

WHAT IS EXPOSITORY PREACHING?

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What is an expository preacher or an expository sermon? I have looked at the websites of a good number of churches who claimed to practice expository preaching, but upon visiting the church discovered the claim to be false. Granted, it could have been a fluke; maybe just for that Sunday only the preacher decided not to preach an expository sermon. I tend to believe claims like this are sincere, but misguided.

There are several reasons why churches “falsely” claim to have expository preaching. First, there are many incorrect definitions of expository preaching out there, and some churches after hearing one of those bad definitions, proclaim they have an expository preacher in their pulpit. Others may listen to other self-proclaimed expositors, yet who in actuality are not, and by comparison arrive at the conclusion they too are expository preachers. Still others listen to famous expository preacher so and so going through a book of the Bible verse by verse, talking about the text, developing doctrines, giving application, and they say to themselves, “This is what I do on Sundays, so I must be a biblical expositor too.” Finally, there are some who want to associate with one or more well-known expository preachers and so proclaim themselves to be expositors without really understanding what expository preaching is or how to preach expositionally. However, declaring yourself to be an expository preacher doesn’t make you one any more than declaring yourself to be a Christian causes you to be born again. No, there are some basic requirements that must first be met and adhered to in sermon preparation and delivery in order to be classified as an expository preacher.

Prerequisites For Being An Expository Preacher

This section could be very long and detailed, but I leave the lengthier treatment for other entries on www.drivennails.com. However, I do want to briefly state some of the basic requirements of expository preaching so that a quick and initial evaluation can be made by those who are curious.

1. *Every expository preacher needs a good understanding of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments.* You can’t expect to be an accurate preacher of the Word of God if you have a superficial understanding of the book you are trying to teach others.
2. *Every expository preacher needs some training in sound doctrine and systematic theology.* This is a necessary part of what it takes to be an accurate interpreter of Scripture. Having a general understanding of sound doctrine and systematic theology protects you from interpretive errors.
3. *Every expository preacher needs training in hermeneutics or Bible study principles.* You can’t interpret the Scriptures accurately armed only with good intentions. You need to understand proper interpretive rules, how to apply those rules, and in what order to apply them to various texts of Scripture. If you do not have training in this area you will be like a carpenter with no tools;

- you won't be able to craft an expository sermon.
4. *Every expository preacher needs some training in exegesis, including the ability to determine what the main point of the text is and what is subordinate to the main point of the text.* This is absolutely essential for deriving an outline that accurately represents the text being preached.

Each of the points above is somewhat subjective because there is no precise definition of *how much* training a preacher needs in each of the areas listed. I would say you need enough training in these areas to handle accurately the Word of Truth. I would also remind any would-be preacher that they are commanded by God to interpret the Bible accurately (II Tim. 2:15), warned that they will be judged more strictly as preachers (James 3:1), and that it is the greatest of sins to represent yourself as a purveyor of truth, but lead people into error. *In general, it is impossible to be an expository preacher if you don't have some training in Bible content, doctrine, theology, hermeneutics, and exegesis.*

Defining terms is very important, so I am going to give you multiple definitions of expository preaching from various authors and then synthesize those definitions at the end in an attempt to give you a clear understanding of *what expository preaching is and is not.*¹ It is important to have clear definitions. J. C. Ryle states why:

If men would only define with precision the theological terms which they use, many disputes would die. Scores of excited disputants would discover that they do not really differ, and that their disputes have arisen from their own neglect of the great duty of explaining the meaning of words.²

Modern day expositors have defined expository preaching for us. Dr. Stephen Olford states:

A sermon is the proclamation of the Word of God only if the text of the Word is accurately expounded and preached. So, in the strictest sense of the term, authentic preaching is expository preaching."³

Sidney Greidanus defines expository preaching and gives an additional definition by Merrill Unger:

Expository preaching, as its name implies, is to expose, to lay open, the meaning of the preaching text in its contexts. Merrill Unger has provided a fine description of expository preaching: handling the text "in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular Biblical writer and as it exists in the light of the over-all context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the

¹ This portion of this article was adapted in part from *Expository Preaching: With Word Pictures From The Sermons of Thomas Watson*, Christian Focus (Jack Hughes).

² J. C. Ryle, (2011-06-16). *Knots Untied* (Kindle Locations 95-97). Heritage Bible Fellowship. Kindle Edition.

³ Stephen D. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998) 4.

hearers.”⁴

Haddon Robinson has defined expository preaching this way:

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.⁵

John MacArthur, discussing the issue of inerrancy and expository preaching, explains:

The only logical response to inerrant Scripture, then, is to preach it expositionally. By expositionally, I mean preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented entirely and exactly as it was intended by God. Expository preaching is the proclamation of the truth of God as mediated through the preacher.⁶

John R.W. Stott defines expository preaching saying:

It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching. Of course if by an ‘expository’ sermon is meant a verse-by-verse explanation of a lengthy passage of Scriptures, then indeed it is only one possible way of preaching, but this would be a misuse of the word. Properly speaking, ‘exposition’ has a much broader meaning. It refers to the content of the sermon (biblical truth) rather than its style (a running commentary). To expound scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view. The expositor prizes [sic] open what appears to be closed, makes plain what is obscure, unravels what is knotted and unfolds what is tightly packed. The opposite of exposition is ‘imposition’, which is to impose on the text what is not there. But the ‘text’ in question could be a verse, or a sentence, or even a single word. It could equally be a paragraph, or a chapter, or a whole book. The size of the text is immaterial, so long as it is biblical. What matters is what we do with it. Whether it is long or short, our responsibility as expositors is to open it up in such a way that it speaks its message clearly, plainly, accurately, relevantly, without addition, subtraction or falsifications. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, or a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.⁷

⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999) 231.

⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980) 20.

⁶ John F. MacArthur and the Master’s Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992) 23-24.

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982) 125-126.

All of these definitions explaining expository preaching are somewhat different. Yet, if each definition was put into the smelter and alloyed a definition with certain attributes would result.

The *content* of expository preaching is the Word of God.

The *method* of deriving the sermon is the application of a literal, historical, grammatical method of interpretation and exegesis.

The *quality* of the sermon is accuracy to the text of God's Word.

The *goal* of expository preaching is to represent or expose to view or plainly reveal what God and the authors of Scripture meant by what they said, exactly and entirely.

The *practical purpose* of expository preaching is to show how the text of Scripture is to be applied in the believer's life.

The expository sermon must also be *personally applied* by the preacher and *delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit*.

The *mode* of delivery is public preaching or proclamation.

Why is the definition of expository preaching so important? Why does a preacher have to get training to be a biblical expositor? This is why:

1. If the preacher doesn't know the Bible very well or the overall story of Scripture it makes him vulnerable to misinterpreting the text, which will lead to false doctrine and ungodly behavior.
2. If the preacher doesn't have a good understanding of theology and sound doctrine he will be vulnerable to misinterpreting a text and deriving doctrines from the text that are contrary to the teaching of the Bible as a whole and not even realize it.
3. If the preacher doesn't have good exegetical skills, he can't know what the main point of the text is or what in the text is speaking about the main point. He will have no interpretive precision and therefore inaccurately handle the Word of God (II Tim. 2:15), which is a sin.
4. If the preacher isn't trained to submit to the text of Scripture in crafting his sermon, his sermon title, proposition, and outline will be derived from his imagination rather than from the inspired Word of God.
5. If the text isn't accurately interpreted and explained then God is gagged or at best, His Word is distorted; and the church suffers because of the negligence of the preacher.

Biblical preaching is expository preaching for it's only expository preaching that lets Christ clearly speak to His Church. Let's me conclude with a detailed, one sentence definition of expository preaching:

Expository preaching is a method of crafting and delivering a bold, authoritative, commanding, clear, engaging, memorable, practical, and direct address of divine truth taken from one or more biblical texts, that are studied in their various biblical contexts, by a preacher who is gifted, called, and trained in Bible content, sound doctrine, theology, hermeneutics and exegesis, so that the preacher handles with precision the Word of Truth, communicating to his listeners what God and/or the original author meant for his original audience to understand by what was written, while preaching in a reproving, rebuking, exhorting, and admonishing way, so that God's voice can be heard from the biblical text, through the preacher.

Keep that in mind! 😊