Two Kinds of Sermons that Seem Expositional But Really Aren't

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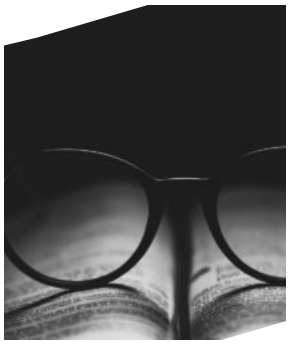
Common in conservative evangelical circles today—certainly among the readers of ministries like 9Marks—is a professed commitment to expository preaching. We say "professed" commitment because our experience over decades as both a pastor and faithful church member, having either delivered or listened to thousands of sermons, has led us to the conclusion much "expository preaching" does not in fact meet the definition.

Too many sermons focus on the biblical text, but fail to exposit the main point of the scriptural passage under consideration. To be clear, this critique isn't merely an academic or definition one. If a sermon fails to unpack the main point of the text at hand, the pastor is failing to preach the whole counsel of God regardless of how throughly the speaker examines the scriptural passage. Such a sermon fails to communicate what God intended to communicate by inspiring that text.

Let's be more specific. Two kinds of preaching are often confused with expository preaching because of a superficial resemblance: "sequential preaching" and "observational preaching." We'll discuss them below. We pray that this discussion will be edifying to preachers as you seek to feed your flocks.



1. Sequential preaching is not necessarily expository preaching.

Many preachers believe they're engaged in expository preaching simply because they sequentially preach through a particular book of the Bible. While there's much to commend about this approach, it doesn't necessarily equate to expository preaching.

For example, a pastor may preach a 16-week series through the book of Romans. That fact by itself would cause many preachers to think they're doing expository preaching. But it's not. Whether the sequential preacher is delivering an expository sermon in any given week depends on two things:

1. whether the preacher has rightly identified the main point of the week's assigned passage,
2. and whether the sermon then keeps as its focus the main point of the passage.

An example may clarify this point. If, in the third week of the series, the preacher delivers a sermon on Romans 3 that centers on and rightly explains the doctrine of inspiration, then the preacher would *not* be preaching an expository sermon. Why do we say that? Because the main point of Romans 3 is not the doctrine of inspiration, but rather the fallenness of man. The entire chapter builds to man's fallenness; Paul surveys the Old Testament and concludes that "all have sinned and fall short of God's glory" (3:23).

To be sure, the doctrine of inspiration is mentioned, but only in passing in verse 2 ("the very words of God," NIV). Simply put, inspiration is not *the main point* of Romans 3. Rather, the inspiration of the Old Testament is invoked by Paul to give authoritative weight to his recitation of passages that make his main point.

Furthermore, the main point of Romans 3 is not the unbelief of Israel (vs. 3), the faithfulness of God (vs. 3), the righteousness of God (vs. 5), the coming judgment of the world (vs. 6), or the ways men demonstrate depravity (vs. 13–18). All of those concepts *appear* in Romans 3 not as ends in themselves, but rather as elements of an argument toward Paul's main point: we *all*, Jew and Gentile alike, hav sin problem that we cannot solve.

What distinguishes an expository sermon is not simply that what the preacher is saying is biblically accurate, but that it draws its main truth from the main point of the passage. An expository sermon on Romans 3 requires that the main point of the sermon is *the main point*—not a sub-point, not peripheral to the main point—of Romans 3.

Of course, there's value in sequentially preaching through books of the Bible. It helps to ensure that the whole counsel of God is preached and you have "kept nothing back that was profitable for" the congregation (Acts 20:20 KJV). Furthermore, by taking an entire book under study, the preacher is forced to grapple with the flow of the author's argument throughout. This increases the likelihood that the preacher is rightly identifying the main point of a particular sermon's text.

2. Observational preaching is not necessarily expository preaching.

The second type of preaching often confused with expository preaching is what we call observational preaching. This kind of preaching attempts to be faithful to the text at hand, but it fails to move from observations about the text and its structure to an exposition of *the point* of the passage.

As we learned in seminary, good Bible exegesis begins with observations about a text and its structure. But the reason for making observations is to ensure we're exposing the full truth of the passage.

Unfortunately, far too many sermons never make the turn from observations to exposition. Put another way, preachers frequently deliver an exegetical outline rather than a homiletical one. When that happens, the elements of a text's argument become the points of the sermon without connecting the observations to the author's argument. The pastor discusses at length what's in the passage without ev communicating *the point* of the passage.

But the goal of an expositional sermon is to draw a line from the content of the passage to the main point of the author. This line distinguishes an observational sermon from an expositional sermon.

An illustration from an analogous context might help to illuminate this point. Imagine a college literature professor lectured her class on Ernest Hemingway's classic, *The Old Man and the Sea*. After introducing the class to the text and identifying its author, the professor then outlines three "points" of the story which will form the points of her lecture: (1) the man, (2) the sea, and (3) the fish. The profes then proceeds to discuss the points in turn.

The man was named Santiago: an old man, a fisherman by trade, and yet poor. The lecturer describes Santiago's appearance, the village in which he lives, his friend Manolin, and Santiago's persistence i his fishing endeavors. For more than 15 minutes, the professor discusses the various facts about the man that are recounted in the story. She then turns to the second "point": the sea. Again, the professo talks at length about the sea near which Santiago lives, the storms that come up on the sea, the prevalence of sharks in the sea, and various other details. Finally, the professor turns to her final "point:" the fish. She recounts at length the details about the fish, including the type of fish, color, weight, and length. It was large, so large in fact that it could not even be brought into the boat, but was instead lashed the side. The professor talks about how the fish was then attacked and eaten by sharks while strapped to the side of the boat. With that, the professor observes that it is a sad story, ends the lecture, and adjourns the class.

Such an approach to Hemingway's classic would do a grave disservice to the story and to the students. While the professor in our illustration understood the details of the story—those three points do app prominently in the book—she and the class will leave the lecture without "the point of it all." Any skilled literature professor would exposit—would expose—the class to Hemingway's point.

Simply put, "the man," "the Sea," and "the fish" are not the points. Instead, they lead to Hemingway's point about the futility of life. The main point of the story, which any able literary expositor must explain the class, is that you can spend your whole life pursuing the big fish and then, after catching it, lose it all in the end anyway. To fail to elucidate that for the class is to fall short as a literary expositor.

Sadly, this is how far too many preachers approach the Bible. They riff at length about various factual elements of the text, labeling the observations "points," but they fail to see those "points" as constituer elements that contribute to a main point, an argument. Understanding a text's details is important to grasp its argument. But too often, sermons are organized around factual or structural observations abou from the text, without seeing those observations as building blocks to an argument.

For example, while preaching on 1 Peter 1:1–2, a preacher might identify his three "points" as God's people, God's foreknowledge, and God's work—all of which appear in the text, but none of which are a the point Peter is making. The point of that passage is that God has chosen a people to obey him. The various factual observations about God's people and his foreknowledge and his work are there to ma a point, but they are not themselves the argument of the passage. By stopping at factual observations and not pushing through to the point of the text, the preacher fails to deliver an expository sermon no matter how much the sermon may focus on the verses as hand.

Conclusion

Are these critiques much ado about nothing? Are we hoping to instigate a merely academic debate about whether a sermon meets some technical definition of an "expository sermon"?

No, as we said at the outset, the issue is a theological one. To hold a high view of Scripture requires not merely a belief in the authority and inspiration of Scripture, but also faithfulness to the meaning of th author, both human and divine. And while we're promised that Scripture is sufficient for the sanctification of the church, this assumes that the point of Scripture is rightly identified and conveyed, thereby bringing the full import of Scripture to bear on members' lives.

In our hermeneutics classes, we began with the task of making observations about the text. But as we progressed through our respective classes and neared the end of the semester, the assignments mo from making observations about the text to summarizing the author's point—what the professors at Dallas Seminary refer to as the text's "Big Idea."

This exercise is useful for preachers. Study the text. Understand its words. Observe the relationship of the words to one another. Consider the structure. But do all of this not as an end itself. Do it in order get to the point of the text. Only then can you deliver a truly expository sermon that makes the point of the text the point of your sermon in a way that will thoroughly furnish your congregation unto all good works (2 Tim 3:17).

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For more on this topic, check out these two articles (Part 1, Part 2) by Mike Gilbart-Smith.

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