

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

T. Harwood Pattison

Copyright © 1898

CHAPTER SIX

THE TREATMENT OF THE TEXT - CONTINUED

SUMMARY

THE VARIOUS KINDS OF EXPOSITORY SERMONS

1. Scripture words and phrases.
2. Exposition of a complete passage.
3. A course of expository sermons:
 - (1) The entire Bible;
 - (2) One book;
 - (3) Sacred biography;
 - (4) A group of subjects.

II. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING

1. The most natural way.
2. Scripture precedent - on its side.
3. Historic usage commends it.
4. Greatly benefits a congregation:
 - (1) Incites to a study of Scripture;
 - (2) Does justice to the mind of the Spirit;
 - (3) Builds up a congregation in divine truth.
5. Of service to the preacher himself.

III. QUALIFICATIONS FOR SUCCESS IN EXPOSITORY PREACHING

1. An intelligent faith in the inspiration of the Bible.
2. A power of selection.
3. A logical mind.
4. Preaching power.
5. Studious habits constantly maintained.

IV. COUNSELS

1. Begin the preaching of exposition with a brief course.
2. Begin elsewhere than at the Sunday service.
3. Carefully study models of excellence in exposition.
4. Show results rather than processes.
5. Attend to the rhetoric of the expository sermon.

The Expository Sermon

EVERY sermon must have in it a certain amount of exposition, as every case in law must have in it a certain amount of statement. In the topical sermon there is likely to be some of the theme; and in the textual sermon it is still more likely that as the result of careful exegesis there will be some exposition of the text. But we come now to deal with the sermon which is exclusively expository in its nature. The constantly increasing number of preachers who are setting forth the truths of Scripture in this way, and the growing demand for this sort of preaching among our more intelligent hearers, make it of the first importance that we consider just what the expository sermon is, what can be said in its favor, and what qualifications are necessary in the preacher who is desirous of doing full justice to it in his ministry.

I. There are so many varieties of exposition that we will begin by a classification

1. Simplest of all forms of exposition is the study of Scripture words and phrases.

(1) As to the method which consists in selecting some one word, and arranging in some kind of order the places where it occurs in the Bible, and then amplifying each instance with exhortation or illustrating it with anecdote, it stands related to the sermon much as the kindergarten stands related to the university. There may be infantile conditions in the spiritual life where it has its use, but we doubt it. What profit can there be in stringing together "*The 'Comes' of the Bible,*" when the only possible connection between them is the fact that a number of passages have this one word in common?

- (2) When a phrase rather than a word is chosen, an advance has been made.

To select some topic, doctrinal or practical, and trace its history along the lines of revelation, is interesting and profitable; but even here great care must be taken to maintain the dignity of Scripture, not to find in it what was not meant to be there, and not to yield to the dictates of fancy, of accidental alliteration, or of mere prettiness of form. Vast harm has been done by expositors who foist a non-natural sense on words and phrases, and who, like dishonest speculators salting mines to beguile their gullible victims, dig out of the Bible just what they themselves have first put into it. So Ruskin says: "I believe few sermons are more false or dangerous than those in which the teacher professes to impress his audience by showing how much there is in a verse. If he examined his own heart closely before beginning, he would often find that his real desire was to show how much he, the expounder, could make out of a verse" (Ruskin, "*Modern Painters,*" Vol. V., p. 157).

How easily this degenerates into solemn trifling the mediaeval sermons witness, but in later times and in schools priding themselves on the enjoyment of special light the same mischievous tendency is to be traced. "My brethren," observed a monk of this discerning order, when preaching upon the servant of the high priest warming himself, "My brethren, see how the evangelist relates not merely as an historian, 'he warmed himself,' but as a philosopher, 'because he was cold.' "

2. When we proceed to the exposition of a complete passage of Scripture we pass to a much higher kind of preaching.

To do this well the preacher needs some acquaintance with the tongues of Scripture, in their genius if not in their grammar; a familiarity with the way in which words and phrases are used in the Bible; readiness in seeing antitheses, contrasts, comparisons, and parallels; and rhetorical skill as well as spiritual fervor, so that his sermon may be alive, "a thing," as Luther said, "with hands and feet." In doing this it may be best to break up the passage which you are to expound into clauses and make of each clause a division of the discourse; or it may be possible to select out of the whole passage one or two verses for a text on which all the others naturally converge (Candlish, "*Genesis*," Vol. 1., p. 46. Maclaren, "A Pattern of Prayer" (Psalm 86:1-5)). Thus the one hundred and twenty-first Psalm has for its keynote the word "**Keep**," and the thought of God's preserving care for Israel runs through the whole. "**The Lord is thy keeper**" is therefore an excellent text for a sermon on this entire psalm ("*The Expositor in the Pulpit*," Prof. M. R. Vincent. See also "*Notes on Genesis*," F. W. Robertson (Genesis 50:24-26). Dale's "*Yale Lectures on Preaching*," pp. 229-231).

3. If the preacher finds himself succeeding in such an exposition, he may naturally plan out a course of expository sermons.

(1) That even the exposition of the entire Bible is not impossible, Matthew Henry's "*Commentary*" remains as the substantial evidence; and Dr. Joseph Parker's "*People's Bible*" illustrates another and less elaborate way of attaining the same end. Dean Farrar succeeded in keeping a nobleman awake against his will by a sermon, the text of which was the whole Bible; and he advocates a series on the books of the Bible which might be prefaced by another on the Bible as a whole, and on the various kinds of literature of which it is composed (F. W. Farrar, in "*The Homiletic Review*," January, 1897).

- "*The Bible as History*" can be arranged according to the great epochs it covers, and
- "*The Bible as Literature*" can be treated under the heads of history, poetry, proverbial lore, and so on.

(2) The exposition of some one book of the Bible is much to be commended.

The skill of the preacher will be shown in breaking up the book into distinct themes, in showing how one subject stands related to others, and in fastening upon the key thought of the passage under exposition, and holding his audience to it (O. S. Stearns, D. D., "*Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament*").

A series of sermons on Galatians or Ephesians. can readily be mapped out in this way, because the lines of cleavage are clearly defined.

The character of the book to be expounded will naturally determine the character of the treatment. Sometimes the homiletical form will be adhered to, and there will be well-marked divisions in the discourse (S. Cox, D. D., "*The Private Letters of St. Paul and St. John.*" Alex. Maclaren, D. D., "*Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*"); again, when some great central doctrine is expounded, the preacher will collate passages, and his address will become more of a treatise, calling for close attention on the part of his hearers and taxing his own powers as theologian and logician as well as preacher; or if he is pursuing the course of history he will become a narrator, and will tell his story with such illustrations and enforcements as the age and audience suggest (Alex. Raleigh, D. D., "*The Book of Jonah*").

(3) The study of sacred biography is of perpetual interest and value.

Let the preacher fix upon the Scripture character whom he proposes to study, and divide his life by its main epochs, and assign one sermon or lecture to each epoch. The interest in many of the great figures of the Bible never flags.

- Abraham is the emigrant for all time,
- Joseph is the perpetual model for young men;
- Every age sees in David chivalrous traits which it loves to trace also in its own heroes, and,
- Alike by his strength and his weakness, Peter never fails to touch the one universal human heart (W. M. Taylor, D. D., "*Elijah*," etc. Dr. Maclaren, "*The Life of David as Reflected in his Psalms*").

(4) We mention as another useful kind of exposition, the consecutive study of some group of Scripture subjects such as the parables or miracles of our Lord.

Good models will be found in "*The Pilgrim Psalm; An Exposition of the Songs of Degrees*," by Dr. S. Cox; and "*The Law of the Ten Words*," by Dr. J. O. Dykes.

II. Let us now glance at some of the arguments in favor of Expository Preaching

1. First among these we mention that it is the most natural way of enforcing divine truth.

To interpret the Scriptures is the purpose for which the ministry was instituted (Alexander, "*Thoughts on Preaching*," p. 274).

"We cannot expect to deliver much of the teachings of Holy Scripture by picking out verse by verse, and holding these up at random. The process resembles too closely that of showing a house by exhibiting separate bricks" (Spurgeon).

2. More than any other way of preaching, the expository method has scriptural precedent in its favor.

Ezra standing upon his pulpit of wood (Nehemiah 8), which they had made for the purpose, with his group of elders supporting him, and opening the book of the law in the sight of all the people, and reading distinctly, and giving the sense, and causing the great open-air congregation to understand the words as he read them, is “the very first original and most ancient type and pattern of our best pulpit work to this day” (Dr. Alexander Whyte). And Jesus, with the eyes of all in the synagogue fastened on him, expounding Isaiah in the synagogue. of his early home is the perpetual model for Christian preachers. These two examples point to the regular practice in the Jewish Church.

3. Historic usage has almost everything to urge in commendation of this method.

The early believers brought it from the synagogues to their meetings. In the second century Justin Martyr says that the portion of Scripture read in the public service was followed by addresses upon it; Chrysostom, two hundred years later, complains of his audience because while he is expounding the Bible their eyes are turned to the man who was lighting the lamps; and his contemporary, Augustine, in his own expositions has left us one secret of his impressiveness as a preacher. Exposition continued to protest against the puerility and irreverence of the preaching which chose a text only as a motto, “a usage learned by the modern church, not from apostolic times, but from the most corrupt age of Christendom” (Edward White).

Supreme as an expounder, Calvin was only one in the fearless host of Protestant reformers who used it. Luther in Germany, Colet in England. Knox in Scotland, forged their mightiest weapons in the fires of Scripture exposition; and in times later still it is enough to mention the great name of Matthew Henry who being dead yet speaketh, and to this hour by his popular “*Commentary*” keeps a multitude of pulpits, in some measure at all events, loyal to this highest and noblest method of preaching.

4. Think how greatly expository preaching benefits a congregation.

(1) Inciting them to a study of their Bible, it makes them dissatisfied indeed with inferior pulpit work but keen in their appreciation of the best. It has created a standard in Scotland which has influenced not only the religion of the people, but also their habits of thought, their literary judgment, their political faith, and the fullest pulsations of their patriotism.

(2) It does the amplest justice to the mind of the Spirit in the Scriptures, and brings with it the approval of God, for the ministry which honors him the most is the ministry which he is surest to honor. Incidentally it should be said, that exposition allows of the impartial treatment of many portions of Scripture which would otherwise be neglected, or from which the preacher might turn aside out of a super-sensitive fear of being thought personal. “When the Scripture battery is fired off in order, there is no suspicion as to the laying of the guns. We all take our turn to be under fire, as we all need it.” (Edward White).

(3) So it is sure when faithfully done to build up a congregation in divine truth. A minister will be likely to remain when he is bound to his people by an unfinished course of exposition, and is not tempted to throw up his church in a hurry between the irresponsible excursions among disconnected and desultory texts.

How could Matthew Henry leave Chester for London at a time when his people were waiting to see him wrestle with an unfulfilled prophecy, or a perplexing doctrine? "This skipping and divagation from place to place," says John Knox, "be it in reading, be it in preaching, we judge not so profitable to edify the church as the continual following of one text." An American visitor to Scotland heard Dr. Candlish expound the eighth and ninth chapters of Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians, verse by verse, by way of inducing his people to pay off a debt on the church; and he testified that "the attention of the great congregation was intense as they followed him with their open Bibles. The preacher put the appeal upon the very highest ground - the lesson of God's word on the subject of giving" (Prof. M. R. Vincent, *The Expositor in the Pulpit*, p. 24).

5. To the preacher himself, I need scarcely add, expository preaching is of incalculable service.

It gives him the relief of variety in sermon work, it enriches him with texts which he lays aside for his other sermons, it affords him an opportunity to deal with delicate themes, and it saves him from the anxiety to know, when one Sunday is safely surmounted, on what he is to preach when the next comes around. Here is one secret of a long and fruitful pastorate.

III. What, it may now be asked, are the qualifications for success in expository preaching?

1. We take it for granted, to begin with, that the preacher has an intelligent faith in the inspiration of the Bible.

Whether or not he has formulated for himself a theory of inspiration, it is evident that by cutting himself loose from any reliance on the final authority of human opinion, and by refusing to submit his own judgment to the dictum of any historical church, he finds himself shut up to the supremacy of the Word of God. It is safe to affirm that while a vast amount of textual preaching has imperceptibly weakened the respect which thoughtful people feel for the Bible, expository preaching is bound to strengthen faith in it; bound to do so, we say, because it compares spiritual things with spiritual, appeals to testimony, gets at the roots of history, wields the weapon of argument with a skill learned at the feet of teachers greater than Gamaliel, and charges home on the intelligence of its hearers with the articles of Paul's great appeal, "**I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say.**"

2. The preacher to do his work well as an expounder of Scripture, should possess a power of selection.

He must know what he himself can do best; what parts of the Bible are especially needed by his congregation; and then how to deal in a workmanlike way with the portion when it has been fixed upon. He will not find all Scripture submit itself to the expository treatment. Unless there be unity of structure he will be tempted to substitute a few scattered remarks for the continuous and progressive unfolding of truth; his sermon will be a coat of many inharmonious colors, in little danger of exciting the jealousy of his brethren; and his method, if method it may be called, will be that of the blundering preacher who said that he preferred to hold forth on a long text, because when he was persecuted in one verse he could flee to another.

3. We add, therefore, that he himself must train his mind in logical processes.

Analysis will help him to determine what the passage under consideration contains, and synthesis will teach him how to present it effectively and forcibly to his congregation. Expository preaching, as much as landscape painting, depends largely on a knowledge of perspective. Do not spend half an hour over a particle, hewing out for yourself some exegetical cistern that can hold no water, while forsaking the fountain of living water for which the people are athirst.

- the specific gravity of the Dead Sea;
- the probable meaning of Urim and Thummim;
- the birthplace of Judas Iscariot;
- the weak eyesight of the Apostle Paul,

are points which may be dismissed in a few words, without doing any injustice to the emphasis of divine truth.

Map out your expository series carefully before beginning to preach. See the end from the beginning, and - for they also are men of like passions with yourself - let your hearers see it also. It will quicken and maintain their interest if they know that you are not starting out, as did Abram, not knowing whither you are going. That way, to the ordinary preacher, Canaan does not lie.

4. So many expository experiments have failed for the lack of distinguishing between the teacher's chair and the throne of oratory, that we must insist upon preaching power as another essential to success.

Avoid, on the one hand, becoming too hortatory; but, on the other hand, be on your guard against becoming too didactic. The preacher is a prophet, and comes to us with a message. The church is not the class-room.

5. We crown our requirements when we insist that to expound the Bible satisfactorily there must be studious habits, and a resolution on the part of the preacher constantly to maintain them.

Roger Bacon, in the thirteenth century, traced the decay of exposition to the ignorance of the bishops, and in all centuries and countries the preacher has found it dangerously easy to glide into exhortation when he should be rather exercising himself in explanation.

Dr. Howard Crosby, who maintained for many years a high level of exposition, after saying that for a series of Old Testament discourses, which he was then giving in New York, he carried no manuscript into the pulpit, and indeed prepared no rhetoric, added: "I study three days on each exposition, using every help of Hebrew history, geography, archaeology, etc., with prayer.

These exercises have made my people Bible students. One of these discourses I consider worth a dozen of my set sermons."

IV. In conclusion we offer the following counsels

1. Begin the practice of exposition with some book or portion of Scripture which will not take too many Sundays. Ruth, the Idyll of the harvest field; the letter of Paul to Philemon, “the polite Epistle”; or the Messages to the Seven Churches in the Revelation, will not tax you or your hearers severely. Should you or they show signs of weariness, suspend the expositions, or, better still, anticipate possible languor by making the series occasional.

2. What we may perhaps call trial-trips on the great sea of exposition may with advantage be taken at other services of the church than those of the Sunday worship. A preparation class for teachers, a Bible class for young men, or a series of brief expository addresses continued over a number of weeks at the church prayer meeting will give steadiness of flight and readiness of resource.

3. Learn how to expound by a careful study of the masters of the art.

- Mr. Moody can teach you how to use exposition in its simplest form,
- Dr. Candlish how best to open up a doctrine,
- Dean Stanley how to make the history of an ancient people yield lessons of perennial freshness;
- Under Dr. W. M. Taylor you may study the best way of popularizing Scripture biography; and
- For the continuous exposition of a book of the Bible you may take as models, F. W. Robertson on Genesis, Dr. Maclaren on the Psalms, Dr. G. A. Smith on Isaiah and Dr. R. W. Dale on Hebrews.

A preliminary exercise of much value will be found in President Wayland’s exposition of “*A Day in the Life of Jesus of Nazareth.*”

4. Be careful to show results rather than processes.

The scaffolding of your building has its place in the study, but not in the pulpit. Exegesis is not exposition, although it may be essential to it. Straw and clay are not bricks, although the pyramids could not have been reared without them. We do not find our appetite for dinner stimulated by seeing the fowls captured and slain as one does in the Spanish posada.

Expository preaching becomes dry and sapless when we are treated to details which belong to the preparation rather than to the delivery of the sermon.

The learned Dr. Duncan, of Edinburgh, began to lecture to his congregation, and took three lectures over the first half of the first question. He proposed to treat his subject exhaustively, but his hearers resented being included in the same heroic method, and so with the third Sabbath the series died the death.

5. Accustom yourself, if you do not write your expository sermons in full, to compose sentences, especially in defining a doctrine or locating a place or sketching a character.

Make ample notes and bring to the pulpit a mind clear, full and ready.

Expository preaching, as Tholuck warns us, “cannot be done purely extemporaneously.” Not at once, remember, can skill in this high order of preaching be acquired. But he who sets himself to do it, “ever learning in it, ever improving in it, ever adding to his treasures of exposition and illustration, ever putting himself into his lecture, and ever keeping himself out of it, will never grow old, he will never become worked out, he will never weary his people, but he will to old age bring forth his fruit in his season, and his leaf shall not wither” (Dr. Alexander Whyte).

~ end of chapter 6 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
