

ESSENTIALS FOR EFFECTIVE AND ENGAGING EXPOSITION

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Biblical exposition has never been popular among advocates of liberal theologies. There is nothing surprising about this, given their theological and practical commitments. Theologically they have jettisoned biblical inerrancy, and so it naturally follows that a careful and consistent exposition would not be required or even expected. Some, such as David Buttrick and Edward Farley, take the logic of this position to its inevitable conclusion. Farley writes, “We must pose a question. Given a rejection of biblical inerrancy and the acceptance of historical-critical methods, what is the basis of the claim that something preachable is necessarily present in a passage of the Bible chosen by the preacher? Such an assumption seems more arbitrary and more incoherent than the fundamentalist view.... But why would someone who thinks that the Bible originated historically, contextually, and editorially, thus reflecting the human and even corrupted perspectives of its writers, [also think] that any passage one happens to select must contain something in or about it that is proclaimable?” (Edward Farley, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” *Theology Today*. 51 (1994), 100.) Buttrick colorfully adds, “For the better part of the twentieth century, preaching and the Bible have been wrapped up in a kind of incestuous relationship.” (David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching*. Westminster/John Knox (1994) 171.)

Practically, the various liberal theologies orbiting about us have their own particular and peculiar interest. Starting, almost always, with their experience and situatedness, their agendas are driven by personal, social and cultural concerns. On those

occasions when The Bible can be summoned for support, they will allow the Scripture to make a brief appearance. Once its usefulness has been served, it is dismissed from the playing field and sent back to the sidelines where it spends most of its time.

Again, let me be clear. This is neither surprising nor unexpected. This is a reasonable position based upon their philosophical and theological convictions and commitments.

However, what is surprising and disheartening is when evangelicals walk this same path. Claiming to believe in an infallible and inerrant Bible (though some are now questioning this), and affirming that it is alive and powerful, they nonetheless handle it in a way that, in my mind, raises serious questions of theological integrity and spiritual wisdom. In terms of theological integrity such preaching betrays its convictions, at least methodologically. In the context of spiritual wisdom, it says we can see people converted and brought to maturity in Christ without the consistent teaching of the whole counsel of God's Word. Further, at least implicitly, it questions the judgment of God the Holy Spirit in inspiring Scripture to be written as we have it. Topical preaching, narrative preaching, emerging preaching, and yes, even some types of doctrinal preaching, fundamentally suggest by their method and practice that the Holy Spirit should have packaged The Bible differently. This is spiritually ignorant at best, and arrogant at worst. Al Mohler is certainly correct when he observes, "Preaching has fallen on hard times. That's the impression you would gain by listening too much of what passes for preaching in American pulpits. Something is clearly missing—and that missing element is the deep passion for biblical exposition that always characterizes the great preachers of an era. (*Charles Haddon Spurgeon – A Passion for Preaching, Part One 9-20-04. Weblog*)

Some evangelicals have argued that biblical exposition cannot reach the 21st century believer. Others have criticized exposition saying it is dull and boring, dry, uninspiring and irrelevant. These kinds of criticisms are legitimate if you are critiquing “bad preaching.” However, these barbs are out of bounds if engaging exposition is the target. I am convinced that the need for preaching that is faithful and inspiring, expository and engaging has never been greater. Therefore I will address, what I see, as 7 essential elements of effective and engaging expository preaching. However, before moving to do this, we need a definition, a description of what expository preaching is.

Biblical Exposition: A Definition/Description

It is often said that there are as many definitions of expository preaching as there are books on the subject. This statement has some degree of truth, but it is not the whole truth. It ignores the basic fact that these various definitions, though differing at particular points, are quite similar at the foundational level. What we discover is that there actually exist a genuine consensus on what expository preaching is among those who write about it and practice it. Note the following definitions/descriptions which make this point.

Walt Kaiser says:

“Expository preaching is that method of proclaiming the Scriptures that takes as a minimum one paragraph of Biblical text (in prose narrative or its equivalent in other literary genre) and derives from that text both the shape (i.e., the main points and subpoints of the sermon) and the content (i.e., the substance, ideas, and principles) of the message itself.”

-Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Crisis in Expository Preaching Today," *Preaching II* (1995-1996), 4.

Charles Koller:

(The expository sermon derives) "its main points or the leading subhead under each main point from the particular paragraph or chapter or book of the Bible with which it deals."

-Charles W. Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 21.

Donald Miller:

"Expository preaching is an act wherein the living truth of some portion of Holy Scripture, understood in the light of solid exegetical and historical study, and made a living reality to the preacher by the Holy Spirit, comes alive to the hearer as he is confronted by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit in judgment and redemption."

-Donald G. Miller, *The Way to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1957), 26.

Farris Whitesell:

"An expository sermon is based on a Bible passage, usually longer than a verse or two; the theme, the thesis and the major and minor divisions coming from the passage; the whole sermon being an honest attempt to unfold the true grammatical-historical-contextual meaning of the passage, making it relevant to life today by proper organization, argument, illustrations, application, and appeal."

-Farris D. Whitesell, *Power in Expository Preaching* (Westwood: Revell, 1967), vi-vii.

Haddon Robinson's classic definition:

“Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.”

-Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 19.

W.A. Criswell:

“Expository preaching is the method of selecting a large portion (a paragraph or more) of the Bible and expounding it's meaning and applying the message before the people.”

-W. A. Criswell, *Criswell's Guidebook For Pastors* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1980), 42.

Sidney Greidanus:

“The first and foundational criterion is that sermons must be biblical, that is, they must pass on the meaning and intent of Scripture. A second criterion, implied in the first, is that sermons must be God-centered (or Christ-centered) rather than human centered.”

-Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 15.

James Merritt, past president of the SBC:

“Expository Preaching is the explanation, illustration and application of a passage of Scripture deriving its *central theme* and *main points* from the passage itself with the

truths applied to the lives of the hearers.”

-James Merritt, (Pastor, Crosspoint Church, Atlanta,GA).

Al Mohler:

“Expository preaching is that mode of Christian preaching which 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.”

-R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Stephen Olford:

“Expository preaching is the Spirit-empowered explanation and proclamation of the text of God’s Word with due regard to the historical, contextual, grammatical, and doctrinal significance of the given passage, with the specific object of invoking a Christ-transforming response.”

-Stephen F. Olford with David L. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* (Broadman & Holman, 1998) 69.

Ramesh Richard:

“Expository preaching is the contemporization of the central proposition of a biblical text that is derived from proper methods of interpretation and declared through effective means of communication to inform minds, instruct hearts, and influence

behavior toward godliness.”

-Ramesh Richard, *Scripture Sculpture* (Baker, 1995).

J. I. Packer:

“Christian Preaching is the event of God, Himself, bringing to an audience a Bible based, Christ related, life impacting message of instruction and direction through the words of a spokesman.”

Paige Patterson:

“Expository preaching is preaching that enables people to read the Bible better and with greater understanding for themselves.”

Drawing from these complementary definitions and descriptions of expository preaching, I present my own. It is more of a description than a definition.

“Expository preaching is text driven preaching that honors **the truth** of Scripture as it was given by the Holy Spirit. Discovering the **God-inspired meaning** through historical-grammatical-theological investigation and interpretation, the preacher, by means of engaging and compelling proclamation, explains, illustrates and applies the meaning of the biblical text in submission to and in the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching for a verdict of changed lives.”

From this description, we can now examine 7 important and essential components of expository preaching.

1. Expository Preaching is Text-Driven Preaching

Mark Dever writes, “The first mark of a healthy church is expository preaching. It is not only the first mark; it is far and away the most important of them all, because if you get this one right, all of the others should follow” (*9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, p 39).

Expository preaching allows the Scripture text to determine both the substance and the structure of the message. How one structures the Scriptures will determine how one structures the sermon. The Scriptural text drives and determines, shapes and forms sermon development as it relates to the explanation of the biblical text. Sidney Greidanus reminds us that,

“Biblical preaching is ‘a Bible shaped word imparted in a Bible-like way. In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said.”

-(*The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 11).

Allen Ross of the Beeson Divinity School concurs and adds an important warning:

“Too many so-called expositors simply make one central idea the substance of their message. The narrative may be read or retold, but the sermon is essentially their central expository idea-it is explained, illustrated, and applied without further recourse to the text. This approach is not valid exegetical exposition. In exegetical exposition, the substance of the exposition must be clearly derived from the text so that the central idea unfolds in the analysis of the passage and so that all parts of the passage may be interpreted to show their contribution to the theological idea.”

-(*Creation and Blessing*, 47).

The faithful expositor will reject any method that would entice him to superimpose his preconceived agenda on the text. Further, he will not, as Kaiser states, “[Force the] text to answer one of his favorite questions or to deal with one of the contemporary issues... that our cultures wants to have solved” (Kaiser, 153). The faithful expositor will make sure that his people meet the God who inspired the text and is in the text.

Are there advantages in this method? The answer is yes and there are many. Don Carson highlights six:

1. It is the method least likely to stray from Scripture.
2. It teaches people how to read their Bible.
3. It gives confidence to preachers and authorizes the message.
4. It meets the need for relevance without allowing the clamor for relevance to dictate the message.
5. It forces the preacher to handle the tough passages.
6. It enables the preacher to most systematically expound the whole counsel of God if sufficient chunks are handled.

Unfortunately, in our therapeutic culture, where felt needs and how-to sermons are dominant and deemed essential, even by evangelicals, text-driven preaching is viewed as simply inadequate for the day. The perspective of many is expressed well in an article entitled “What Is The Matter With Preaching?” The author writes,

“Every sermon should have for its main business the solving of some problem- a vital, important problem puzzling minds, burdening consciences,

distracting lives... And if any preacher is not doing this, even though he have at his disposal both erudition and oratory, he is not functioning at all. Many, preachers, for example, indulge habitually in what they call expository sermons. They take a passage from Scripture and, proceeding on the assumption that the people attending church that morning are deeply concerned about what the passage means, they spend their half hour or more on historical exposition of the verse or chapter, ending with some appended practical application to the auditors. Could any procedure be more surely predestined to dullness and futility? Who seriously supposes that, as a matter of fact, one in a hundred of the congregation cares, to start with, what Moses, Isaiah, Paul or John meant in those special verses, or came to church deeply concerned about it? Nobody else who talks to the public so assumes that the vial interests of the people are located in the meaning of words spoken two thousand years ago. The advertisers of any goods, from a five foot shelf of classic books to the latest life insurance policy, plunge as directly as possible after the contemporary wants, felt needs, actual interests and concerns... Preachers who pick out texts from the Bible and then proceed to give their historic settings, their logical meaning in the context, their place in the theology of the writer, are grossly misusing the Bible. Let them not end but start with thinking of the audience's vital needs, and then let the whole sermon be organized around their endeavor to meet those needs. This is all good sense and good psychology."

-“What is the Matter with Preaching?” in *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1928, 135.

Interestingly, this statement is not the musings of a contemporary pulpiteer. Its author is Harry Emerson Fosdick, who penned these words in 1928! Contemporary evangelicals need to be careful from whose homiletical stream they drink.

2. Expository preaching honors the principle of authorial intent, recognizing that the ultimate author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit, God Himself.

The faithful expositor is humbled, even haunted, by the realization that when he stands to preach he stands to preach what has been given by the Holy Spirit of God. Why is he haunted? Because he understands that what is before his eyes is divinely inspired by God, and he trembles at the very thought of abusing, neglecting or altering what God Himself wrote. Yes, the Bible is best described as the Word of God written in the words of men. However, it is ultimately the Word of God, and the divine author's intended meaning as deposited in the text should be honored. There is a noble tradition concerning this principle. The Westminster Dictionary (of 1645) states, "...the true idea of preaching is that the preacher should become a mouthpiece for his text, opening it up and applying it as a word from God to his hearers,... in order that the text may speak... and be heard, making each point from his text in such a manner that [his audience] may discern [the voice of God]." Charles Spurgeon notes,

"A sermon comes with far greater power to the consciences of the hearers when it is plainly the very Word of God- not a lecture about the Scripture, but Scripture itself opened up and enforced...I will further recommend you to hold to the *ipsissima verba*, the very Words of the Holy Ghost ... those sermons which expound the exact words of the Holy Spirit are

the most useful and most agreeable to the major part of our congregations.

They love to have the words themselves explained and expounded.”

Though Spurgeon himself did not always practice what he preached, his words here are certainly on target.

-Lectures to My Students (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 73.

Haddon Robinson adds, “When a preacher fails to preach the Scriptures, he abandons his authority. He confronts his hearers no longer with a word from God but only with another word from men.” (Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*) In the past several decades the issue of authorial intent has come under heavy and sustained assault, especially with the popularity of the deconstruction movement and its godfather, the recently deceased Jacques Derrida. For a number of years the English literary critic E.D. Hirsch stood in the gap. Recently Kevin Vanhoozer has entered the battle, exposing the underlying [a] theistic/ [a] gnostic agenda that was driving deconstruction all along. In his superb work, *Is There a Meaning in This Text*, he presents a careful and impressive defense for “Resurrecting the Author” (ch. 5) and Redeeming the Text (ch. 6). This is a much needed critique in the greater theological and literary world. It is a sad commentary on how easily evangelicals can be seduced, if not by the academy, then by the culture. That this theological and hermeneutical quicksand is ever a serious consideration for those who man our pulpits and shepherd the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a tragedy with enormous consequences. We should not ignore what a reader or hearer brings to a text or a sermon. However, we should not deify (small “d”) it either.

3. Scripture must be interpreted and understood as it was given to the original audience. The text cannot mean today what it did not mean then.

Fee and Stuart correctly assert, “A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers.” (*How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, 64). This principle does not neglect the fact that the faithful expositor must build a sturdy bridge between the historical audience and their context, and the audience he addresses here and now. It does mean he will not eisegete the text, reading into it the preconceived notions of his own imagination or interest. Further, he will not injure the inspired text with a fanciful and irresponsible hermeneutic that surpasses the allegorist of the medieval period. As evangelical expositors we must continue to affirm that “the meaning is one, though the applications are many.” Jay Adams says, “Though the purpose of the sermon may be different from the purpose of the text, the purpose of the sermon will not violate the purpose of the text, for whenever preachers depart from the purpose and the intent of a biblical portion, to that extent they lose their authority to preach.” (Quoted in Timothy Warren, *BibSac*, Oct-Dec, 1991, p. 480) That is a strong word, but a necessary word. We must honor the text as it was given and as it would have been understood by the original audience. This principle does not ignore the divine authorship of Scripture, the concept of the whole canon, the flow and nature of redemptive history, or the intriguing issue of *Sensus Plenior*. As Vanhoozer argues, and I find his argument compelling, “‘the fuller meaning’ of Scripture—the meaning associated with divine authorship—emerges only at the level of the whole canon...the canon as a whole becomes the unified act for which the divine intention serves as the unifying principle. The divine intention supervenes on the intention of the human authors. The Spirit will apply meaning, not change it” (264-65). In other words, implications and significances embedded in the meaning of the text,

in light of the whole canon, may certainly come to light. This will provide balance, as well as a healthy affirmation of the principle of progressive revelation.

4. Historical-grammatical-theological interpretation will best discover both the truth of the text and the theology of the text.

It is my conviction that biblical theology is prior to systematic theology, but that biblical theology must always proceed to systematic theology. The hesitancy on the part of some biblical scholars to follow through on this latter point is unwise and unacceptable.

Allowing the priority of biblical/exegetical theology will result in a more faithful and honest interpretation, but it will also demand more tension in one's theological system.

Kaiser reminds us that, "the discipline of Biblical theology must be a twin of exegesis. Exegetical theology will remain incomplete and virtually barren in its results, as far as the church is concerned, without a proper input of "informing theology" (Kaiser, 139).

Doctrinal/theological preaching is noticeably absent in the modern pulpit.

Theological and biblical illiteracy is the heavy price being paid. As the preacher exegetes both his text and audience, he should be sensitive to the theological truths contained in and supported by the text. He must endeavor to develop a strategy that will allow him to convey these truths in a clear, winsome and relevant manner. A faithful minister of the Word will bombard every text with a series of questions that many preachers of the Holy Scripture never ask.

1. What does this text say about the Bible (and the doctrine of Revelation)?
2. What does this text say about God (also Creation, angelology)?
3. What does this text say about man (and sin, our fallenness)?

4. What does this text say about Jesus Christ (His person and work)?
5. What does this text say about the Holy Spirit?
6. What does this text say about Salvation?
7. What does this text say about the Church?
8. What does this text say about Last Things?

Now, we need to be honest and forthright at this point. It is impossible to preach without preaching some type of theology or doctrine. However, though an unhealthy allegiance to a particular tradition of theology will give you a nice, tight, clean theological system, it will also lead you to squeeze and twist certain texts of Scripture in order to force them into your theological mold or grid. I believe a better way is to let your exegesis drive your theology. Let your theological system be shaped by Scripture and not the reverse. You will most certainly have more tension, more mystery, but you will be more true to the text of Holy Scripture, and you will embrace and cultivate a more healthy theology.

In this context, I would encourage us to always ask of every text two questions, and to ask them in this order, something seeker and emerging types usually fail to do: 1) What does this text say about God; and 2) What does this text say about fallen humanity. This two-fold inquiry appropriates the insight of Bryan Chappell and his Fallen Condition Focus (FCF). It also will guide us in having a Theocentric/Christocentric homiletic and theology. It will make sure that the real hero of the Bible is always on display: the Lord Jesus Christ. It will serve as an effective vaccine to the psychological, therapeutic, feel-good or mystical/personalistic diseases that have infected the Church. It will keep Jesus preeminent and the gospel front and center.

Warren Wiersbe has sounded a much needed warning in this area,

“I don’t think the average church member realizes the extent of the theological erosion that’s taken place on the American exegetical scene since World War II, but the changes I’ve witnessed in Christian broadcasting and publishing make it very real to me. Radio programs that once majored in practical Bible teaching are now given over to man-centered interviews (‘talk’ radio is a popular thing) and man-centered music that sounds so much like what the world presents, you wonder if your radio is tuned to a Christian station. In so much of today’s ministry ‘feeling good’ has replaced being good, and ‘happiness’ has replaced holiness.”

-(Warren Wiersbe, *Be Myself*, 301.)

Donald Bloesch adds, “...the church that does not take theology seriously is unwittingly encouraging understandings of the faith that are warped or unbalanced.”

(*Crumbling Foundations: Death And Rebirth In An Age Of Upheaval*, 107). A steady diet of exegetical theology fleshed out in expository preaching is a certain cure of the spiritual anemia that afflicts too many of our churches.

5. The task of the expositor is incomplete without the necessary components of illustration, application and exhortation.

Illustrations are windows that help our audience see clearly into the house of the sermon. They bring clarity, touch the heart, move the emotions, and reveal that Scripture works in real life. Biblical warrant for illustrations in biblical proclamation need only look to Jesus, the master illustrator.

Application addresses the action that needs to take place on the part of the audience that should result from the message. Howard Hendricks often says that “interpretation

without application results in abortion. We must let the baby go full term.” Again, I believe there are two additional questions that we must ask and answer each and every time we preach and teach the Word of God:

1. What do I want my people to know?
2. What do I want my people to do?

If the latter question is not adequately addressed, your audience will be frustrated for want of an outlet to put into practice what they have learned, even if you deliver an outstanding oration.

Exhortation must also be an essential aspect of Biblical proclamation. This element addresses the will. We must call our people to action, raise the bar and challenge them to reach for it. On the day of the Pentecost Peter “strongly urged them” (Acts 2:40). When Paul was at Corinth he “tried to persuade both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4). In his final words to his son in the ministry, Paul wrote to Timothy, “rebuke, correct, and encourage with great patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). Illustration, application and exhortation are not optional in a comprehensive job description for the faithful expositor and shepherd of the Lord’s sheep. They are essential ingredients.

6. From beginning to end, from the study to the pulpit, the entire process of biblical exposition must take place in absolute and complete submission to the Holy Spirit.

J. H. Jowett captured the essence of what we are after when we stand to proclaim the Word of God. There is a sobering and piercing nature to what he says: “What we are after is not that folks shall say at the end of it all, ‘What an excellent sermon!’ That is a

measured failure. You are there to have them say when it is over, ‘What a great God!’ It is something for men not to have been in your presence but in His.”

-(J.H. Jowett, quoted in *Context*, Dec. 1, 1997, p. 2).

All that we do in preparation and proclamation of the Bible should take place in humble submission to the Holy Spirit. In the study as we analyze the text, study the grammar, parse the verbs, consult commentaries, and gather the raw materials for the message, we should seek His guidance and confess our dependence on Him.

When we stand to preach, to minister the Word to our people, again we must plead for His filling and direction. Word and Spirit was a hallmark of the Reformers, and it must be the same with us. Submission to the Spirit is no substitute and no excuse for shirking the hard work of the study. However, a homiletical masterpiece will be of little value without the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

One final word on this point is instructive. Jesus said in John 15:26, When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father- the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father- He will testify about Me.” And again in John 16:14, Jesus said, “He [the Holy Spirit] will glorify Me.” Call it what you will, preaching that does not exalt, magnify and glorify the Lord Jesus is not Christian Preaching. Preaching that does not present the gospel and call men and women to repent of sin and place their faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not gospel preaching. We are not Jewish rabbis or scribes, and this truth should guide us in how we handle the Old Testament. Jesus, Himself, provides the hermeneutical key in Luke 24. On the other hand, we are not journey guides, self-helpers, positive thinkers, or liberal or conservative commentators, parroting the wisdom of the world, true though it sometimes may be. We

are gospel preachers, Jesus-intoxicated heralds by virtue of the indwelling and filling of the Holy Spirit. Submission to the Spirit will lead to exaltation of the Son.

7. Changed lives for the glory of God is always the goal for which we strive.

Therefore it is a sin, of the most serious sort, to preach the Word of God in a boring and unattractive fashion.

I agree with Charles Koller who says, “It is more important clumsily to have something to say than cleverly to say nothing” (Charles Koller, *Expository Preaching Without Notes*, 42-43). However, in Ecclesiastes 12:9-10 Solomon says, “...the Preacher also taught the people knowledge; and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly.”

In the multi-media, entertainment saturated culture in which we live, I repeatedly tell my students, “What you say is more important than how you say it, but how you say it has never been more important.” Haddon Robinson, quoting a Russian proverb says, “It is the same with men as with donkeys; whoever would hold them fast must get a very good grip on their ears.” Leith Anderson notes, “Every audience is unique...The communicator must know the audience, and the sermon must be customized to fit the audience (“Should the Sermon Beat Up or Lift Up?”, *Preaching Magazine*, May-June 1993, 14). There is certainly truth in Anderson’s statement, though it can run the risk of being abused. Restricting ourselves to the American context, since that is where the vast majority of us live and minister, I would proffer several observations concerning attractive and engaging exposition that keeps a “wise eye” on the audience.

First, do not neglect the crucial importance of the introduction. You have 3-5 minutes to win their attention or lose their interest. More sermons fail here than probably anywhere else. Bryan Chappell informs us that, “Today’s communication researchers say that audiences generally decide within the first 30 seconds of a presentation whether they are interested in what a speaker will say. This modern reality underscores the importance of gaining attention in the opening moments of a sermon...”(p. 229).

Second, we cannot improve on the 3 canons of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In the communication event we must weave together in an attractive tapestry *Logos* (what), *Ethos* (who), and *Pathos* (how). Content is essential, credibility is crucial, and delivery is of no small importance. Aristotle reminds us, “it is not enough to know what to say – one must know how to say it” (*Rhetoric*, 182). Chuck Swindoll warns us, “If you think the gathering of Biblical facts and standing up with a Bible in your hand will automatically equip you to communicate well, you are deeply mistaken. It will not. You must work at being interesting. Boredom is a gross violation, being dull is a grave offence, and irrelevance is a disgrace to the Gospel. Too often these three crimes go unpunished and we preachers are the criminals...preaching is not as simple as dumping a half-ton load of religious whine, and a hodgepodge of verbs, nouns, and adjectives; but preparing the heart, sharpening the mind; delivering the goods with care, sensitivity, timing, and clarity. It’s the difference between slopping hogs and feeding sheep...[Therefore] study hard, pray like mad, think it through, tell the truth, then stand tall. But while you’re on your feet, don’t clothe the riches of Christ in rags. Say it well.” (Eva. Ch. of Fullerton Newsletter, date unknown.) Martyn Lloyd-Jones adds, “There is no doubt about this;

effective speaking involves action; and that is why I stress that the whole person must be involved in preaching.”

Third, be relevant. The wise preacher will exegete both the scriptures and the culture. He understands that he must know each equally well. Both Luther and Calvin understood this. Luther said, “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ” (quoted in *Good News*, Sept/Oct 1998, p. 9).

Calvin adds,

What advantage would there be if we were to stay here half a day and I were to expound half a book without considering you or your profit and edification?...We must take into consideration those persons to whom the teaching is addressed...For this reason let us note well that they who have this charge to teach, when they speak to a people, are to decide which teaching will be good and profitable so that they will be able to disseminate it faithfully and with discretion to the usefulness of everyone individually. (John Calvin, quoted in Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Word*, pgs. 132-133)

Fourth, realize that bad preaching will sap the life of the church. It will kill its spirit, dry up its fruit, and eventually empty its buildings. If we would dare be honest we must say bad preaching is no preaching. It is preaching not worthy of the name.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones understood this well when he said:

“What is preaching? Logic on fire! Eloquent reason! Are these contradictions? Of course they are not...A theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology

coming through a man who is on fire....I say again that a man who can speak about these things dispassionately has no right whatsoever to be in a pulpit; and should never be allowed to enter one.” (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching*, pg. 97) Any theology that does not compel you to plead with men to be reconciled with God is not a theology worth having. Any preaching that does expect the living and powerful Word of God to produce results and usher in conversions is preaching that should be retired to the graveyard where it rightfully belongs. “On one occasion a young student of Spurgeon came to the great preacher complaining that he wasn’t seeing conversions through his preaching. Spurgeon inquired, ‘Surely you don’t expect conversions every time you preach, do you?’ The young man replied, ‘Well, I suppose not.’ Spurgeon then said, ‘That’s precisely why you are not having them.’”

-(Roy J. Fish, *Giving a Good Invitation*, p. 221)

William Willimon, Dean of the chapel at Duke University, said some years ago, “today’s conservatives sound like yesterday’s liberals.” In a fascinating article titled “Been there, preached that,” (*Leadership*, Fall 1995), Willimon sounds a prophetic warning to evangelicals that they might not be seduced by the sirens of modernity and follow the tragic path of insignificance which mainline denominations have trod.

“I’m a mainline-liberal-Protestant-Methodist-type Christian. I know we are soft on Scripture. Norman Vincent Peale has exercised a more powerful effect on our Preaching than St. Paul...

I know we play fast and loose with Scripture. But I’ve always had this fantasy that somewhere, like in Texas, there were preachers who preached it all, Genesis to Revelation without blinking an eye...

I took great comfort in knowing that, even while I preached a pitifully compromised, “Pealed” – down gospel, that somewhere, good ole Bible-believing preachers were offering their congregations the unadulterated Word, straight up. Do you know how disillusioning it has been for me to realize that many of these self-proclaimed biblical preachers now sound more like liberal mainliners than liberal mainliners? At the very time those of us in the mainline, oldline, sidelined were repenting of our pop psychological pap and rediscovering the joy of disciplined biblical preaching, these “biblical preachers” were becoming “user friendly” and “inclusive,” taking their homiletical cues from the “felt needs” of us “boomers” and “busters” rather than the excruciating demands of the Bible.

I know why they do this...It all starts with American Christians wanting to be helpful to the present order, to be relevant (as the present order defines relevance). We so want to be invited to lunch at the White House or at least be interviewed on ‘Good Morning America.’ So we adjust our language to the demands of the market, begin with the world and its current infatuations rather than the Word and its peculiar judgments on our infatuations. If you listen to much of our preaching, you get the impression that Jesus was some sort of itinerant therapist who, for free, traveled about helping people feel better. Ever since Fosdick, we mainline liberals have been bad about this. Start with some human problem like depression; then rummage the Bible for a relevant answer. Last fall, as I was preparing in my office for the Sunday service, the telephone rang. ‘Who’s preaching in Duke Chapel today?’ asked a nasal, Yankee-sounding voice. I cleared my throat and answered, ‘Reverence Doctor William Willimon. ‘Who’s that?’ asked the voice. ‘The Dean of the Chapel,’ I answered in a sonorous tone. ‘I hope he

won't be preaching politics. I've had a rough week and I need to hear about God. My Baptist church is so eaten up with politics, I've got to hear a sermon!' When you have to come to a Methodist for a biblical sermon, that's pitiful."

Walt Kaiser would concur with Willimon:

"It is no secret that Christ's Church is not at all in good health in many places of the world. She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, "junk food;" all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and Biblical malnutrition has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are carcinogenic or otherwise harmful to their bodies. Simultaneously, a worldwide spiritual famine resulting from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God continues to run wild and almost unabated in most quarters of the Church."

-Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], pp. 7-8

Luther, in a different day to be sure, saw the church in a similar condition. However he did not despair, for he saw, as we must see, the antidote that will cure the patient. In his "A Treatise on Christian Liberty" he throws down the gauntlet and gives us final words to guide us and inspire us:

"Let us then consider it certain and conclusively established that the soul can do without all things except the Word of God, and that where this is not there is no help for the soul in anything else whatever. But if it has the Word it is rich and lacks nothing, since this Word is the Word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy,

of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory, and of every blessing beyond our power to estimate.”

-Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Christian Liberty.” *Three Treatises*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947, 23

To Luther’s word we should all voice a hearty, “Amen, and amen.”