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I

“GENTLEMEN, THIS IS A SERMON!”

REVISITING THE ROOTS OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING

Jim Shaddix

Any self-respecting sports fan (and even some who aren't!) has heard the stories of the motivational prowess of Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers. He started every season the same way—gathering his players together and giving them what became one of his famous speeches.

With a football in hand, the feared and revered coach would walk to the front of the meeting room, take a moment to gaze over the group of assembled players, hold out the pigskin in front of him, and say, “Gentlemen, this is a football.” After describing the importance of the football as if no one on his team had ever seen one, he then would lead the team outside and show them the field. He would explain the out-of-bounds lines and the end zones, and then remind the players that the football was intended to go across the end zone line.¹

Lombardi knew the importance of stressing fundamentals—even to seasoned athletes. No doubt that emphasis played a huge role in him winning

five National Football League championships, including Super Bowls I and II, during his tenure with the Packers. It shouldn't be any different for preachers. While it may seem strange to begin a book on progressing in your preaching with the fundamentals, nothing is more important to our growth as preachers than returning to the basics. It would do us all well to periodically have someone with a Bible in their hand say to us, "Gentlemen, this is a sermon!"

Jerry and I both are unapologetic in our conviction that biblical exposition should serve as the foundational approach to preaching. In exposition, the preacher lays open a biblical text in such a way that the Holy Spirit's intended meaning and attending power are brought to bear on the lives of contemporary listeners. The word *expose* means to lay open or uncover, and it includes the totality of the preacher's study, interpretation, and proclamation. So before we venture too far into some new territory of making progress in our preaching, let's take a trip down Memory Lane and revisit the basic nature of our preaching "football"—the expository sermon.

As we begin to think about making progress in the pulpit, we want to summarize, consolidate, and briefly comment on some of the theological moorings we have discussed in our previous works. Hopefully doing so will give us a solid foundation on which to build the rest of the help we offer in this book. True expository preaching is rooted in five basic theological convictions about the Bible that make it a faithful stewardship as opposed to a sermon form, a sacred obligation instead of a sermon option. See if your sermons are driven by these things.

THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE

The expository sermon is first and foremost shaped by a high view of Scripture.² V. L. Stanfield, a giant among teachers of preaching, helps us at this point by describing preaching as "giving the Bible a voice,"³ which coincides with John Broadus's simple and accurate definition of preaching as "letting God speak out of his Word."⁴ In other words, these preaching forefathers saw the Bible as the written record of God's voice, and preaching as the act of giving God His voice in the hearing of people. That's huge when it comes to determining what a sermon ought to look like! Why? Because expository preaching of the Bible provides the only chance we have to preserve God's voice and reveal it to listeners correctly. God has spoken and the Bible is the accurate record of His speech. So we're compelled to communicate it accurately so that we represent Him rightly.

Representing God rightly depends on a certain conviction about biblical inspiration. By “inspiration” we are referring to “the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that enabled and motivated the human authors of Scripture to produce an accurate record and revelation of God’s redemptive will, purpose, and activity.”⁵ Preaching has to be driven by an understanding that the text of Scripture accurately records God’s voice. If you believe the Bible merely *contains* the Word of God, rather than actually *is* the Word of God, you won’t be as driven to study it carefully, to organize its theology, or to proclaim it authoritatively and uncompromisingly.⁶ The conviction that the Bible is God’s Word will dictate everything in the preparation and delivery of your sermons.

The Bible itself makes its own claims about its divine origin. Paul asserted that “all Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), suggesting the divine source of the words we have in our Bible. Peter wrote that “prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21 NKJV). Essentially, these men were carried along by the Holy Spirit much like a sailboat is carried along by the wind. They were superintended by the Holy Spirit, giving Scripture a dual authorship—the Holy Spirit as the sole divine Author and a company of divinely chosen men as human authors. We refer to this process as verbal plenary inspiration. God let us hear His voice through the unique personalities of individual writers, each one being fashioned by the circumstances of his own life and the genetic combination of his own personality, yet all the while being filled by the breath of the divine Spirit.

If the Bible is inspired by God, and preaching gives the Bible a voice, there’s an essential relationship between inspiration and the way one’s sermons are crafted. Sermons necessarily have to rightly reflect the very voice of God. Consequently, your sermon journey must begin with finding out what God has said. You can’t expect to stand up and say “Thus saith the Lord” if you don’t know what the Lord saith! So the basic question both you and your listeners have to ask about the sermon is: who said it, the preacher or the Bible? The answer to that question determines whether your sermon came from the Bible or from your own experience and opinion.⁷ Whenever you reveal God’s eternal truth found in the Bible, you can be confident that your people are hearing the very voice of God instead of your voice.

So how does this happen? How do you go about rightly reflecting what God has said? After all, regarding the preaching and teaching gifts, Peter said, “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11 NKJV). So how can you ensure that you’re speaking the oracles of God in such a way that His words rightly reflect what the Holy Spirit gave to us? The only logical an-

swer to this question is the exposition of biblical texts, or expository preaching. This process alone maintains the integrity of the Holy Spirit's intended meaning in any given text of Scripture. Consequently, exposition is the natural outgrowth of what the Spirit has inspired the text to say and mean.

THE REVELATION OF THE BIBLE

The expository sermon not only grows out of *how* God spoke, but also *when* He spoke. Where contemporary preachers stand in relation to the time in which God revealed His Word says a lot about how we preach. I've heard more than once the seemingly spiritual call for contemporary preachers to preach more like the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. Certainly, the quest to preach like the Bible preachers preached is a noble one—unless we fail to realize we haven't been called to preach like they did! Here's what I mean. An important difference exists between preaching *now* and preaching *then*. In fact, the role of every preacher after the apostolic age has been fundamentally different than that of preachers before them. And that difference actually provides one of the strongest rationales for biblical exposition.

During the biblical period, preachers like Old Testament prophets and New Testament prophets—Jesus, and the apostles—often were giving *revelation* in their preaching. They communicated things God said that people had never heard before. It was new information because God had never said it before. But those preachers also did a lot of *explanation* in the sermons they preached. Sometimes they weren't giving new information, but simply providing explanation of stuff that had already been revealed. Additionally, they did a lot of *persuasion* in their preaching based both on what had been revealed as well as on what they had explained. Under the leadership of God's Spirit they pleaded with people to say "yes" to what they said.⁸

As the sun set on the biblical period, however, some things changed. First, God's voice was funneled into the Christ event, and God's words were fulfilled totally and completely in His Son. The author of Hebrews summarizes, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb. 1:1–2). About this astounding declaration, David Allen writes,

Amazingly, the author viewed the revelation of the Son as God's "speech" to us, and thus it is an appropriate metaphor for all that

God does through Christ in the world and not just in reference to the words of Christ. Additionally, when Scripture speaks of the “word of the LORD” addressed to and through Old Testament prophets, the Son, as the second Person of the Trinity, is always involved as well.⁹

Second, God’s special revelation—which the early church understood to be the accurate record of God’s revelatory works and words¹⁰—was canonized to form the Old and New Testaments that comprise our Bible.¹¹ Chapell writes, “Each verse, each recorded event, and each passing epoch of biblical history God uses to build a single, comprehensive understanding of who he is.”¹² Thus, the voice of God that reveals who He is and the mission He is on became contained in the Bible.

Now do the math. One of the natural results of the canonization of Scripture was that preaching simplified. Instead of involving the revelation, explanation, and persuasion that characterized the biblical period, preaching evolved to only include explanation and persuasion. The closing of the biblical canon, so to speak, marked the end of God’s revelation of new material, at least as far as what He determined was necessary to be passed on through the ages to accomplish His purpose. And every preacher since that time has enjoyed the blessing of not living under the pressure of being responsible to introduce new information from God. Why? Because God stopped giving new revelation about “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3) and encapsulated them in the person of Jesus Christ. Since that time preachers have been charged only with the responsibility of explaining what God has already revealed in Christ and persuading people to act on it.

That reality magnifies the characteristic that is at the very heart of biblical exposition—explanation of the biblical text. Broadus identifies four functional elements in preaching: explanation, argumentation (proof), illustration, and application. Of these four, he says explanation is “among the primary functions of the preacher.”¹³ And it’s not difficult to understand why. Essentially, the other three elements are servants to explanation. Although some of these functional elements at times overlap, explanation fundamentally drives the train. We don’t just do application; we apply something. We don’t just use illustrations; we illustrate something. We don’t just do argumentation; we argue something. And that something is the truth of God’s Word rightly explained and understood. The text has to be explained in order for us to do the other elements of good preaching. Steven Smith insightfully describes preaching as “re-presenting the Word of God.”¹⁴ He writes:

This is a theology of preaching in one sentence: we speak for God because he has already revealed himself in his Son and his Son has revealed himself in his Word. This book is God's communication with us. . . . We have an obligation to re-present what God has already said. So, we have to get at the meaning.¹⁵

So the default approach to preaching must be—by necessity—to explain what God has already revealed in His Word and persuasively apply it to people's lives so they can obey it.

Your responsibility, then, is to peel back the layers of language, culture, background, worldview, literary genre, and more that characterize the differences between then and now. You do this in order to expose God's revelation and all of its relevance. This makes an expository sermon more than a homiletical form defined by the length of a given text, a particular rhetorical design, or even a Bible book series. An expository sermon is the result of a journey that begins long before your sermon is developed or preached. Essentially, exposition describes the manner of treatment with which you handle Scripture, a process by which you discover and encounter the true voice of God. And in the sermon that you birth from this process, you explain enough of your journey to your listeners to enhance their understanding of the truth and its relevance for their lives.

THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE

Another theological mooring that grounds the expository sermon is the nature of the Holy Scriptures, which contain God's inspired and revealed voice. Contemporary Christian culture has a tendency to view the Bible as nothing more than a practical manual for daily living. We demand relevance, we long for practical application, and we gravitate toward what works. This earthly view of the Bible, while not totally without merit, has serious ramifications. It causes us to overlook some of the Bible's most important qualities. For example, the Bible is much more than just a book *about* God. It is a book *from* God. When the apostle Paul told the Corinthians he had come to them declaring "the testimony of God" (1 Cor. 2:1), he used the possessive "of God" to convey his understanding of the nature of Scripture. Paul considered his message to be the testimony that God gave inasmuch as it had God as its content. It was both from God and about God.

As a message both from God and about God, the Bible's specific content

was intended to be delivered to people in a way that accurately represents what God has to say to them. Let’s be honest. As a preacher, you can take just about any subject under the sun and somehow relate it to something about God from some place in Scripture. But just because a message is about God doesn’t mean that it’s the message God intended people to hear. This is a subtle yet significant qualification for biblical exposition. Your preaching isn’t validated on the basis of its relational proximity to the idea of God. You’ve been given a very specific message to deliver, and that message doesn’t always include all things God-related. It’s a specific message that God dictated and intended for a specific purpose (a subject that we’ll take up shortly).

The Bible’s God-centered and God-dictated nature creates a tension in preaching. Preachers—especially pastors—rightly want to meet people’s needs and heal their hurts. But what are we to do when the Bible’s God-centered and God-dictated message doesn’t offer any specific and practical help for certain life situations? When that happens we naturally feel the temptation to run down to the local Christian bookstore and take our content from sources other than the Bible. After all, if it’s written by the most popular Christian author, then surely it’s sermon worthy. Surely if it’s not heretical in principle, then it’s allowable in preaching. And it makes great fodder for life application, felt needs, and topical sermons that provide helpful wisdom for anyone to follow.

But just because something isn’t heresy doesn’t mean it faithfully represents the inspired Word of God, especially when it involves subjects God didn’t directly address. Jerry and I previously identified this subtlety as the distinction between *God’s stuff* and *good stuff*.¹⁶ God’s stuff is the body of truth that is revealed in the Bible, given for the purpose of accomplishing God’s agenda. It’s the true nature of the Bible. Good stuff, on the other hand, is all the helpful advice and practical information we get in life that isn’t necessarily drawn directly from biblical teaching, but instead from information or principles that we glean from simple observation and research.

To illustrate the difference, consider some topics that God clearly addresses in the Bible. The old and new covenants, justice, holiness, the crucified life, the church, the ordinances, forgiveness, the second coming, and more are all topics God specifically and clearly addresses on the pages of Scripture. All of those subjects are clearly God’s stuff, and we glean our understanding of them from applying good interpretive principles in our Bible study. By contrast, a therapist can observe enough people dealing with stress in the job place in order to glean certain helpful principles for relieving stress. A marriage counselor can observe enough people recovering from divorce to identify some

helpful guidelines for navigating that crisis. Parenting experts can talk with enough moms and dads to be able to delineate some practical ways for raising strong-willed children. And while general Bible truths can be identified that relate to these and other life experiences, it would be difficult to conclude that God addressed any of them specifically and directly in His Word. That stuff is good stuff, but we can't categorize it as biblical truth.

Mark it down, fellow preacher. You haven't been given the responsibility of addressing all things good and helpful. You've been charged with the task of speaking only what God has spoken. Stott pointedly asks, "How dare we speak, if God has not spoken? By ourselves we have nothing to say. To address a congregation without any assurance that we are bearers of a divine message would be the height of arrogance and folly. . . . If we are not sure of this, it would be better to keep our mouth shut."¹⁷ While all truth certainly is God's truth, He has sovereignly chosen to include in the Bible only the truth that's necessary to accomplish His eternal purpose. That means your authority to say "Thus saith the Lord" doesn't rest in good stuff, but God's stuff. So you're compelled to rightly exegete, interpret, and proclaim biblical truth in such a way that it's free to accomplish God's purpose. And that stewardship will issue forth in only one kind of sermon—an expository sermon. This practice is the only way for you to be true to the Bible's nature.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BIBLE

The nature of the Bible as God's stuff demands that we lean in a bit further and consider the specific reason for which the Bible was given, another reality that compels us to preach expository sermons. During the "battle for the Bible" that took place in my denomination during the last three decades of the twentieth century, issues like the Bible's inerrancy, infallibility, authority, and sufficiency were frequent topics of debate. But I don't recall a whole lot ever being said about the purpose of the Good Book. Yet this neglected issue has as much to do with how we preach as any of the others.

What you think about the purpose of the Bible largely will determine how you approach your preaching. If you think the Bible's purpose is just to get people converted, then most of your sermons will be evangelistic. If you think the Bible was intended to be an answer book for all of life's questions, then your sermons will generally pose and answer questions you think your listeners are asking. If you think the Bible was given to be a practical manual for daily living, then your sermons will take the nature of "how-to" messages

on how to navigate life.¹⁸ The simple fact, however, that the Bible says more to God’s people than it does to unbelievers indicates its purpose couldn’t be limited to conversion. All we have to do is come up with one question that the Bible fails to answer (e.g., What about dinosaurs?) or one life issue that it doesn’t address (e.g., raising strong-willed children!) to prove the Bible wasn’t given to us for those purposes. So why do we have the Bible? What purpose does it serve?

The answer is clear in just a brief survey of the biblical canon. The apostle Paul set the table for the answer when he told the Roman believers that the people whom God foreknew, “he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29–30). Before time began, God determined to save a people from their sins and set them on a course to be shaped into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Consequently, every believer is moving toward perfect righteousness as part of God’s plan for Christ to reign throughout all eternity over a holy race. That holy race will consist of people who are citizens of His divine kingdom and children in His divine family, all due to the redemption they received through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

This purpose is verified when we look at the big picture of the biblical canon. The Bible opens with the declaration that “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). It closes with the creation of “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Rev. 21:1). The Bible opens with God creating for Himself an even more precious possession than His physical world: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; . . . So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:26–27 NKJV). It closes with God re-creating mankind into His image (cf. 1 John 3:2; Rev. 21:3–4). Creation and re-creation of heaven, earth, and mankind essentially bookend the Bible with the resounding statement of God’s purpose of redeeming and restoring His creation and His creatures to their intended state.

In between those bookends is the story of our tragic fall from God’s design, His pursuit of us in Christ Jesus, and His redemptive plan to restore us to our intended purpose. Nowhere is this more evident than in the apostolic testimony of the new covenant. Paul told the Corinthians that “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). He said to

the Philippians that Christ Jesus “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21). The Colossians were reminded they had “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:10). Peter told his readers that Jesus’ “divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:3–4). This mission of God to re-create His creation is the clear purpose of the Bible.

That realization leads us down a path toward expository preaching in at least two ways. First, if the Bible’s overarching purpose is to recount God’s plan of re-creating mankind into His image through Christ, then the accurate declaration of that story becomes paramount. It just makes sense that if we want to use something effectively, then we use it for its intended purpose. We don’t use a washing machine to fix a computer or a toaster to make ice cubes. What sense does it make, then, to use the Bible to try to answer questions it wasn’t ever intended to answer, or to navigate aspects of daily life that it nowhere addresses? Discovering and proclaiming the Holy Spirit’s intended meaning in every text of Scripture assures you of accurately reflecting God’s voice so as to accomplish His agenda.

Second, the Bible’s purpose of re-creation also compels the preacher to expose Christ in every text of Scripture. Every passage in the Bible either points to Christ futuristically, refers to Christ explicitly, or looks back to Christ reflectively. Consequently, the re-creation of individuals into Christ’s image demands that you determine where your preaching text stands in relation to Christ, and then expose that relationship to your listeners. So in a very real sense expository preaching and Christ-centered preaching ought to be synonymous terms. Exposition gives you the confidence that God’s agenda in Christ—the most relevant and urgent need in every person’s life—will truly bring about life change in your listeners. In short, expository preaching simply allows the Bible to say what it was intended to say and do what it was intended to do.

THE POWER OF THE BIBLE

Serving as an accurate record of God’s agenda of re-creation, however, is only part of the Bible’s purpose. A careful reading of the New Testament reveals that God sovereignly has connected His Word with His agenda in a dynamic

way. Specifically, God has ordained that the purpose of the Word isn't merely to recount the story of His redemptive activity, but also to be the means of bringing it about! In other words, the Scriptures are actually the supernatural agent that fosters this re-creative process in the lives of people. The truth of the Bible acts as the powerful sword (cf. Heb. 4:12) to accomplish God's purpose in our lives. So this cause-and-effect relationship demands that preachers unleash the Bible's innate power, allowing it both to say and do what it was intended. Expository sermons are the only way for that to happen.

God's Word makes incredible claims about its own spiritual ability to affect life change. Consider just a few examples of its own testimony. When Joshua was intimidated about trying to fill the shoes of Moses after the death of the great deliverer, God reminded him that meditating on and obeying His Word were the secrets to his success and prosperity (Josh. 1:8). The psalmists, meanwhile, emphasized how the Scriptures are able to impact human nature. In Psalm 19:7–11 God's Word is referenced by six different titles: *law, testimony, precepts, commandment, fear, and rules*. In those same verses, the psalmist mentions numerous characteristics of the Scriptures: *perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, eternal, true, and righteous*. It is more desirable than gold and “sweeter than honey.” And we can't overlook all the blessings and benefits that God's Word brings: restoration of the soul, wisdom, joy, understanding, warning, reward, conviction, and cleansing. Verses 12–13 conclude that the Scriptures also bring protection from sin and blamelessness before God!

Clearly our Lord has given us every truth, principle, standard, and warning that we'll ever need for restoration into His image. Psalm 119 abounds with claims about the supernatural power of God's Word. In verses 1–5 it gives direction for navigating life's journey. In verses 9–11, heeding it results in spiritual cleansing and prevention of sin. In verse 18 it births awe-inspiring wonder.

The Old Testament prophets also knew the benefit of Scripture. God declares through Isaiah that His Word will give repentant sinners a heavenly drink that enables them to spiritually blossom upon their return to Him (55:10–11). Then they're able to receive the grace-gifts of His Word, sowing and eating instead of being paralyzed by sorrow. All of this describes the prosperity that God's Word brings! Jeremiah writes that God's Word is the source of joy (15:16). In 23:29, God declares through the weeping prophet that His Word is sufficient to confront hard hearts and difficult situations with consuming and forceful power!

The New Testament is also thick with claims by Jesus and His disciples about the awesome power of Scripture. It stirs the hearts of those who receive

its explanation and application (Luke 24:32). Jesus Himself acknowledged that God's truth is the sanctifying agent in the disciple's life (John 17:17). The apostle Paul claimed the Word of grace would foster spiritual growth and advance the believer toward glorification (Acts 20:32). He also identified it as the producer of faith (Rom. 10:17) and the possessor of proactive and protective power for conviction (Eph. 6:17). He told Timothy the Scriptures provide everything that men and women of God needed for the entire salvation journey: wisdom for all godliness, instruction for knowing godliness, rebuke for straying from godliness, restoration to godliness, and training for pursuing godliness (2 Tim. 3:14–17).

The author of Hebrews noted the Word's ability to do soul-searching and spiritual examination (Heb. 4:12). James spoke of the Word's ability to foster the sanctifying wholeness of salvation (James 1:21). The apostle Peter said it purifies the soul, gives new birth to the dead heart, and fosters spiritual nourishment in infant Christians (1 Peter 1:22–2:2).

If these claims are true, then it follows that the preacher ought to do everything he can to make them available to people who desperately need the redeeming work of God in Christ in their lives. To do otherwise would be worse than possessing a cure for cancer and withholding it from the public. It begs the question, If this is where God has promised to invest His power, why would you want to give your people anything less than full exposure to this supernatural truth? If the Holy Spirit does all of this work and more through God's Word to affect life change, then the preacher has a high responsibility. He is charged with interpreting and preaching this truth in keeping with its full potency so that people aren't robbed of their only hope of being transformed into Christ's image through God's powerful, life-changing Word, empowered by the Holy Spirit within every believer.

CONCLUSION

These convictions are basic to right preaching and faithful sermon development. If the Bible is God's voice, it follows that as pastors, teachers, and evangelists, we're compelled to preach it. The prophet Amos rhetorically asks, "The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8). The apostle Paul, citing Psalm 116:10, similarly confesses, "Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, 'I believed, and so I spoke,' we also believe, and so we also speak" (2 Cor. 4:13). Stott rightly concludes:

CHAPTER 1 : “Gentlemen, This Is a Sermon!”

Here then is a fundamental conviction about the living, redeeming and self-revealing God. It is the foundation on which all Christian preaching rests. We should never presume to occupy a pulpit unless we believe in this God. . . . Once we are persuaded that God has spoken, however, then we too must speak. A compulsion rests upon us. Nothing and nobody will be able to silence us.¹⁹

Preaching, then, is rooted in basic assumptions that God has spoken, and He has orchestrated the record of His words to be compiled and preserved in our Bible. These assumptions drive us to interpret the Bible accurately, and they compel us to expose that interpretation accordingly in our sermons.

Gentlemen, this is a sermon!

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