



Types of Sermons

By Jess Hall Jr.

Great chefs give as much attention to presentation as they do to cooking. Experience teaches them that if a dish is not pleasing to the eye it will never please the palate. Small children graphically demonstrate the same principle every time one looks at dinner, and, with contorted face, blurts out, "Yecch"! Sophisticated adults simply say, "No thank you."

When the preacher has determined his purpose and gathered his materials, he then must decide how he will present the material. Will he preach an expository sermon? A textual sermon? A topical sermon? Which method will best present the truths he hopes to impress on his hearers?

Some proclaim that "true preaching" must be expository (*Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, Haddon W. Robinson, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980). Others, though defining "expository preaching" more broadly than most, assert that all preaching is expository (*Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, John R.W. Stott, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982, p. 125). While it is correct that all preaching must be an exposition of Scripture (or it is not true preaching), it is also correct that not all true preaching must be expository. In fact, most of the sermons in the history of preaching have been either textual or topical. The topical sermon is the most oratorical type of sermon. It takes only its subject from the text. Its organization is based on the subject rather than distinctions of the text. Properly done, it embraces a single idea that can be stated in a succinct statement, thus lending itself to unity of discussion and power of impression. Its freedom is attractive to the fertile mind. Its danger is that if the mind is not fertile, it can repeat subjects (though called by a different name), deal primarily with the peripheral, and seek the sensational.

In the textual sermon, both the subject and the main points are based on ideas in the text, but, unlike the expository sermon, the development of the main ideas comes from sources outside of the immediate text.

The expository sermon, like the textual sermon, takes its subject and main points from a particular text, but, unlike the textual sermon, it also takes its subpoints from the immediate text. References to others texts may occur, but they are used only to support, elaborate, or confirm what is already evident in the immediate text. A sermon is not expository merely because it addresses a subject in the Bible or because it cites numerous Scriptures. The true expository sermon discloses the thoughts of the author, covers the range of the passage, and applies its truths to the lives of the listeners.

The expository sermon has apparent benefits to recommend it. For instance, it focuses the hearer's attention on the Scripture as the source of authority and teaching. The preacher is not expounding a

great book, a poem, a political passage, or his personal opinion. The expository sermon demands integrity on the part of the preacher. Exegesis, which is the art of critically analyzing or interpreting the passage, must be done honestly. Eisegesis, which is the "art" of reading preconceived opinions into the text, must be avoided. Expositors may wander from the text, thus departing from true exposition; they may stretch and strain the text, drawing from it lessons it was never intended to teach and does not teach. Expositing the text is replaced by exploiting the text.

Expository preaching appears simple, which entices many to attempt it. It is not. The greatest danger is that the preacher will fail properly to proceed from the exegetical to the homiletical. The end result is an expository lesson, not an expository sermon. The expository lesson aims at imparting information; it is aimed at the mind. The expository sermon not only imparts information to the mind, it seeks to change the behavior. It is addressed not only to the mind, it addresses the will. Thus, proper expository preaching requires a rich knowledge of human nature and life experience to apply the text to the lives of the hearers. It relates the listener to the sermon's proposition by focusing on the hearer's responsibility toward that proposition and how that responsibility can be carried out in daily living. An exegetical lecture is a poor substitute for an expository sermon. The preacher who fails to make the text meaningful to the lives of his hearers may impress the audience with his savvy, but he will not impress them with the Savior. A sermon is meaningful when it relates God's truth to man's life, addressing hearers in the way they listen. The sermon must be logical, but that is not enough. People listen psychologically.

No one type of sermon should be preached all of the time. Remember that in the audience are women who move furniture for no apparent reason and men who keep changing styles of automobiles. While variety may not be the spice of life in all things, it does tend to get our attention and increase our anticipation. The wise preacher does not neglect methods and tools that assist him in acquiring his hearers' attention and heightening their anticipation to hear the Word.

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