

# **The Whole Bible and Expository Preaching**

## **Subject: "Is an Expository Ministry Realistic?"**

### **In My Experience, Biblical and Practical Considerations**

Have Dovetailed Together to give me deep conviction on the subject of expository preaching. I have come to believe that I can be a faithful pastor only by seeking to expound all of God's Word to all of the people in my congregation.

### **Biblical Considerations**

I have never sat under an expository ministry. In the church where I was converted, the order of the day was: 10.45 Sunday morning, Consecration preached; 6.30 in the evening, Conversion preached. The diet never changed! With unflinching consistency the endless army of "lay preachers" held forth on these two themes. In themselves they are not unhealthy themes, but repeated ad nauseam fall pitifully short of Biblical requirements. If hearers wanted to know anything more of God and his ways they were expected to glean it from their personal Bible reading, which duty was constantly urged.

So it was that when I entered into my first pastorate in my early twenties, I found that there were two questions which I had never heard discussed, nor had I ever asked them. I was now the approved minister of a settled congregation, but never once had I enquired, "What is a minister?" or, "What is the task of a minister?" You may think it appalling that someone could be called to a pastorate without those questions being asked and answered. I agree with you, but those are the facts.

It was really quite ordinary things which made me begin to ask those questions. A rather eccentric old lady fell asleep in every single church service, but was always sufficiently awake afterwards to chide me for my refusal to wear a clerical collar. She told me that "proper ministers wear dog-collars" and wanted to know why I did not behave as a "proper minister". What is a "proper minister"? For the first time I found myself asking the question.

Besides this, I was finding regular sermon preparation very taxing and consequently was doing comparatively little visitation. Some other ladies told me that if I was a "real pastor" I would have been round to see them more often. This led to my seeking to define precisely what my task was. With the New Testament in my hand I tried to get to grips with both the questions which were causing me concern. Can you imagine the consternation of a young minister who reads the New Testament and finds no ministers (as he understands them) mentioned? I began to wonder what Biblical justification, if any, I had for the things that I was doing.

The New Testament spoke of elders. The passage which helped me the most was Acts 20. There Paul sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus and told them to "pastor the flock of God" (Acts 20:17, 28). Those same elders were called in verse 28 "overseers", or "bishops". No one had ever told me this before, but I discovered that New Testament churches had elders, that each elder was to pastor the local church, and to be a bishop over the local church. Numerous other passages, such as 1 Peter 5 and Titus 1, confirmed these findings. Nobody had ever told me that eldership existed, yet here it was. These elders were to teach and to rule. I had to ask myself whether I was such an elder and, if so, what justification I had for accepting financial support from the church.

I was very relieved to discover 1 Timothy 5:17! Clearly then it was quite justifiable for some elders to be financially supported by the congregation. Elders who ruled well qualified for such support, so that they could give themselves more fully and completely to labouring in the Word and doctrine.

The two questions were thus beginning to be answered for me. "What is a minister?" He is a ruling, teaching elder, set aside to labour in the Word and doctrine. What is the task of a minister? It is to feed the flock with the Word. It is to rule the flock by bringing it into submission to the Word. So a minister is primarily a man of the Word. He labours in the Word and doctrine. He is a man whose time and talents are taken up with the Word and its application to the flock.

Having faced this, I was then confronted by the question: "How much of the Word am I to give to the congregation?" The apostle's ambition was "to present every man perfect", and I knew that mine was the same, for I now believed, from Ephesians 4, that God had given me to the church "for the perfecting of the saints". My thinking was directed to 2 Timothy 3:15-17. Holy Scriptures is the means by which the man of God becomes perfect. If I was to see saints perfected it meant teaching them the Scriptures and, as all Scripture is inspired and profitable in the way that passage shows, it meant teaching them all Scripture.

This was confirmed to me by Matthew 4:4. Jesus did not say that man shall live by most of the words that proceed out of the mouth of God, but by all of them. John 17:17 also weighed heavily on my mind. "Sanctify them through thy truth," the Saviour prayed. What is the truth? "Thy word is truth." I could see then that the people of God needed to know the whole of inspired Scripture before they could be mature spiritually.

If I was to present every man perfect, it was my responsibility before God to ensure that every boy, every girl, every young person, every man and woman, was taught every word of God. Nothing less would do. This gave a wholly new dimension to my understanding of the ministry. I could see that it could not be done without hard work, much concentration and thought, and the employment of all one's energies and faculties. It meant "labour in the word and doctrine".

### **Practical Considerations**

While Scripture was moving me towards these conclusions, a number of practical considerations were propelling me in the same direction. On entering the ministry I had found, to my amazement that I was preaching every week to a number of people who could not read, and a greater number of others who had immense difficulty in reading. This swamped my previous convictions about daily Bible reading. From conversion I had been schooled in "Quiet Time theology". I had been taught that "a chapter a day keeps the Devil away" and, therefore, it was my duty to read the Bible every day.

At this stage in my ministry two thoughts occurred to me. The first was this. The early Christians did not practise daily Bible reading. How could they? Printing had not been invented and handwritten copies were beyond the reach of the normal person. The "Quiet Time", as currently advocated, was unknown to the New Testament Church. How, then, could I bind the consciences of my people to it?

The second thought concerned the practical question of what I was going to do with those people (of all ages) who could not read. How could I tell them to go home and do something which they most certainly could not do? Reading is a highly desirable skill and I would most certainly encourage people to take steps to learn, but it is possible to put so much pressure in this direction that you convey the impression that illiteracy, or reading-difficulty, is a sin. It isn't.

Nor does the New Testament teach that the ability to read is an essential requirement for anyone wishing to grow in grace.

I came to the conclusion that the New Testament lays little emphasis on personal Bible reading, but rather 'stresses the gathering of the church to be instructed by Christ-appointed teachers. It teaches that new converts should be baptised and join a church, and that it is in the sphere of the local church that they are to hear the apostles' doctrine. With this in mind I knew that my ministry would have to change. I could no longer be content to preach from parts of the Bible and expect the people to go home and read up the parts that I did not cover.

As a teaching elder with responsibility for that congregation, I felt that I must teach the whole congregation the whole Word myself. Whatever the value of personal Bible reading, it seemed clear to me that the ministry of teaching elders was the God-appointed means of bringing the church to spiritual maturity. I felt that I must henceforth labour as if the private means of personal Bible reading did not exist (as it did not, for so many). My public ministry alone would have to be of such a sort that every person came to know "every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God". So, by Biblical and practical considerations, I came to the conclusion that an expository ministry is the ministry God expects of us, and which pleases him. This being so, how could I labour any other way? Would it be realistic to seek to advance Christ's cause by means which he has not appointed? I did not feel I could sincerely ask God's blessing on anything other than an expository ministry. This is the greatest factor in my mind when I seek to advocate that an expository ministry is eminently realistic.

### **An Expository Ministry in Practice**

How does such a ministry work out in practice? How do you go about seeking to teach every person the whole counsel of God? You might think this incredibly unrealistic, but the target which I have set myself in the ministry is to cover the whole of the Bible in ten years. I believe that this is not as unrealistic as it sounds. Perhaps we should sacrifice some depth for breadth. Most men's talents lie in this direction. Only a very small number of men can expound at great depth. Most men in the ministry do not have such gifts. There are a few, and we thank God for them, but they are only a few.

Hardly any of us is like the man who is said to have expounded the book of Job for forty years. I have heard it told that he started with eight hundred hearers, and ended with eight! If so, there is little doubt that the surviving eight knew the book of Job fairly well, but what else did they know? Did they know the gist of Ephesians, or the contents of Hebrews? Did they know the main drift of the prophecy of Ezekiel? Were they familiar with the particular distinctives of the book of Habakkuk? Did they have a good Biblical theology so that they could give a clear 'summary of each book of the Bible? Did they have a true, systematic theology so that they could relate the teachings of the Bible scattered throughout its parts into one consistent whole? I very much doubt it.

I believe that the overall results of sacrificing some depth for breadth are better than a very lengthy exposition of one or two books. Imagine a young man, born into a Christian family, who is brought along to hear expository preaching every week. If the Bible is expounded fully every ten years, by the time he is thirty he will have heard the whole of the Bible three times. He will have heard it when he was a child, then again in his formative 'teen years, and then again in his thinking twenties. There is a young man who will be well founded in the things of God.

I have a friend who went into the ministry at the same time as I did, ten years ago. The first book he began to expound was Ezekiel. When I heard news of him, a couple of years back, he was still expounding Ezekiel! I love my friend, but do not think he is being very realistic.

I believe his commission is to preach the whole counsel of God to all his people. Someone who has heard the whole Bible expounded three times in thirty years will be far better off than someone who hears only a very few books expounded over the same period.

Can it be done? Is this "ten-year plan" really feasible?

I think it is basically realistic if we remember a few fundamental factors.

We must remember that the Bible was written in books. Our job is not only to expound verses or chapters, but books, because God gave us the Scriptures in books. Chapters and verses are man's inventions. They make it easy to find one's place, but many of the divisions are quite arbitrary and artificial. Take the epistle to the Romans. I do not believe that Paul intended one sentence of his letter to be read to the church one week, and another sentence the next week. The letter, when it arrived, was read to the church in one session.

When the hearers came to the practical chapters of chapter 12 onwards they could still remember the doctrinal chapters of 1-11. When they came to the closing greetings, they could still remember the opening greetings. When the session had finished they had in their minds a whole book with its distinctive theology. They could summarise the gist of its argument and the drift of its thinking. They could talk about its main features and emphases, for they had a whole book in their minds. When we expound Romans our hearers should be no different.

I do not mean that we should expound Romans in one sermon but I do mean that when our hearers come to the practical chapters, they too should still have the doctrinal chapters sounding clearly in their minds, just like the original hearers. When they come to the end of the letter they should still be crystal clear as to its beginning. When we have finished expounding, any person who has listened should be able to give a summary of the main theme, thread and argument, distinctive points and peculiar theology of that letter. He should have the book in his mind. Therefore, I am advocating that we should sacrifice some depth for breadth, so that we may accomplish this. In our own congregation we expounded Romans in six months. We started the letter on exactly the same day as another church, well-known to us. When we had finished the letter, that church was still on chapter 1 verse 8! Personally I think that this is unbalanced.

After we had been through Romans some of our young people went to help on a beach mission, where some team members were more than scornful of the fact that a church should attempt to get a serious understanding of so lofty an epistle in so short a time. These critics set our young people a sort of verbal exam to see if they had managed to learn anything useful from the book, and were astonished when they received a clear and correct answer to every question. I believe that incident speaks for itself. These young people had clearly in their minds the drift of the book, the main contents of the individual chapters, the distinctives of the book, and its practical implications. Romans was in their minds. Unless accompanied by a regular survey of the whole, verse by-verse preaching does not have this effect. I maintain that if a book has been expounded successfully, those who heard the exposition should be able to give a résumé of the book.

The "ten-year plan" is entirely realistic if we vary our method. Some people have an expository ministry, but only one method. They start at verse 1 of the first chapter, and go on doggedly to the last verse of the last chapter. That is what exposition is generally reckoned to be. I have heard it called "expedition"!—and it can end in frigidity of the arctic!

I believe it is essential to vary the method. You cannot treat an epistle as you treat a prophetic book like Jeremiah, where the chapters are not chronological, and the "beginning-to-end" method is out of the question. For my own part, we were able to tackle Romans by expounding it straight through, keeping the main drift of the book in people's minds and sacrificing some depth. We did not spend eight weeks on the word "propitiation", but gave a brief summary of what the word means, and then continued, so that the main force of the book was not lost.

Jeremiah was entirely different. First of all I gave a summary of the life of Jeremiah so that everybody had a clear mental picture of the prophet's life. Then I was able to show how different chapters fitted into the various times of his life, the changing experiences through which he was passing and the different kings under whom he was prophesying. We left out quite a few chapters, but when we had finished there was reason to believe that the people had a clear view of the total teaching of the prophet Jeremiah.

Job required yet another approach. We spent some time on the introduction, which is a narrative and easy to follow, and then pointed out the whole question of cycles of speeches. We expounded the main theme of each contributor in the first cycle of speeches. In the second and third cycles we gave a summary of all the parts not included initially, and chose the contribution of just one speaker to expound. The main points of Elihu's contribution were then studied, followed by two expositions of Jehovah's answer to Job, and an exposition of the conclusion to round off. Of course we left out much. But when we had finished I believe most of our people were clear as to the total force and overall message of the book of Job, were edified and able to retain what the book was about.

I believe this "ten-year plan" is realistic if we are not afraid of repetition, because, after ten years (if we are labouring according to schedule), we will have covered the Bible. We should not be embarrassed to go over it again. Why should we be embarrassed by repetition? Jesus felt no embarrassment. It is quite clear that he said many things on more than one occasion and both Peter and Paul admit to saying things for the second time. If we ourselves are growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, we will never go over the same ground with the same light, but always with brighter, fuller light.

Besides this, after ten years, the average congregation changes a lot. Johnny, who was two, is now twelve. The new convert of a week's standing then, has now been a Christian for a decade. There will be folk who have been saved recently and others who have moved to the area, as well as new people. We ought not therefore to be afraid or ashamed of repetition. I know some pastors who have preached through Romans early on in their pastorate and have no intention of ever preaching through it again in the same pastorate. But why deprive their congregation of a book of the Bible? Why deprive the new people I have mentioned of such a treasure house?

### **My "Liverpudlian" Method**

The method which I use in Liverpool is that on Sunday mornings, after the opening act of worship, I spend ten minutes telling a Bible story, in a plain and unadorned manner. I am working through the Biblical narrative consecutively, and the intention is to cover all the main highroads of Scripture every five years. Two factors have caused me to do this. The first is that God is adding people who have no background of Biblical knowledge. I know that even under the sort of expository ministry that I am advocating, they are going to have vast tracts of Biblical ignorance for a long time to come. This is a useful way of bringing before them parts of Scripture with which they may be completely unacquainted.

In addition, there is a second factor. It is that the vast majority of the Christian public lacks any appreciable understanding of Biblical chronology, and this ten-minute session is a useful way of constructing it in people's minds and cementing it in as the different stones in an arch are each placed in correct position.

Later in the morning service we have forty minutes exposition of a particular Bible book. I alternate between the Testaments to keep the teaching balanced, so that a series of sermons from a New Testament book is always followed by a series from an Old Testament book. I am aware that the Old Testament is composed of history, poetry and prophecy, and therefore, in my Old Testament series, I usually preach from each type of literature in turn. I usually do much the same in my New Testament series, preaching in turn from the Gospels and Acts, the Pauline epistles and the general epistles. I have not yet had the courage to expound Revelation!

On Monday nights we gather for church prayer, and we read a chapter (or part of a chapter) of a book consecutively. I seek to explain any difficult allusions, and then to bring out one or two straightforward doctrinal and practical points; all in less than fifteen minutes. I would have great difficulty in preaching a series of forty-minute sermons from 1 Samuel. Nonetheless, I can keep the teachings of that particular book before the congregation by such a method as this.

On Wednesday evenings we gather for a Bible exposition, where the atmosphere is much more relaxed and there is less sensitivity concerning the time factor. At the end we always have a time of questions and discussion. I usually seek to put some questions to the congregation, mostly on the application of the things we have studied. They also put questions, which have led to some stimulating and helpful discussions, and have often greatly increased my own understanding of the passage in hand. I believe this sort of "come-back" is very profitable and entirely consistent with our commission to teach the people thoroughly.

Despite what I have said about the exposition of books, I do not believe that an expository ministry is only the exposition of books. On Sunday nights I preach what Pastor Al Martin calls "topical expository sermons". I do not mean that they are topical in the sense that today's news is, but rather that I preach through particular topics or themes. The sermons are expository by nature, because they are expositions of texts of Scripture, but rather than expounding just one passage, several passages and texts which bear on the theme are opened up.

We duplicate the sermon outline so that people can read it before the service starts, follow it during the preaching, and review it afterwards. This has been particularly useful to those members of our congregation who are not used to formal teaching, for it greatly helps their concentration and ability to follow. Many people keep the outlines and now have quite a stock of them. In this way they have built up a brief compendium of Biblical teaching on a host of subjects.

Another justification for the topical expository method arises from the pastor's ministry of counselling. He finds that again and again people ask the same sort of question. There are certain questions which are of more than usual concern. Inner Liverpool is multi-racial and those of our congregation who come from there have repeatedly asked pointed questions on the Biblical teaching concerning race. One (lengthy) topical expository sermon settled most of their problems. In other sermons we have dealt with work, leisure, ambition, the Devil, the gifts of the Spirit and dozens of other topics which people have raised in pastoral visitation and counselling. It is right that they should hear what the Word of God has to say on these subjects, and that the pastor should draw from every part of Scripture to make God's mind clear.

I am not convinced that people who restrict themselves to verse by verse, book by book preaching meet these needs. Most people do not have the ability to search the Scriptures and to draw out the principles and teachings of each part to see what the total message of Scripture is on a particular subject. It is not the task of a sheep to feed himself and to find his own pasture.

The feeding and protection of the sheep is the duty, responsibility and delight of the under shepherd. What I am advocating, then, is a combination of "ten-year plan" book by-book exposition and topical expository preaching. For me this is the most realistic way for a minister to fulfil his responsibility to teach all the people all the Bible.

Stuart Olyott gave this talk, the above article way back in 1974 when 6 years into his ministry in Liverpool, to the evangelical ministers in the mid-Sussex area gathered at Haywards Heath. He got round to expounding Revelation in 14 sermons in 1978 at the end of his ten year plan. Pastor Olyott has since taken God's people through the Bible many times and today 40 years later he still stands by the usefulness of the "Ten-year plan", that this type of Expository Ministry is Realistic.

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