

Scales are to a musician what the Bible is to an expository preacher. They are the accepted, set and unchanging standards from which all beauty and creativity flow. As a boy I was amazed and somewhat envious of Dave Brubeck as I heard him play. The first time I saw him play, I thought, "This guy does not even try hard and is barely paying attention to what he is doing," and it looked to me as if he just dropped his hands on the keyboard; but wherever he dropped his hands incredible chords and melodies arose. I wanted to play piano like Dave Brubeck, but I discovered that every time I dropped my hands on the keys it sounded just like I had dropped my hands on the keys. The difference, as I discovered, Dave Brubeck spent years locked in a practice room mastering the foundation of all great music - scales. Learning scales teaches the musician not only the ingredients of music but also the relationship between the ingredients and how to move from one note and chord to the next. I hated scales and I hated practicing. The rest, as they say, is history.

Each Sunday thousands of men will enter the pulpit to communicate a message to the millions of people God has assembled before them. What those millions of people hear is less about what the preacher says behind the lectern for those few moments of delivery than what has taken place behind the study desk and on the altar during the days, months and years prior to that preaching moment. The power and persuasion in the hearts of those who hear is a culmination of the preacher's commitment to accurate understanding and application of the text and total dependence upon God's Spirit. The two main ingredients of expository preaching are commitment to and study of the biblical text and prayer.

To establish a good definition of expository preaching one would be wise to depend upon the knowledge and experience of great men from the past who successfully demonstrated

their commitment to the text and unquestionable dependence upon The Holy Spirit before entering the pulpit. The most commanding and perhaps controversial statement I have found is from John R.W. Stott who slices a great swath of elimination in his bold assertion, “It is my contention that all true Christian preaching is expository preaching.”¹ Therefore, religious or morality talks which are not derived from Scripture and committed to the integrity of its original meaning are not necessarily Christian and thus cannot be classified, according to Stott, as “Christian preaching”. With that statement, Stott reduces the field of religious speakers and discussion about preaching to a narrow standard which we will follow throughout this essay.

What Stott said previously about preaching is a qualifying but not a definitive statement. He goes on to define expository preaching: “Expository preaching (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.”²

Preaching is more than an academic commitment; however, it is a philosophical life commitment which may be discovered from men known as much by their godliness as their pulpit and writing skills. John Calvin states, “Preaching is the public exposition of Scripture by the man sent from God, in which God Himself is present in judgment and grace;”³ and Martyn Lloyd-Jones builds upon this, “Any true definition of preaching must say that that man is there to deliver the message of God, a message from God to those people . . . Preaching is delivering what you have received. It is not “silver or gold” (what the world gives) but what God gives.”⁴

John Piper elevates the definition of preaching to the proper perspective by declaring, “Preaching

¹ John R.W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 125.

² *Ibid.*, 125, 126.

³ John Calvin, as quoted in *Gathered Gold*, quoted in Steven J. Lawson, *Famine in the Land*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 104.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 53, 60, 61.

is a public exultation over the truth that it brings . . . True preaching is not the opinions of mere man. It is the faithful exposition of God's Word . . . preaching is expository exultation.

Expository preaching will: feed understanding – teach the mind; and feed feeling – reach the heart.”⁵

The clear sense these definitions give is that preaching is a work of God through the man who is committed and submitted to delivering God's Word through both life and proclamation. The nature of a working definition is to move beyond mere description to the setting of parameters or organized limits, benefits and, if pertinent, difficulties for what are and are not included within the concept. Let us now turn our attention to the parameters or essential components of expository preaching. Richard Mayhue lists five elements which must be present to consider the event expository preaching: “(1) The message finds its sole source in Scripture; (2) The message is extracted from Scripture through careful exegesis; (3) The message preparation correctly interprets Scripture in its normal sense and its context; (4) The message clearly explains the original God-intended meaning of Scripture; and (5) The message applies the Scriptural meaning for today.”⁶ Stott gives four benefits as a part of his definition: (1) Exposition sets limits (to the biblical text); (2) Exposition demands integrity (stay as true as possible to the original intent and meaning); (3) Exposition identifies pitfalls [a] Forgetfulness – going off on a tangent [b] Disloyalty – appearing to remain true to text while straining and stretching it into something different; and (4) Exposition gives us confidence to preach (because it is God's voice and will that is leaned upon and not our own opinion.”⁷ Finally, in Albert Mohler's definition, he includes three characteristics of expository preaching:

⁵ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004) 10-11.

⁶ Richard Mayhue, “Rediscovering Expository Preaching,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, ed. Richard Mayhue and Robert L. Thomas (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), 12-13.

⁷ Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 126-132.

"Expository preaching is that mode of Christian preaching that takes as its central purpose the presentation and application of the text of the Bible. All other issues and concerns are subordinated to the central task of presenting the biblical text. As the word of God, the text of Scripture has the right to establish both the substance and the structure of the sermon. Genuine exposition takes place when the preacher sets forth the meaning and message of the biblical text and makes clear how the word of God establishes the identity and worldview of the church as the people of God. . . . Authentic expository preaching is marked by three distinct marks or characteristics: (1) Authority – because it stands upon the very authority of the Bible; (2) Reverence – this type of preaching requires and reinforces a sense of reverence on the part of God’s people; and (3) Centrality – because it demands the central place in Christian worship and is respected as the event through which the living God speaks to His people.”⁸

My personal conviction for expository preaching, which comes partially from its definition, will be addressed more fully in the theological justification for expository preaching. It states, “I will glorify God through the clear and contemporary preaching of His Word.”

We find beneath the preceding definitions and lists of components and/or characteristics a strong biblical justification for expository preaching. The biblical justification for expository preaching is determined by two elements: (1) what the Bible says and; (2) what we believe about the Bible. The Bible says much about its power and validity (e.g. Psalm 119) but if we doubt or minimize that power and thus invalidate it from our pulpit by not preaching it with confidence and authority, then what we do not believe about the Bible virtually overrules what the Bible says. When Howard Hendricks says, “Biblical truth is the wardrobe of the soul,”⁹ he is agreeing with the Apostle Paul when he says, “*Urge* bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.”¹⁰ The implications toward expository preaching are that those who truly believe the Bible will accept preaching as

⁸ Albert Mohler, “Expository Preaching and the Recovery of Christian Worship,” *Commentary by R. Albert Mohler Jr.*, (August 2005), part 3 [on-line]; accessed 26 September 2005; available from http://albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate=2005-08-11; Internet.

⁹ Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By the Book* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 284.

¹⁰ Titus 2:9-10 (N.A.S.B).

the outward manifestation of that belief by the preacher and the resultant glad acceptance and obedience by the hearer. Those who adorn the doctrine of God, who are called to preach, will preach the Bible.

We are commanded to “preach the Word...” Another biblical justification for expository preaching is discovered in the description of what we are told to do with it as we preach; “...reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction (2 Tim 4:4).” This can only be accomplished through careful exposition of the Scripture with the end clearly aimed at an active faith response from those who hear. The demands of the Bible, therefore, will never allow us to merely exposit information to be correct in our thinking.

Those who adorn the doctrine of God, who hear the Word proclaimed, will respond by faith with obedience. The goal of expository preaching for the congregation is the biblical mandate to:

“...prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”¹¹

The fact that the phrase, “it is written,” appears fifty-nine times in the New Testament reveals that the Scriptures were given to be actively cited; “it is written... therefore”. Four passages support the assertion that the Word of God is powerful when declared and explained: (1) Nehemiah 8:8 where Ezra publicly read and made sense of the Scripture; (2) Acts 20:26, 27 where Paul reminds the Ephesian church how he declared the “whole purpose of God,” and for the undershepherds to continue doing the same; (3) Luke 24 where the risen Christ appeared to the men on the road to Emmaus and opened their eyes about Himself through the recalling of the

¹¹ Jas 1:22-25.

Law and Prophets; and (4) Acts 8:25-40 where Phillip spoke to the Ethiopian eunuch using the Scriptures to reveal Jesus to him.

What we believe about God will determine how we declare Him. Man is naturally man-centered in thinking and practice. Because it is unnatural for man to center his life around anyone or anything other than himself or that which brings pleasure to himself, it stands to reason that to most, theology is merely academic at best and usually irrelevant and complicated. Therefore, when a preacher is homiletically responding to the “natural” needs of his congregation, he will not begin with Scripture (where God is central) but with society/culture (where man is central). However, if a preacher’s intention is to be God-centered or theologically accurate, he must begin with Scripture.

Expository preaching, by nature and practice, is that philosophy of preaching which demands we start with the text of Scripture. Because Scripture is the revelation and revealer of God, and theology is the study and understanding of God, preaching that will be most interested in disclosing God to its hearers is that which is tied most closely to Scripture. Its content and structure will be lifted from the text and not imposed on it. Topical or thematic driven pulpits will discover their congregation to be less focused on God than preaching which drives its congregation into God’s revealing Word. If we intend for our people to have a godly worldview and to begin with God in making their life decisions, then we must teach them applied theology from the pulpit. This can only be accomplished by expounding the Scriptures.

There is a theological cause and effect process to be discovered by observing the preacher and his pulpit. That which causes the God-centered messenger to preach expository sermons will in effect cause the hearer to receive or reject the message based upon their own approach to the Scriptures. Preachers are generals on the frontline of the battle between the

natural tendency of man to make man the center of all things and God's insistence that He alone is to be praised and regarded above all things. John Piper states:

“The goal of preaching is the glory of God in Christ reflected in the glad submission of His creation. There are two massive obstacles to the attainment of this goal: the righteousness of God and the pride of man. The righteousness of God is His unwavering zeal for the exaltation of His own glory. And the pride of man is his unwavering zeal for the exaltation of man's glory.”¹²

We must preach expository sermons in order to change and encourage the core worship and philosophy of our congregation from man to God. The Apostle Paul plainly stated his motivation for what and why he preached when he declared:

“And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.”¹³

The theological justification for expository preaching is the preeminence of God and the ultimate sovereign judgment of His Son. The fullness of this truth was demonstrated at the cross.

Therefore, it may be more specifically stated that it is the cross which demands our preaching be expository, for every part of Scripture will inevitably lead us to it. Piper continues:

“Without the cross, the righteousness of God would demonstrate itself only in the condemnation of sinners, and the goal of preaching would abort – God would not be glorified in the gladness of His sinful creatures. His righteousness would simply be vindicated in their destruction.”¹⁴

Expository preaching is the logical and obedient response to the demand that we always preach Christ at the heart of every message. Once we accept the truth that Scripture will always reveal Christ, we will then confidently proclaim the Word and allow it to do what it was intended to do.

¹² Piper, *The Supremacy of God In Preaching*, 32.

¹³ 1 Cor 2:1-5.

¹⁴ Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 35.

Preachers have two basic ways to approach the Scriptures. First, we may seek to better understand ourselves and the world around us. This is an anthropocentric or man-centered perspective. This worldview will inevitably lead to moralistic and “do better” preaching which focuses on our response to what the Bible says about man. For example, Donald Gowan, when speaking of preacher’s faulty preaching from the Old Testament says, “We have wanted to use the Bible as a set of moral examples,...but...most of the book presents, not models of perfect behavior, but the story of how God deals with ordinary, imperfect human beings.”¹⁵ This “exploitation” of the text diminishes the larger dimensions of the event “into a surface lesson of the text.”¹⁶ The second approach we may take is the theocentric or God-centered perspective. This approach is the theological heart of expository preaching as it emphasizes the Bible’s first purpose: “to tell the story of God. In relating that story, the Bible naturally also depicts many human characters – not however, for their own sake but for the sake of showing what God is doing for, in, and through them.”¹⁷

“You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me” (John 5:39), Jesus told the religious elite of His day. When it comes to the Word of God, today’s people are no different than those who lived when Jesus walked the earth. They claimed to believe and even revere the Scriptures, yet they treated them like any other document created to represent and even impose man’s will and not God’s. Piper concludes his thoughts on this topic with an ominous prediction: “Where the Bible is esteemed as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, preaching can flourish. But where the Bible is treated

¹⁵ Donald Gowan, *Reclaiming the Old Testament*, 3 taken from Sidney, Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 117.

¹⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 117.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 117, 118.

as a record of valuable religious insight, preaching dies.”¹⁸ Therefore, what we believe about God’s Word will determine how we declare Him.

What Paul proclaims about the preaching of the cross is as relevant today as it was when he said:

“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”¹⁹

This statement is the full explanation of Romans 1:16 where Paul boldly says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

The most general and all encompassing theological imperative given from Scripture is to glorify God in everything we do: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God , and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19, 20) “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). Those who God has ordained and gifted to preach must do so to His glory; this can only be accomplished by preaching His Word. It is from here that I arrive at my personal conviction about expository preaching; “I will glorify God through the clear and contemporary preaching of His Word.”

Along with biblical and theological justifications for expository preaching is the practical justification which is ultimately what we need to see if we are to diligently pursue this

¹⁸ Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 44.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 1:18-25.

approach to preaching. Before exploring this subject we must define what is meant by practical. Certainly we do not mean pragmatic in the sense of “if it works do not question or argue against it.” This observation leads to the next question, “what defines success in preaching?” The nature of expository preaching says that we must draw our goals (the end) and our methods (the means) from Scripture. This debate is where the great divide in ministry and preaching arises. If we measure success from the perspective of man, then we will define practical as such and will resist anything that potentially gives failing results by that standard. The emphasis here is on defining the practical justification for expository preaching. If one is neither biblically nor theologically convinced that this is the best approach to the preaching ministry, then he will like the practical justification to be asserted even less. If we are to abandon modern pragmatism and be consistent, then we must turn to Scripture for the practical justification for expository preaching as well. II Peter 1:3-4 gives us the practical justification for expository preaching:

“...seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence . For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence , and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge, and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness, and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love. For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these *qualities* is blind *or* short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his former sins. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you. Therefore, I will always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you *already* know *them*, and have been established in the truth which is present with you.”²⁰

Romans 8:29 gives us the general practical result for which we are looking: “...He also predestined (us) *to become* conformed to the image of His Son.” Peter breaks it down into two

²⁰ 2 Pet 1:3-12.

practical elements: (1) “His divine power (Holy Spirit) has granted to us everything pertaining to life;” and (2) “godliness.” How is this accomplished? “Through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own grace and excellence.” What specifically is the true knowledge of Him? We are to declare “His magnificent promises.” This is where the payoff comes; this is the practical justification for which we are looking. By these promises being proclaimed we “become partakers of the divine nature (conformed to the image of Christ), having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.” The remainder of this passage adds further to the practical result we are looking for and ends with the preacher’s job description: “Therefore, I shall always be ready to remind you of these things, even though you already know them, and have been established in the truth which is present with you” (I Peter 1:12).

The state of preaching today is one which causes both alarm and hope in me. On the one hand, our culture has reentered the Dark Ages where biblical literacy and general awareness of the principles of God are waning exponentially. It reminds me of the “nothing” which swept through the universe and caused great bewilderment and panic in Michael Ende’s book *The Neverending Story*. There is a biblical nothingness that is sweeping through our current generation and its void leaves us on the verge of panic. In his book, *Famine in the Land*, Steven Lawson speaks to this condition, “The prophet Amos warned of a famine that would cover the land, a dearth of hearing the Word of the Lord (Amos 8:11)... Indeed we are living in such days of drought, a time when many forces are suffocating biblical preaching. Now, more than ever, pastors must return to their highest calling, the divine summons to “preach the Word” (II Timothy 4:2).”²¹

²¹ Steven J. Lawson, *Famine in the Land* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 17, 18.

My alarm is twofold. First, as stated, we are witnessing a great vacuuming of the Word of God from our culture. This void drives people to frantically search for meaning. The enemy is all too willing to offer his deceptive fill. Second, and most distressing, our pulpits are becoming both cause and effect in this vacuity. Our previous generation of preachers, believing that “meeting felt needs” and homiletic therapy was the way to fill churches and satisfy the demands of the people, raised up this generation of preachers who are ministerially and philosophically secular and biblically illiterate; and therefore spiritually naïve. These certainly are the days “...when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths (2 Tim 4:3-4).”

My hope is found in Christ alone and His promise regarding His Word. I am to keep preaching the full counsel of His Word, keep doing the work of an evangelist and never be ashamed of His gospel. His Word will not return void and will always accomplish His intended purpose. The Scriptures in concert with God’s Holy Spirit have the power to reveal sin, righteousness and judgment. In the midst of darkness I see the beginnings of revival of God’s Word in many pulpits. Whereas there are still overwhelming numbers of those who do not believe and therefore will not preach it, there are countless men who are discovering that the emperor of the modern church growth and human potential movements is naked and they are returning to or coming for the first time to expository preaching as the only means of growing their church and discipling their people. My optimism is not based upon the condition of expository preaching presently but upon the Word of God which will never change nor become irrelevant. As the fads and programs which promise so much and deliver so little pass away, the Word of God will remain forever.