

EXPOSITORY PREACHING

SERIES: PBC DNA: WHY WE DO
WHAT WE DO



Catalog No. 20180107
Various Verses
First Message
Scott Grant
January 7, 2018

Various Verses

This year marks the seventieth anniversary of Peninsula Bible Church. We're beginning the year by revisiting some of our core ministry principles.

Actually, it's not quite accurate to say this is the seventieth anniversary of Peninsula Bible Church, because we didn't start as Peninsula Bible Church. We started as Peninsula Bible Fellowship. We began as a Bible-teaching ministry and then morphed into a church, which is to say that the Scriptures were in our DNA from the start. Seven decades later, they remain central to our understanding of what God has called us to be and do in this place.

When Peninsula Bible Fellowship started, it didn't have a paid pastor. Two years later, Ray Stedman became our first pastor. What did he do? Ray said this: "Upon coming to Palo Alto in 1950 I began immediately to preach through books of the Bible, working my way through Sunday after Sunday until I had finished the whole book."¹

The approach that Ray was referring to is called "expository preaching," which involves studying a particular biblical text and preaching from it. Expository preaching is distinguished from topical preaching, in which the preacher begins with a topic and preaches on it, often using a collection of texts that relate to the topic. In expository preaching, a topic or topics emerge, but the text is determinative, not the preacher.

Although I believe that topical preaching has its place, and we do preach topical sermons, our main diet on Sunday morning remains expository sermons.

A light to my path

God inspired humans to write the Scriptures. Peter says, "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Paul says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God . . ."

(2 Timothy 3:16). In a remarkable passage, Paul says that the Scriptures contain "the wisdom of God," "the thoughts of God," "the depths of God," and "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

The Scriptures, being breathed out by God, speak truth. In prayer, Jesus says to the Father that "your word is truth" (John 17:17). God is one and he exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Scriptures connect all three members of the Trinity with "truth." Isaiah speaks of "the God of truth" (Isaiah 65:16). Paul says "the truth is in Jesus" (Ephesians 4:21). Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13).

Thank God that he has given us the Scriptures so that we might live according to what's true, not according to what's false. The psalmist says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet / and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

Apart from God's revelation, we'd be doing a lot of guessing as to what's true and what's false, what's right and what's wrong. We'd be at the mercy of flawed and ever-shifting human culture, reasoning, and emotions. We would be more likely to become "futile" in our "thinking" (Romans 1:21). We would be more susceptible to false teachers, "who will secretly bring in destructive heresies" (2 Peter 2:1). We would be more vulnerable to being taken "captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world" (Colossians 2:8). We would be at the mercy of Satan, who is "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Let us not forget that we are in a spiritual war for the hearts and minds of men, women, and children.

Malcolm Muggeridge, a British sage from the previous century, said this of his time: "The twentieth century is an age of almost inconceivable credulity, in which critical faculties are stifled by a plethora of public persuasion and information so that, literally, anyone will believe anything" (qtd. in Internet Archive "Chronicles of Wasted Time"). If Muggeridge were alive today, I wonder what he would say about the twenty-first century and our so-called "post-truth" world. Praise God that he has given us the Scriptures, which speak truth.

Something deeper

Yes, all Scripture is breathed out by God, but how did God breathe it out? He didn't breathe out a Bible dictionary. He didn't give us a book that lists topics and then tells us, unambiguously, everything we need to know about those topics. If God breathed out a Bible dictionary, then I would say our primary method of preaching should be topical. Instead, God breathed out mostly stories, poems, and letters, which were written by particular authors in particular languages for particular people in particular times and particular places.

If God breathed out the Scriptures in this manner, then the expository approach mirrors the manner in which they were breathed out. We take a story, a poem, or a letter, for example, and try to understand what God is saying to us today.

God didn't make it easy for us. In order to understand a particular passage, we have to do our best to understand the grammatical, historical, and theological context in which it was written. Even the apostle Peter acknowledges that the apostle Paul wrote some things "that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). No, God didn't make it easy for us; he made it better!

Stories, poems, and letters are much more interesting than a dictionary. A dictionary puts us to sleep, but we love stories, poems, and letters. We might want God simply to dictate to us what he wants us to do. He doesn't seem to do that very often, however. Instead, he says something like, "Read these stories. Read these poems. Read these letters." And as we pore over them, God doesn't simply inform us; he also shapes us and inspires us.

Many people credit Ted Wise as being the founder of the so-called Jesus Movement, which this church was caught up in the 1970s. After coming to Christ and evangelizing hippies in the Haight (district) in San Francisco in the 1960s, Ted served for a while as a pastor at our church and he remained part of our church until moving to southern California to be near his family toward the end of his life.

When I was in my early twenties, I attended a Bible study that Ted led at an apartment complex in Sunnyvale and was blown away by his stories. On one particular evening, he simply told his life story. Part of his conversion story included a vision of Jesus during one of his then-frequent acid trips. The strange thing, he said,

was that though he was high on acid, he became aware that this vision of Jesus stood outside of the trip he was on: it was a non-acid-inspired vision of Jesus.

Later, I asked Ted why the Lord doesn't appear to people in such visions more often. He answered, "Because he wants something deeper." I think he's right. The Lord wants something deeper, and something deeper is awaiting us in the Scriptures. When we dive into the Scriptures, we're diving for something deeper.

All truth

We humans are especially adept at avoiding truths we would rather not deal with. But if it's the truth, we are better off dealing with it than living in denial of it. The Scriptures, as we have seen, speak truth from God. The expository approach tends to lead us into texts that are not only comforting but also challenging, texts that are not only popular but also obscure.

As preachers here, we want all truth, even difficult truth, first to reach us and then you. Therefore, we study and preach through all sorts of texts in both testaments, comforting texts as well as challenging texts, popular texts and well as obscure texts. We just finished, for example, a series in Ezekiel, much of which is both challenging and obscure.

I received this email from a recent college graduate who was back in town last year and attended one of our worship services when I was preaching from Ezekiel. I hesitate to share this, because it may come off as somewhat self-serving, but I do so because she says what I want to say (and probably says it better!) but from the perspective not of a preacher but from the perspective of a congregant:

I wanted to write you to express my appreciation for our church—and particularly for the dedication of its pastors to expository preaching. I've visited so many churches lately that present Scripture with an agenda behind it . . . I am struck by how easy it is to approach Scripture with an idea in mind, and then use Scripture for our own purposes. And so I was so grateful for your sermon today, and how you preached the text faithfully and let the powerful words of Ezekiel speak for themselves. And, even from Ezekiel, a book I'm sure most are too intimidated to read or understand, the weight of the gospel was clear, and any non-Christian who attended today was surely awestruck by Yahweh who strikes . . . even his own Son. I know I was profoundly impacted. I also appreciated

the fact that we pondered God's true character—even an aspect of it that is somewhat unappealing to many. I'm not sure the last time I heard a sermon about God's anger, and yet how critical it is to meditate on his holy wrath, and how necessary for understanding the Gospel.

We preach expositionally, from the biblical text and moving through particular books or sections of books, because you need to hear from God far more than you need to hear from a preacher, no matter how good the preacher.

For the preacher

This approach benefits, first of all, the preacher.

I'm not searching for something to preach; the text is right in front of me. With a text, as opposed to a topic, I'm more likely to look for what the text says, not what I want to say. For sure, I sometimes come to a text with an idea of what I think it says or what I want it to say, but oftentimes, spending time with the text (and spending time with God in the text!), I am disabused of my preconceived notions. If I come to a text and have an idea of the sermon that will emerge from my study, I almost always end up with something different.

I come to a text and ask God to use it in my own life, for the Spirit to lead me into the text and meet me in it, and for a sermon to emerge that first of all challenges and/or comforts me. For me, the journey from text to sermon is a spiritual adventure.

To renew and equip

Second, the expository approach benefits the congregation.

If the preacher is faithful to God in his or her work in the text, the congregation gets a sermon from someone who has met with God in the Scriptures. The last thing you want in a preacher is someone who doesn't believe his own stuff.

We seek, in expository preaching, to renew the minds of those who are hearing and equip them to know and follow the Lord, not least by seeing a text in front of them and learning how to interpret and apply it for themselves (Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, Ephesians 4:23, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

During the week, we are bombarded with information, thoughts from within and thoughts from without. Our minds need to be renewed, and at least once a week, as we give attention to God in the Scriptures, our minds are renewed.

When we preach in this manner, we seek to equip rather than to spoon-feed, to make people not dependent on us but dependent on the Lord—to make them, in the words of David Roper, a former pastor of our church, “independently dependent on the Lord.”

I came to Christ when I was sixteen years old, but I didn't lead my first Bible study until twelve years later, but for all those years, I attended churches, including this one, that taught the Scriptures and led Bible studies. I was being equipped. Without knowing it, I was learning to understand, study, and teach the Scriptures. When I taught my first Bible study to a group of forty high school students, it dawned on me, “I think I know how to do this.”

Seeker-sensitive

It is sometimes said that this approach is not seeker-sensitive. I disagree. When we preach from a text, a seeker can see the text we're preaching from—and can have a much better idea whether what we're saying is coming from ourselves or from the Scriptures.

An Ethiopian eunuch was reading a text in Isaiah when Philip asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The eunuch answered, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Philip, beginning with the text in Isaiah, then proceeded to guide him (Acts 8:30-31). This is what we do as preachers here: we start with a text and do our best to guide you through it. In that sense, we're guides.

None of this is to say that topical sermons don't have their place. Sometimes, the times dictate that we deal with certain topics; so topical sermons supplement our main diet of expository sermons. For example, a few months ago, I preached a sermon to recognize the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Before the 2016 election I preached a sermon titled “Faith and Politics.” What you are reading right now is a topical sermon that draws from multiple texts. It is perhaps ironic, then, that this is a topical sermon that extolls the virtues of expository preaching! When preaching topically, however, care must be taken so that one doesn't take particular texts out of context to fit certain preconceived notions.

It's about God

Not being mechanically inclined, I have had occasion to look at numerous tools in my lifetime and ask, "What is this thing for?" Only after its purpose was explained to me was I able to understand how I might profit from its use. What are the Scriptures for? The Scriptures themselves declare their purpose.

The Word of God is about . . . God. Every time people speak, they are saying something about themselves; they are saying what they think and feel. When God speaks, as he has in the Scriptures through Spirit-inspired human authors, he is telling us something about himself; he is telling us what he thinks and feels.

As noted earlier, the Scriptures represent "the wisdom of God," "the thoughts of God," "the depths of God," and "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). The first book of the Scriptures begins this way: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The last book begins this way: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place" (Revelation 1:1). From first to last, the Scriptures are about God.

In the Scriptures, God reveals himself to us. The "word of God" is God's revelation. But the "word" is also God himself as seen in Jesus Christ (John 1:1, Hebrews 1:1-2). That does not mean that words on a page, even the pages of Scriptures, are God, but it does mean that God's written word concerns the incarnate word, Jesus Christ. Listen to Jesus, addressing a group of his countrymen: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me . . ." (John 5:39). The word of God bears witness about the Word of God, Jesus Christ. When Phillip guided the eunuch through the Scriptures, beginning with the text in Isaiah that the eunuch was reading, he guided him to Christ.

Every biblical text should therefore be approached with the question, "What does this tell me about God?" John writes, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). What does that tell us about God? Paul writes, "Flee immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18). What does that tell us about God?

It's about relationship

First, the Scriptures are about God. Second, in that they were breathed out for humans, they are about humanity. Not surprisingly, if the Scriptures are first

about God and second about humanity, they are about humanity in the context of humanity's relationship to God. The Scriptures in particular feature God's determination to rescue humans from evil, create a people for his name's sake, and put the world to rights.

In the book of Ezekiel, this refrain appears more than seventy times: "you" or "they" "will know that I am the Lord." God wants to be known, and he wants men and women to know him. The Scriptures, then, call us into relationship with God.

The Scriptures feature "what God has prepared for those who love him" and "the things freely given to us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). These things are gifts of love—an expression of God's love for us. After spending three chapters telling the Ephesians how much God loves them, Paul prays that they may be able to comprehend the depth of God's love (Ephesians 3:14-19).

David writes, "One thing have I asked of the LORD, / that will I seek after: / that I may dwell in the house of the LORD / all the days of my life, / to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD / and to inquire in his temple" (Psalm 27:4). He also writes, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!" (Psalm 139:17).

Although the Word calls us into an intimate love relationship with God, we are not equal with God. He is the Lord God Almighty; we are not. The Scriptures therefore not only call us to love God, they call us to worship him. The psalmist prays: "Make me understand the way of your precepts, / and I will meditate on your wondrous works" (Psalm 119:27). God's precepts, contained in his Word, are designed to lead us to meditate on his wonderful nature; this is worship. Later, the same writer prays, "My lips will pour forth praise, / for you teach me your statutes" (Psalm 119:171). Again, he sees the teaching of God's statutes contained in his Word as calling for the worship of God.

The Scriptures call humans into a worshipful relationship with God, not only as individuals but also as a community. Jesus prays for his disciples and for the world in this way: "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:22-23). Paul's great concern in Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, especially, is to bring Jews and Gentiles together in a worshiping community. Paul urges us to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3).

It's about mission

The Scriptures call us not only to know and worship God but also to bring his healing, loving rule to each other and to the world, not only as individuals but also as a community.

God called Abraham with the purpose that he would “be a blessing” to the nations (Genesis 12:2). God called Israel, the people who descended from Abraham, to be “a light for the nations” (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6). Jesus, fulfilling the call of both Abraham and Israel, said, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). But he also told his disciples, “You are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14).

Jesus called his disciples not only that they might relate to him but also that they might both preach about the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God and cast out demons (Mark 3:13-15). He wants his disciples to love each other so that “all people will know” that they are his disciples (John 13:35). He commands them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Paul wants us to pray and live in a particular way because God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).

To think: We can actually know God, our creator and redeemer. We can actually serve his purposes in the world. What a thrill!

Ministry of the Spirit

We practice expository preaching, but we don't trust in expository preaching. We trust in the Lord. So we pray the Holy Spirit to take the Scriptures, which he breathed out, and make “our hearts burn within us,” show us “the glory of the Lord” and “guide” us “into all the truth” (Luke 24:32, 2 Corinthians 3:18, John 16:13).

After exploding with one long sentence declaring all the blessings believers have “in Christ,” Paul prays that his readers may be able to comprehend the blessings so that they may increase “in the knowledge of him,” or with respect to their relationship with him (Ephesians 1:3-17). This requires the work of the Spirit. Likewise, Paul prays that the Spirit would enable them to comprehend “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:14-19).

We pray with the psalmist, “Open my eyes, that I may behold / wondrous things out of your law,” and, “Make me understand the way of your precepts, / and I will meditate on your wondrous works” (Psalm 119:18, 27).

When I attended my first Bible study on the verge of my sixteenth birthday, I knew two things about the Bible: there's an Old Testament and there's a New Testament. When I showed up, the youth pastor said, “Open to Ephesians,” at which point the lovely girl sitting cross-legged on the floor next to me handed me a Bible and opened it to Ephesians, because I had no idea where Ephesians was in the Bible, or if it was in the Bible—or even what it was, for that matter.

I don't remember learning anything specific from Ephesians that day, but I came away with this sense: there was something going on in that room that was both unfamiliar and attractive to me, and I knew that it had something to do with this book that the girl put in my hands. I take it now that I sensed the Holy Spirit as the pastor opened the Scriptures.

I came back the next week. And the week after that. And every week for the next few months. I learned a lot from those Bible studies. And I gave my life to Christ.

Means to an end

We practice expository preaching, then, not as an end but as a means to an end: so that we might be renewed and equipped to know and follow the Lord. Moreover, expository preaching is by no means the only means.

After all, there's only so much a sermon can do. I personally subscribe to the Dirty Harry philosophy of ministry. In *Magnum Force*, Clint Eastwood, who plays San Francisco police inspector Harry Callahan, says regarding one of his vanquished foes, “A man's got to know his limitations.”³ The best preacher of the best sermon can only do so much.

A sermon, then, sets the stage, not least for community life, further study, devotional reading, prayer, various spiritual practices, spiritual direction, and counseling, any of which the Lord can and does use so that we may know and follow him. Even so, we base our church on the foundation of the Scriptures, and for us that begins with preaching the Scriptures expositionally.

In 1987, toward the end of his tenure as a pastor of this church, Ray Stedman said this: “The greatest contribution the church can make today to a troubled and frightened generation is to return to a consistent and relevant preaching of the word of God.”⁴

True then. True now. Now more than ever.

Endnotes

¹ Stedman, Ray C. “On Expository Preaching.” Authentic Christianity. Ray Stedman Ministries, Date Unknown, <https://www.raystedman.org/thematic-studies/leadership/on-expository-preaching>.

² Internet Archive “Chronicle of Wasted Time.” Web. https://archive.org/stream/MuggeridgeMalcolmChroniclesOfWastedTime/Muggeridge%2C%20Malcolm%20-%20Chronicles%20of%20Wasted%20Time_djvu.txt. 85.

³ *Dirty Harry*. Directed by Don Siegel, performances by Clint Eastwood, Harry Guardino, Andrew Robinson. Warner Brothers, 1971.

⁴ Stedman