

# MUST EXPOSITORY PREACHING ALWAYS BE BOOK STUDIES? SOME ALTERNATIVES

Irvin A. Busenitz  
Professor of Old Testament  
The Master's Seminary

*To be truly biblical, preaching can and should be expository, even if it is thematic, theological, historical, or biographical. Expository sermons of these types must be thoroughly biblical, not only in their foundation but in their superstructure as well. The effectiveness of the messenger and the power of the message depend upon a close attention to the Word presented with grammatical, historical, literary, and contextual accuracy. For these special kinds of expository messages, certain guidelines must prevail, and many tools are available to assist the research process, but there are no shortcuts. The path to powerful preaching inevitably demands diligence in the Word.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Just as preaching that is verse-by-verse is not necessarily expository, so also preaching that is not verse-by-verse is not necessarily non-expository. It is granted that some topical approaches are not expository, but such *need not* be and certainly *should not* be the case. No book deals with topics that directly impact daily life more than the Bible. Thus, to be effective, all topical preaching and teaching, whether the topic be thematic, theological, historical, or biographical, must be consumed with expounding the Word.

Jesus expounded the Scriptures powerfully (Mark 1:22), but not always verse by verse. As an expositor, He sometimes spoke topically, using many different OT Scriptures as the basis of His teaching. Sometimes He touched on a specific theme or aspect of theology, such as the nature of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13), divorce (Matthew 19), or how to pray (Matthew 6; Luke 11). At other times He employed a historical event (Luke 13:4 ff.) or character (Matt 12:41 ff.). Yet He always used the Word as the foundation and as the building blocks of His instruction. On the basis of Jesus' example, it can be

unequivocally asserted that all truly biblical preaching is also expository and is not necessarily restricted to a verse-by-verse format. It can take alternative forms, too.

Topical preaching has many benefits. First, used at the end of one book study and before starting another, it provides variety. The change from one type of presentation to another often contributes freshness and causes increased attentiveness. Preaching on a theme or salient point of doctrine can give people a greater understanding of a particular subject, resulting in a greater impact on their lives. Larsen observes,

Topical preaching has a venerable place in the history of the craft. Its legitimacy is seen in the validity of biblical and systematic theology. While this should not be the first choice of the pastor-teacher, every pastor will preach topically on occasion. . . . Because the topical sermon can be more relentlessly unitary, one discovers that any list of the ten sermons which have most decisively influenced world culture and society consists mostly if not entirely of topical sermons.<sup>2</sup>

Second, restricting preaching solely to the verse-by-verse method without including any kind of didactic treatment of major biblical themes, doctrines, and ethical teachings is to make an unbiblical distinction between preaching and teaching, thereby withholding from a congregation essential perspectives on the Word. Stevenson asks,

Is there any reason why he should meet them week after week but leave them ignorant of doctrinal meanings . . . ? The didactic and kerygmatic sides of the gospel cannot be separated, one to be assigned to the pulpit, the other to the church school. To separate one from the other is to kill both.<sup>3</sup>

## PRECAUTIONS

---

<sup>2</sup>David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 31.

<sup>3</sup>Dwight E. Stevenson, *In the Biblical Preacher's Workshop* (New York: Abingdon, 1967) 196.

Contrary to what is frequently thought (and, by the preponderance of its usage, apparently taught), topical preaching is not always the easiest. In many respects, it is the most difficult when done with correctness and accuracy. Consider these reasons. First, the biblical text often used for topical homilies is merely a springboard for launching a selected topic and has no inherent relationship to the topic of the message. When this happens, the preacher draws from his own personal perspectives, ideas, principles, and world view to develop the subject. This is not expository preaching. The preacher's proper task is to *deliver* the goods, not to *manufacture* them. He is the waiter, not the chef. Therefore, the biblical text must be his resource, the fountain of truth to which he constantly resorts, from which he himself continually drinks, and from which he faithfully draws to satisfy the thirst of others. Exercising this kind of control over topical preaching is hard work.

Second, the Scriptures garnered to support the emphasis of a topical message are many times wrested from their context, forcing them to teach something they do not. The memorization of selected verses of the Bible, beneficial in and of itself, frequently exacerbates the problem. For example, how often has Matt 18:20 ("For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst") been employed to console the faithful few at poorly attended prayer meetings rather than to assure divine presence and enablement in implementing church discipline? This type of pitfall is most common, often capturing its victims unwittingly. Noting its dangers, Stevenson asserts, "To the extent that this kind of preaching uses the Bible at all, it does so to exploit or devour it and not to listen to it, let alone to stand under it and be guided by it."<sup>4</sup> In such cases, pastors "are using the text as its masters rather than serving the text as its ministers."<sup>5</sup> Avoiding this type of danger is very time-demanding. Whether the subject is thematic or theological, each Scripture must be thoroughly researched so as to do justice to its historical and literary context.

---

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 155-56.

Third, though "problem preaching" or "life-situation preaching" may bring much contemporaneity to the pulpit and thus capitalize on relevant issues, it often generates greater focus on the problem than on the solution. It may also occasionally expose the preacher to a "he's-preaching-at-me" accusation. Broadus cautions against a restricted focus on one's immediate concerns:

Subject preaching is the orator's method par excellence. It lends itself to finished discourse. But it has its dangers. The preacher easily becomes interested in finding subjects that are interesting and readily yield a good oration rather than such as have a sure Christian and scriptural basis or such as come close home to the needs of his people. He is tempted to think more of his ideas and his sermons than of "rightly dividing the word of truth" and leading men into the Kingdom of God. He is in danger also of preaching in too narrow a field of truth and human need, since of necessity he will be drawn to those subjects that interest him personally or with which he is already familiar. Unless, therefore, he is constantly widening his horizon by diligent study, he will soon exhaust his resources.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, great diligence is required to avoid a "problem only" orientation when using this method. With a reasonably broad coverage of the Bible in one's preaching, a wide variety of problems and life situations can be addressed naturally and delicately without violating expository boundaries in employing a "topical" approach.

When preaching on a theme, a theological doctrine, or a historical event or character, the expositor must endeavor to utilize Scripture fully in his preaching. His task is to *unfold* the Scriptures, not merely to *enfold* them into a topic. The latter will bend the Word to conform to the preacher's perspective; the former will bend the preacher's perspective to conform to the Word. This is important, because it is the Word that is "living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb 4:12). It is the Scriptures that bear witness about Christ (John 5:39). It is the Gospel that is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom 1:16). Desire to be relevant or current must not

---

<sup>6</sup>John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Harper, 1944[rpt.]) 136-37.

prevail over biblical authority. *Through the knowledge of the Word*, the Spirit of God convicts, directs, and strengthens for Christian living.

Consequently, unless the Scriptures constitute the basis for all the structural elements of a sermon and unless the expositor labors diligently in the context of each of the texts he cites, a sermon will inevitably lack the power of the Word of Truth rightly divided, and hearers will be misled, both in the substance of what is taught and in the example of Bible study methodology. As Koller has poignantly noted, "The preacher must lead his people *into* the text, not *away* from it."<sup>7</sup>

### GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Sermons are classified in different ways, so it is not always evident what category a sermon falls into. Some are categorized on the basis of content and others according to homiletical style. Most classifications must be viewed as nothing more than a skeleton, rough sketches around which the artist crafts the findings of his study. Consequently, the *type* of sermon chosen depends on which type will match the message to be preached. The sermon-type is to serve, not dominate. Hence the underlying commitment must not be to the class of sermon, but to the *sine qua non* dictated by biblical hermeneutics and the sermon-preparation process. As a respected authority has noted, these must guide the craftsman:

[Sermon structures] are always secondary to purpose and utility. They are tools, and in the shaping of tools and the techniques for handling tools experimentation and invention are desirable. But these require intelligence and faithfulness to underlying principles.<sup>8</sup>

Some underlying principles are well defined and very specific, applying more directly to one type of sermon structure than to another. Other guidelines are more generic and give equally

---

<sup>7</sup>Charles W. Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962) 22.

<sup>8</sup>Broadus, *Preparation* 133.

significant direction for all types. General principles will be reviewed next and, after this, specific guidelines will be outlined.

### *When?*

The times when a preacher may wish to present an expository sermon with a thematic, theological, historical, or biographical structure are many and varied. A most effective, and probably the easiest, time is when one is preaching through a book and arrives at a subject requiring greater depth of explanation. For example, when preaching through the Gospel of John, one may pause at 1:1 for an extra message (or extra messages) on the deity of Christ, including a discussion of the related Jehovah's Witness errors; at 1:12-13 to treat the subject of divine election; at 1:14 to discuss the incarnation of Christ; or at 4:24 for a series on worshipping God.

A pastor must be careful, however, not to become too involved with every topic that stems from the text. Too many topical messages along the way cause the audience to lose the train of thought of the ongoing consecutive exposition. In the return to book exposition after a topical study, it is imperative to review the structural and thematic flow of the book.

Other occasions for topical sermons include times of significant events in the life of a church, a community, or the world. The death of a church-family member or a tragedy in the community are also suitable occasions for topic-centered messages. Wars (especially those in the Middle East) give unsurpassed opportunities to focus on subjects like eschatology, the return of the Lord, the omnipotence and sovereignty of God, and the holiness and judgment of God. Major earthquakes give similar openings to treat earthquakes of the Bible, including the significance of such an event and the time-frame of its biblical occurrence.

Special days like Christmas, Easter, and Mother's or Father's Day are the most obvious times for topical sermons. Such occasions often generate increased church attendance and greater attentiveness to the teaching of the Word. They can be strategic occasions for greater effectiveness. However, though one does not want to miss the opportunities such times afford, it is not necessary to produce a special sermon for every special occasion. Pressure to generate something

new every time can lead to eisegesis<sup>9</sup> rather than exegesis. Unger warns,

Topical sermons most readily suggest themselves for special days and events of the year. But the faithful preacher must beware that the incessant clamor of special days and events of the year for recognition does not prove a temptation to lure him from true Bible exposition. [Special days] tend to crowd out solid exposition of the Bible and to displace it with superficial preaching deficient in Biblical content and appeal.<sup>10</sup>

Special days and events bring with them significant beneficial effects, both to the process of sermon preparation and to the hearers. People are often caught up with the significance of the day or moment, allowing the pastor to build his sermon from the foundation already in place. The joy of Mother's Day or the excitement generated at Christmas often enhance the impact of a message.

### *How?*

Some very basic principles must undergird all preaching of God's Word. Because it is *His* Word, it must be studied and presented with care and accuracy. James 3:1 is an ever-present warning and should not be overlooked or underestimated! These underlying principles are, in many respects, the same for all sermons, regardless of their homiletical structure or manner of textual focus. However, sermons that focus on particular subjects or issues are by their very nature extremely vulnerable to particular shortcomings. Consequently, the fundamental principles of preparation require constant attention in this type of preaching.

The first of these principles is *contextual analysis*. Whether one is preaching thematically, theologically, historically, or biographically, he must give close attention to the context of each verse or phrase used in preaching. This is especially true if he is using other passages and

---

<sup>9</sup>I.e., a reading of meaning *into* the text rather than obtaining meaning *from* the text.

<sup>10</sup>Merrill F. Unger, *Principles of Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 52.

cross-references to develop a subject. It is dangerously easy to slip into "proof-texting"<sup>11</sup> when developing this kind of message. A verse in support of a sermon point may contribute to great oratory, but be wrong for expository preaching!

Contextual analysis requires attention to both the immediate and the remote contexts. The remote requires attention to the thematic unfolding of an entire book. For example, understanding 1 John as setting forth various tests which people may apply to see whether they are in the faith, as Robert Law convincingly demonstrates it does,<sup>12</sup> will significantly influence the interpretation of individual texts within the epistle.

A study of the immediate context will yield equally significant benefits. For example, Heb 13:5b ("I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you") is frequently quoted meaninglessly and applied inaccurately, because it has been detached from v. 5a ("Let your way of life be free from the love of money, being content with what you have"). This principle is often paid lip service, but the actual expending of energy toward its true implementation is far more difficult and too rarely practiced. Researching the context of narrative and biographical passages, especially of the OT, can demand extra effort because they are frequently lengthy.

The second principle is *historical analysis*. While often overlooked or summarily passed over lightly, this kind of study can generate tremendous insight into a passage and result in a significantly improved comprehension of the text. For example, a historical study of the Feast of Tabernacles and the ritual reenactment of God's provision of water from a rock in the wilderness furnishes a sharpened perception of John 7:37-38: "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'" In the preaching of Matt 19:1-12, the text comes alive with the observation

---

<sup>11</sup>The severity of wrongdoing when proof-texting should not be underestimated. Stevenson (*Preacher's Workshop* 157) defines it as "using a text to silence opposition and compel consent. . . . This kind of preaching uses the Bible not as 'a searchlight to be thrown upon a shadowed spot,' but as a bludgeon to gain mastery."

<sup>12</sup>Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982[rpt.]).



that the Pharisees' query regarding divorce takes place in Perea, the precise region where Herod Antipas beheaded John the Baptist after being confronted by John regarding his divorce (cf. Matt 14:1 ff.). It is obvious that the Pharisees were attempting to lure Jesus into a situation where Herod might kill him, too.

A third general principle is *literary analysis* which basically looks at the type of literature in which the text is found. Is it biography, history, letter, proverb, parable, or what? Aune notes the importance of carefully observing the literary form of a passage:

Literary genres and forms are not simply neutral containers used as convenient ways to package various types of written communication. They are social conventions that provide contextual meaning for the smaller units of language and text they enclose. The original significance that a literary text had for both author and reader is tied to the genre of that text, so that the meaning of the part is dependent upon the meaning of the whole.<sup>13</sup>

Each genre embodies characteristics which are distinctive and thus requires attention to its own unique interpretive principles. For instance, Jesus' teaching on prayer in Luke 18:2 is prefaced with these words: "Now He was telling them a parable" (18:1). The interpreter is informed that the teaching is to be construed in keeping with principles of parabolic hermeneutics. Therefore, the interpretive strategy has obvious differences from one adopted in Exod 20:15: "You shall not steal." Recognizing and understanding the genre of a given passage prompts a reading strategy, rules out false expectations, and represents an entrée to the meaning of the text.<sup>14</sup>

In the final analysis, placing the preaching text within the broader contextual, historical, and literary framework of the biblical author simply extends to the Bible the same courtesy that we extend to the morning newspaper. Only when that is done will one grasp the

---

<sup>13</sup>David E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 13.

<sup>14</sup>Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 83.

authorial intent and release the power of the "rightly-divided" Word. These principles elicit a commitment of time and energy, and generally do not yield instant results. Yet their fruit is sweet and the rewards great for using them.

### SPECIFIC PRINCIPLES

#### *Thematic Preaching*

*Guidelines.* As a safeguard against selecting a text that does not accurately undergird the subject under consideration, the first principle for thematic preaching requires that the primary text for the sermon be chosen contextually`i.e., as faithfully reflecting what the text means in its own context. Too often in thematic preaching, a sermon is prepared on a purely topical basis, and the text chosen as a "motto" to sound the theme and bless the preacher's ideas.

Unfortunately, this is an exploitation of the biblical text. The text "simply serves as a catalyst; the actual content of the sermon is derived elsewhere and frequently could have been suggested just as well by a fortune cookie."<sup>15</sup> Instead of accurately expounding the Scriptures, the would-be expositor heralds nothing more than personal or cultural values saturated with randomly chosen Bible verses.

Preachers are called to be ministers of the word of God. This means that the sermon should be much more than `one man's opinion'; the sermon should be the word of God. . . . A sermon is the word of God only to the extent that it faithfully proclaims the word of God in the Bible.<sup>16</sup>

The Word of God rightly divided brings authority to the sermon, thereby protecting the preacher from heresy and, at the same time, giving the audience a means to validate and defend the instruction.

A second principle for thematic preaching is to focus on biblical word (or sometimes, short phrase) studies, researching in particular

---

<sup>15</sup>Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) 101.

<sup>16</sup>Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 123.

those words around which the theme is built. For example, when preaching on 1 Thess 5:16 ("rejoice always"), one researches the meanings and biblical usage of the words "rejoice" and "joy," and the general exhortations in Scripture to be glad. In the process, various aspects of rejoicing will emerge, such as its source(s), its hindrances, its rewards, and so on. This method incorporates the important element of using Scripture directly to obtain guidance and teaching for a sermon and avoids the danger of falling into wayward philosophical abstractions. Where an abundance of biblical information exists on a given theme, the expositor will need to sift and select the parts with more significant suitability. At the same time, thoroughness should not be sacrificed.

A third thematic principle requires that a subject of appropriate size be chosen. The broader the topic, the more difficult it is to cover the pertinent material with justice and cohesiveness, and the more difficult it is to instruct people, generate understanding, and foster retention. Alexander notes,

The more *special* the subject, the more you will find to say on it. Take it as a general rule, the more you narrow the subject, the more thoughts you will have. . . . It requires vast knowledge and a mature mind to treat a general subject, such as virtue, or honor, and it is much better to begin with particular instances.<sup>17</sup>

It is sometimes desirable to preach on a broad subject, such as an exposition of a whole book of the Bible in one sermon. The benefit of this type of message is that it affords people a comprehensive grasp of the contents and significance of the whole before it is broken into its parts.

This "macro" approach, however, intensifies the preparation demands on the expositor, for unless he understands the constituent parts, he cannot present the whole accurately. Furthermore, the temptation of a busy pastor is to present the obvious, reciting facts and details already known to his people, thereby sacrificing the primary value of exposition, i.e., telling the audience more than they can glean

---

<sup>17</sup>James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975[rpt.]) 512.

from a casual reading. This has the disastrous effect of leaving both himself (in the preparation process) and the audience without meaningful interaction with the Word and thus without instruction, increased comprehension, and opportunity for spiritual growth.

To restrict the scope to be covered allows for depth of research and precision in instruction. Broadus adds, "It is usually better that the subject should not be general but specific. This not only promotes variety in successive sermons but really makes each subject more fruitful."<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, such preaching can and should be expository`a rich development and presentation of the Word of God. Regardless of one's specific homiletical approach, preaching must be biblical or it is not expository. It must be filled with teachings from the Word, not with humanistic perspectives or cultural philosophies.

*Tools.* The expositor has many tools at his disposal when researching a particular theme. Listed below are just a few of the basic ones:

- a. A good English concordance.
- b. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Eerdmans).
- c. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., ed. by Archer, Harris, and Waltke (Moody).
- d. *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge* (Revell).
- e. W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Revell).
- f. *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols., ed. by Colin Brown (Zondervan).
- g. Numerous books on preaching for special occasions, such as Herbert Lockyer, *All the Holy Days and Holidays* (Zondervan).
- h. Your own file is one of the best, if you have been faithfully reading, clipping, and storing away. It is imperative that you have a good filing system`one that permits you to retrieve the appropriate materials quickly.

---

<sup>18</sup>Broadus, *Preparation* 134.

*Theological Preaching*

*Guidelines.* Preaching a theological expository sermon is very similar to thematic preaching. For the most part, the principles given there apply here, too. However, some additional elements apply specifically to theological topics and thus require separate explanation.

Theological instruction transpires continually within a verse-by-verse expository sermon in brief excursions, paragraphs, or sentences. Nevertheless, to furnish perspective, expand theological understanding, and provide greater appreciation for the nature and character of God, such doctrinal teaching occasionally requires specific unified attention in a sermon devoted exclusively to it. Theological preaching is often shunned because of a pastor's lack of theological acumen and his unwillingness to pay the cost of preparation. But despite its high price tag, it needs to be done. The health of the church necessitates it.

Doctrine, i.e., teaching, is the preacher's chief business. To teach men truth, or to quicken what they already know into freshness and power, is the preacher's great means of doing good. The facts and truths which belong to the Scripture account of sin, Providence, and redemption, form the staple of all scriptural preaching. But these truths ought not simply to have place after a desultory and miscellaneous fashion in our preaching. The entire body of Scripture teaching upon any particular subject, when collected and systematically arranged, has come to be called the "doctrine" of Scripture on that subject . . . ; and in this sense we ought to preach much on the doctrines of the Bible. We all regard it as important that the preacher should himself have sound views of doctrine; is it not also important that he should lead his congregation to have just views?<sup>19</sup>

Theological sermons need not be dry. Broadus observes that it "all depends on the way in which it is done. The dry preacher will make all subjects dry; dull anecdotes and tame exhortations have sometimes been heard of."<sup>20</sup> Conversely, theological sermons can and

---

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

should be as fresh and vibrant as the pastor's own zeal for knowing God, his zest for discovering the deep riches of God's Word, and his passion for preaching the whole counsel of God. Much more than a theological lecture is required; mandated is a treatise passionately delivered and overflowing with evidence that the subject has captured the heart and life of the pastor and now begs to infiltrate the innermost being of the hearer.

By way of caution, the expositor must avoid making a single doctrine his hobby horse. The Word of God in its entirety is to be explained, not just one favorite portion of it. Nor should one avoid those doctrines which may be controversial with some audiences. They too must be taught.

It would seem to be a just principle that a preacher should never go out of his way to find a controversial matter or go out of his way to avoid it. He who continually shrinks from conflict should stir himself up to faithfulness; he who is by nature belligerent should cultivate forbearance and courtesy. When the text or topic naturally leads us to remark upon some matter of controversy, we should not, save in exceptional cases, avoid it. We should of course be mainly occupied with the advocacy of positive truth; but . . . in many cases we cannot clearly define truth save by contrasting it with error. And since errors held and taught by good men are only the more likely to be hurtful to others, we are surely not less bound to refute them in such cases than when advocated by bad men. . . . While faithfully and earnestly opposing error, even as held by Christian brethren, let us avoid needlessly wounding the cause of our common Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere Broadus appropriately cautions, "Be faithful and fearless, but skillful and affectionate."<sup>22</sup>

*Tools.* Topics on which to preach theological sermons are seemingly innumerable. Included in the great doctrines of the faith would be the attributes of God, the doctrine of the church, the Holy

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 61.

Spirit, and the inerrancy and trustworthiness of the Bible and its transmission to us. One could preach on each of the key points in the doctrinal statement of his church, and so on.

Resources for this type of preaching are many, including the following:

- a. John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (Sovereign Grace).
- b. John MacArthur, *The Ultimate Priority* (Moody)
- c. John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Zondervan).
- d. John MacArthur, *God, Satan, and Angels* (Moody).
- e. John MacArthur, *God With Us* (Zondervan).
- f. John MacArthur, *Heaven* (Moody).
- g. John MacArthur, *The Charismatics* (Zondervan).
- h. John MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Moody).
- i. Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Sovereign Grace).

However, it is best to begin with the Scriptures themselves and thereby, in essence, write one's own theology. This cannot be encouraged too strongly! The freshness of the material and the rewards of discovery will exceed what can be gained from a study of theology books. After one's own study, theology books become an excellent source for reinforcement and enhancement. As Unger has wisely admonished, "The best work in this field will carefully expound what the Scriptures themselves reveal more than what might be gleaned from books of theology."<sup>23</sup>

### *Historical Preaching*

History rightly presented has tremendous attractiveness to an eager-to-learn mind. Nor does it lack power to impact and generate understanding. History is the ultimate teacher, patiently waiting in the wings of life until one opens to its persistent knocking. Unfortunately, the old saying is all too applicable: "The only thing we have learned from history is that we have learned nothing from history."

But this need not be the case. To a greater degree than secular

---

<sup>23</sup>Unger, *Principles* 49.

history, biblical history generates great attraction to the truth and is imbued with great power to produce spiritual discernment and influence. Most appropriate are the words of Paul in 1 Cor 10:11: "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction."

In the Bible the designs of Providence are not left to be judged of by our sagacity but are often clearly revealed, so as to show us the meaning of things obscure and the real co-working of things apparently antagonistic. Thus the Bible histories act like the problems worked out in a treatise of algebra, teaching us how to approach the other problems presented by the general history of the world. The oft-quoted saying of an ancient writer that "history is philosophy teaching by example" applies nowhere so truly as to the inspired records, which are God himself teaching by example.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, with so much valuable data at his disposal, it behooves the expositor to research the biblical archive and expound the biblical histories that were sovereignly commenced and which have providentially transpired.

*Guidelines.* Historical preaching requires an acquaintance with the physical surroundings of a context. A Bible expositor should review geography and topography, together with the manners and customs of Israel and her neighbors. He should study them industriously so that he can visualize the scenes so as to re-create them vividly in the minds of the hearers. When preaching from historical books such as Ruth, Esther, Jonah, or Acts, for example, he should incorporate both the setting and the substance of the text in his sermon. Included with the content, the setting provides an expositor with a wealth of historical information from the surrounding physical realm and with an opportunity to present the sermon in dramatic storybook fashion.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Broadus, *Preparation* 71.

<sup>25</sup>This type also allows the preacher to conceal his thesis until the end of the sermon. Although the thesis should be kept in mind throughout the sermon, it would not be revealed until the close, when the case has already been made. This approach



*Tools.* Commentaries will generally include some historical and geographical information. Topographical and archeological assistance is usually more difficult to retrieve. However, a number of excellent works that have this information are available for the expositor researching the historical.

- a. Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Zondervan).
- b. James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Harper Atlas of the Bible* (Harper & Row).
- c. Paul L. Maier, tr. & ed., *Josephus, The Essential Writings* (Kregel).
- d. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Eerdmans).
- e. J. Alberto Soggin, *A History of Ancient Israel* (Westminster).
- f. Michael Grant, *The History of Ancient Israel* (Scribners).
- g. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Doubleday).
- h. Richard L. Niswonger, *New Testament History* (Zondervan).
- i. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Eerdmans).

### *Biographical Preaching*<sup>26</sup>

It seems that nothing interests people more than stories about other people. News (or gossip, for that matter) about another is like honey to flies—it rarely fails to attract a crowd. When tirelessly researched and skillfully presented, an invitation to peer into the life and character of a biblical personage brings with it an unveiling of sin and motivation toward maturity. Biblical principles are not abstract only; they occur on the stage of living history displayed in biblical personification. Since this is true, biographical preaching is a powerful true-to-life instrument eagerly waiting to be used as an effective tool in an expositor's repertoire.

---

is often beneficial for maintaining audience-interest (e.g., Peter's sermon in Acts 2). It can be effectively employed with a hostile audience, too.

<sup>26</sup>Discussions here are limited to preaching biblical personalities. Extra-biblical stalwarts of the faith furnish some additional excellent instruction and examples. But the history of Christianity outside the Bible is best left for illustration and elucidation.

*Guidelines.* Generally speaking, biographical sermons are constructed and delivered in one of two ways. One way is to tell the story of the person and then to follow it with the lessons drawn from his experience. Another is to draw one lesson from each point/stage of a biblical character's life. The lesson is extracted and applied at each stage of the description before moving on to describe the next stage. The reverse is equally effective. The lesson is stated and then followed with a portion of the life story to illustrate it. "If the story has been properly told, the truths one wishes to enforce will already be so clear that they can be driven in and clinched quickly."<sup>27</sup>

Biographical preaching faces the same primary concern that confronts all topical preaching: being true to the context. Because of the ease with which one can extract "juicy" vignettes for a sermon, preachers may be tempted (often unconsciously) to make the life of a biblical character teach lessons it does not teach. The temptation is especially strong when illustrating from a single incident or characteristic from a biblical individual's life.

Consequently, it is generally safer to use the biblical character's entire life as an illustration rather than extracting a single point. And since the Bible frequently furnishes only brief and incomplete sketches, filling in the gaps must be strictly compatible with known or recorded facts. Biblical biographical preaching must be seen first within the context of the Bible's theme. Biographies form an integral part of the whole of sacred history and serve a very specific purpose in the delineation of that history. For this reason, they must be seen first as a part of the larger picture.

Some preachers abuse biographical preaching by shunning it, because they feel they have little talent for description and storytelling. Others abuse it by focusing only on the historical person without teaching anything substantial. A chief benefit of describing lives in the Bible is from character analysis, a study of God's sovereign, providential workings in their motives and actions, both good and bad. Koller has aptly cautioned,

---

<sup>27</sup>Ilion T. Jones, *Principles and Practice of Preaching* (New York: Abingdon, 1956) 112.

It must be remembered that the Bible was not given to reveal the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but to reveal *the hand of God* in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; not as a revelation of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, but as a revelation *of the Savior* of Mary and Martha and Lazarus.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, biographical preaching must have more substance than just a rereading of the text in a Sunday School fashion. It must teach insight into the sovereign workings of the hand of God`insight that comes only through diligent research and faithful study.

*Tools.* The pages of Scripture abound with men and women from every walk of life`e.g., kings, beggars, housewives, zealots, and servants. Biblical material from which to preach is not lacking in this area. Though tools to assist in preparation are not quite as numerous, many are still available. In addition to Bible encyclopedias which generally provide good historical background material, the following are quite helpful:

- a. John MacArthur, *The Master's Men* (Moody).
- b. Richard Mayhue, *A Christian's Survival Guide* (Victor).
- c. Gene Getz, *Joseph* (Regal).
- d. Elmer Towns, *History Makers of the Old Testament* (Victor).
- e. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Apostles of the Bible* (Zondervan).
- f. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Men of the Bible* (Zondervan).
- g. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Zondervan).
- h. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Children of the Bible* (Zondervan).
- i. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Kings and Queens of the Bible* (Zondervan).
- j. J. D. Douglas & Merrill C. Tenney, *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Zondervan).

#### SUMMING UP

---

<sup>28</sup>Koller, *Expository Preaching* 32.

Whether preaching thematically, theologically, historically, or biographically, the bottom line is that the Scriptures must be the primary resource and contextual guidelines must be observed. They are the expositor's chief source of spiritual insight and teaching, the place to which he turns first before studying the many available helps. And once in the Scriptures, the expositor must take great pains to utilize them in a fashion that will reflect the authorial intent.

8. Expository Preaching Is Always Contemporary. When we preach the Word, we never have to worry about whether it is the right time or not, or if it is the right message or not. Now surely wisdom is needed to discern between preaching Lamentations at a wedding or Leviticus 15 and "bodily discharges" at the baptism of an infant! But you know what I mean. Expository preaching is always in vogue, always "cool," if you will. Why? The human condition remains the same in every age.