people about their goals. People have only short-term goals, for the here-and-now, and we must rouse them to be concerned about the true scope of life. In a life without God there are no firm principles of conduct, either, especially in these days of moral abandon. Reflecting the shapelessness of a vapour blown in the wind, people change their views, their ideas and their aspirations constantly over time.

Then there is the unpredictability of a cloud of vapour. You cannot tell when it will dissipate or be blown away. You cannot see the forces that will influence it. The preacher may describe the unpredictability of life, especially human unpreparedness for the end of the journey, and the afterlife.

If life is like a vapour then we may also think of its unprotectability, for it is not walled or contained by anything. Our lives are constantly subject to manipulating influences, from the media, from fiction, and from peer-influence and social fashions. We are so impressionable, and without God the soul has no guardian. We are wide open to atheistic materialism, and a thousand other arrows of spiritual destruction, and the preacher should warn of these influences. A life without God is a life of penetrable vulnerability and susceptibility.

A cloud of vapour is also a very dependent thing, relying on the air in which it is suspended. As human beings we are suspended in God's air, breathing his air, eating his food and yet refusing to accept that we owe him homage and obedience, and are accountable to him. And if a cloud is beautiful, it is just a passing appearance, soon to vanish, and a day of account faced. How striking are Montgomery's words:

*The arrow that shall lay me low
Was shot from Death's unerring bow
The instance of my breath;
And every moment I proceed,
It tracks me with unceasing speed;
I turn, it meets me, Death! –
Hath given such instinct to that dart
It points for ever at my heart.*

Here are just some of the arguments showing the frailty and danger of life (to be combined with the facts of sinfulness and salvation through Christ) which furnish evangelistic reasoning for the preacher. The point of listing them here is to show how truths may be extracted from Spirit-given words. This is expository preaching in connection with the Gospel. We are frequently given a figure, a picture, or a principle that we are to think about deeply, until we see the obvious, but not necessarily immediately apparent, applications to spiritual need and redemption.

Evangelistic preaching is the most difficult form of preaching, taking the most thought. Then, when you have recognised the arguments and derived your points, you must translate them to a level of plainness and digestibility.

Not over-complex

Overall, my burden is to say that exposition is not a synonym for complexity or technical analysis, but the work of showing the sense, and bringing out the message of God from a passage. Speaking to fellow preachers, one wonders if we should at some time allow a year to pass during which we isolate ourselves from all commentaries and allied aids, in order to derive our messages solely from the Word, in dependence upon the Lord. Such a course of action may help us to develop the spiritual thoughtfulness of past pulpit worthies. It could prove to be the most formative year of our ministry. No doubt we would gratefully return to our earthly helpers, but much more able to provide our own contribution, to the blessing of souls.