

The Importance of Expository Preaching for Strengthening the Church

By Scott Brown

One of the distinctives of Trinity Baptist church is a commitment to expository preaching. This pillar holds a unique prominence among the other pillars of the ministry in the sense that if we get this one right, many of the other pillars will function properly. In this article, we will answer two questions: 1. *What* do we mean by expository preaching? 2. *Why* are we committed to expository preaching?

1. What do we mean by expository preaching?

Essentially we define it as preaching and teaching through books of the Bible, giving weight to the context, the definitions of the words, the flow of thought, the theological issues and the evangelistic implications.

Expository preaching at Trinity will have the following characteristics:

1. Preaching through entire books of the Bible.
2. Using the context of the passage to shape it's interpretation.
3. Moving line-by-line and principle-by-principle through the logical sequence of a passage.
4. Bringing out the meanings of the words, to the best of our ability, from the original Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic meanings.
5. Using the theological ideas in the text and correlating them to the broader sweep of theology throughout the scriptures.
6. Cultivating a love for hearing the Word of God

We appreciate the faithful adherence to these principles that John Calvin's life illustrates. Throughout Calvin's preaching ministry, there were fewer than 6 instances where he broke the pattern of working through the context of a book of scripture. He preached completely through entire books. For example, Thessalonians: 46 sermons, Corinthians: 186 sermons, Ephesians: 48 sermons, Job: 159 sermons, Isaiah: 353 sermons. John Piper has a classic chapter in his Book *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, that describes his great passion for revealing the majesty of God through expository preaching (p114-148).

On Easter 1538 Calvin was banished from Geneva for his preaching and went to Strasbourg for three years. Conditions changed and the city fathers invited Calvin back to Geneva. So in Sept 1541 he walks into pulpit and picks up at the next verse from where he stopped when banished. He comments that he wanted them to know that his time in Strasbourg was just an interlude in his preaching through the text.

Why that kind of preaching? Luther did not do it. Spurgeon did not do it. Why did Calvin maintain this radical adherence to expository preaching? There are at least three reasons:

1. Calvin believed the lamp of the Word had gone out in Europe.
2. T.H.L. Parker writes that Calvin had a horror of those who preached their own ideas in the pulpit. "When we enter the pulpit it is not that we bring our best dreams and fancies"
3. He believed that when the Word was faithfully exposted, God Himself stood forth in the congregation. He wrote:

Let the pastors boldly dare all things by the word of God.... Let them constrain all the power, glory, and excellence of the world to give place to and to obey the divine majesty of this word. Let them enjoin everyone by it, from the highest to the lowest. Let them edify the body of Christ. Let them devastate Satan's reign. Let them pasture the sheep, kill the wolves, instruct and exhort the rebellious. Let them bind and loose thunder and lightning, if necessary, but let them do all according to the word of God. (From "Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians").

Perhaps we may not maintain the radical consistency that Calvin demonstrated, but we appreciate the example and take it as a challenge to consistently bring God's Word, in it's context, to the church as our normal practice.

A good way to sum up our objectives would be to say, "we are devoted to the expository method, with a theological mindset and an evangelistic mission".

2. Why are we so committed to expository preaching?

First, we believe that over the years, our greatest impact will be teaching the content of scripture week after week giving a balanced diet of New and Old Testament instruction. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my Word will not pass away".

Second, we trust that God speaks directly to the human heart through the message of the Bible. The Bible is the Word of the Spirit of God for the church in every age.

Third, we believe that a steady diet of expositional preaching is the most effective way to build up the body of Christ and equip them for service.

Fourth, expository preaching forces us to take the direct messages of the passage instead of leaning toward our personal passions and preferred subjects. We avoid a topical approach because we think it gives too much license for our own opinions and personal inclinations. We believe that an expositional approach to our preaching will give a fuller, more balanced picture of the "whole counsel of God".

Fifth, We believe that this approach will provide greater leverage in training our children and ourselves in the ways of God's kingdom. We believe it will provide them with a stronger and broader foundation than would be gained from a topical approach.

Sixth, topical preaching will most probably, after many years, leave the preacher not knowing much more than when he started. Because he often creates the message content with a reliance on his own inclinations, he is not as often stirred up and taken in directions that are counter-intuitive for him.

From time to time we will address topics of theology and contemporary issues we face. But the predominant method will be to stick to the words of scripture and explain them as best we can, attempting to be faithful to the message of the text.

Expository teaching is not an end in itself. We trust that the heads of households will vigorously study the passages we are preaching on and teach them daily to their families. We hope that our preaching will be but a springboard to deeper daily study and education in the whole counsel of God in all of the households of our fellowship. Here are some references that are helpful resources on the subject: **Deut 6:4-9; Ezra 7:10; Neh 8:1-12; Matt 4:4; 1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 3:14-4:5; Titus 1:3, 9; Heb 4:12; 1 Peter 1:22-2:3.**

What other thoughts do we have regarding our preaching ministry?

We want to always uphold the practice of expository preaching, but that it would also contain a particular flavor. Preaching over a text will always be important. But we are looking for more than just preaching and reciting the stories and working through texts.

1. Our preaching should be practical, and address the areas of our lives that God is concerned about. Therefore, there should always be the challenge to "excel still more".
2. Our preaching should be toward the exaltation of God. We are looking for a very dedicated and passionate exposition of the glory to God by framing Him as the most superior of beings and His ways as most superior among ways.
3. Our preaching should leave people more thankful for Him and more amazed at His beauty and grace and kindness and utter superiority.
4. Our preaching should leave people more attracted and devoted to Him than ever. We are looking for more than analysis, but "expository exaltation" as John Piper has stated.

Finally, it is with much joy and confidence that we say with David, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple... More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold. Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." Psalm 19:7,10

Note: Preachers on Preaching

"The Church and the Scripture stand or fall together. Either the Church will be nourished and strengthened by the bold proclamation of her Biblical texts or her health will be severely impaired."

—Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

"The preacher must expound the Word of God or else he has failed in his calling. He may be a wonderful administrator, a winsome personal worker, and effective leader. But if he fails to expound the Word of God, he is a failure to his calling to 'preach the Word.'"

—Phil Newton

"[I]f preachers wish to preach with divine authority, they must proclaim this message of the inspired Scriptures, for the Scriptures alone have divine authority. If preachers wish to preach with divine authority, they must submit themselves and echo the Word of God. Preachers are literally to be ministers of the Word."

—Sidney Greidanus

"Today there is a great need, not for plausible pulpiteers, but for powerful preachers. Contemporary communicators, saturated with arrogance, given to humanistic tactics, and practiced in manipulation, abound. Yet there remains a real draught for the dynamic Word of God conveyed through humble men of God by the powerful Spirit of God."

—George Zemek

"What we need in the face of doubts of personal effectiveness in an age that increasingly questions the validity of preaching is a reminder of God's design for spiritual transformation. Ultimately preaching accomplishes its spiritual purposes not because of the skills of the preacher, but because of the power of the Scripture proclaimed."

—Bryan Chapell

"What you are after is not that folks shall say at the end of it all, 'What an excellent sermon!' That is a measured failure. You are there to have them say, when it is over, 'What a great God!' It is something for men not to have been in your presence but His."

—J. H. Jowett

"When a preacher fails to preach the Scriptures, he abandons his authority. He confronts his hearers no longer with a word from God but only with another word from men."

—Haddon W. Robinson

"You must never preach on a passage until you are certain you understand why the Holy Spirit included that passage in the Bible. When you have grasped His purpose, what He intended to do to the recipient of His message, then—and then only—do you have the purpose for your sermon, and then—and then only—do you know what God wants you to do to your listeners through it."

—Jay Adams

"A sermon comes with far greater power to the consciences of the hearers when it is plainly the very Word of God—not a lecture about the Scripture, but Scripture itself opened up and enforced."

—Charles Spurgeon

"For our preaching to be biblical, the message must be based on the Word of God, presented by a messenger who lives under the authority of that Word, organized in a manner that instructs the mind and moves the heart and captures the will, and interpreted and applied in a way that is true (intrinsic) to the text."

—Warren Wiersbe

"Now let us hurry on to something much more important—the romance of preaching! There is nothing like it. It is the greatest work in the world, the most thrilling, the most exciting, the most rewarding, and the most wonderful. I know of nothing comparable to the feeling one has as one walks up the steps of one's pulpit with a fresh sermon on a Sunday morning or a Sunday evening, especially when you feel that you have a message from God and are longing to give it to the people. This is something that one cannot describe."

—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

"If I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher."

—Martin Luther

"Where the Bible is esteemed as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, preaching can flourish. But where the Bible is treated as a record of valuable religious insight, preaching dies."

—John Piper