

The apostle Peter wrote "if anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God." That text is a great challenge. It puts a tremendous onus upon preachers to be faithful to God's Word. It makes the activity of preaching a declaration of the mind of God. It means that the Gospel must be at the cutting edge of our speech.

For many of us, one of the chief methods of preaching is "expository preaching", by which we mean the exposition of Scripture. That is, to make it our aim to challenge the congregation with the message of the Scripture, that is, to allow the point of the Scripture to dominate the agenda of the sermon. Therefore, the perspective of any part of the

Bible that is being preached upon is the aim and direction of the sermon.

Expository preaching has some distinctive advantages. It can give a balanced diet in congregational life. It keeps the preacher close to the words of Scripture. It allows the congregation to see that the preacher's authority is the Bible and to evaluate whether the preaching is faithful to the Bible. It encourages people to see the answers in Scripture itself. It teaches people how to read the Bible for themselves. It puts constraints upon preachers' hobby horses. It raises issues that preachers would not normally think of.

This paper is dealing not so much with the theory of expository preaching as the practice. We need to expound the Bible to ourselves in our own quiet times. We need to have this as the basis of our Sunday School teaching, Beach Mission meeting, Youth Fellowship talks, etc. Preaching is frequently a monologue. Other contexts of Bible teaching, like Sunday School teaching, bring in other educational and communication methods. However, what is said about preaching is, with modification, applicable to any exposition of the Scriptures. As this is an introductory paper the issues involved are purposefully simplified. The principles of interpretation and application can be discussed at much greater complexity than this paper would indicate. However, we need to walk before we can run.

### Step 1: Understand the Passage

The first step we need to take in preparation for expository preaching of any part of the Bible is to seek to understand the passage properly. Our aim must be to grasp the central thrust of the passage that is before us. What we need to do in order to gain such understanding is firstly to pray. The Word of God is to be spiritually discerned. This is not a denial of our intellectual understanding but of our autonomous intellectual understanding. Having prayed, and continuing to be prayerful throughout, we still have to do the exercise of thinking. God's Word is not irrational. God's Word is to be understood with the mind. What we are seeking to understand is what He is saying. We have to empty ourselves of thinking what we want to say but start asking what he is saying.

### Step 2: Think through the Application

The hearers of the Word of God must be doers also. Preaching must never be reduced to an intellectual inquiry alone. Just as in our own understanding we must start with prayer so in our own preaching we must finish with application. Thus, in our understanding of the central thrust

of any passage we must aim to see its implications for people's consciences. We are asking the question what does this passage say for us now. However, such a question can lead to a legalistic distortion of the Scriptures. Direct commands are easy to apply today. But much of the Scripture is not written in terms of direct command. There is poetry, wisdom writing, apocalyptic, narrative, prayers, etc. Each piece of the Biblical literature may be making its own distinctive point which can be applied to the Christian conscience. However, we must not perceive application in terms of command or prohibition. It can also be in terms of encouragement or question. It can help people reorder their thinking and values. It can call into question a lifestyle or behaviour pattern. There are several dangers at this point. One is never to move from the ancient text to the modern world. Another is to be so caught up with the application to today that the central thrust is distorted. Another is to reduce the Bible to a book of rules and regulations. Another is to choose a passage that is inappropriately short or obscure.

### Step 3: Distill the aim of the Sermon

The third step is to turn this central thrust of the passage whose application to our world you can now see into the aim of the sermon. That is, the aim of the sermon is never to "expound the passage". The aim of the sermon must be to challenge the people with the truth of the particular passage that is before you. Thus the aim should be able to be expressed in one or maybe two sentences. The aim will be expressed in terms of wanting the people to do, say, think, pray, change the x, y, z of their life in the light of the fact that the Bible here is teaching a, b, c. We must have come to x, y, z because of a, b, c. We must have derived a, b, c as the central thrust of the passage. When the aim can be clearly expressed in these terms then the decisions about the content and structure of the sermon can be reasonably undertaken.

### Step 4: Decide the main points to be Communicated

The fourth step is to decide what information needs to be conveyed to the congregation so that they will be able to see that a, b, c has been derived from the passage. Not all of the details of the passage need to be explained. Not all of the information that you have acquired in order to understand the passage needs to be explained. Only those points that are necessary to understand a, b, c, and to understand that a, b, c has been derived from the passage, need to be explained.

### Step 5: Package the Sermon

The fifth step is to organise the structure of the material that needs to be explained. This is the packaging step. Now it is important to have your audience in mind. To whom will you be speaking and under what circumstances? It is also important to have in mind the aim of x, y, z. Getting the audience to the point x, y, z is the controlling factor of my packaging decisions. The easiest basic model to train yourself is as follows:

- 1) Introduction about x, y,
- 2) Content of argument about a, b, c
  - a) Point a from the passage
  - b) Point b from the passage

- c) Point c from the passage
- 3) Summary of how a, b, c implies x, y, z
- 4) Conclusion and challenge to x, y, z.

This then is a sermon with a beginning, a middle and an end. It is a simple structure that is easy for people to follow. It is a form that is recognised within our culture.

The introduction is aimed at engaging the audience. It is important to engage them in terms of personal rapport as well as content. The content should engage their minds on the topic that you wish them to think, especially the central thrust of the passage as it applies to them. Because the application to them is about their lives, it can have a motivational effect upon their listening. It frequently raises a question by which they are encouraged to look into the sermon in order to find an answer. While it is important not to make this section too long so that the Bible is not given its due place, it is equally important that the congregation is on board the train before you leave the station.

The content of the argument needs to set out its material very clearly. The classic way of presenting this material is to put forward your point, explain your point, illustrate your point and repeat your point. For highly intelligent listeners this can be a little tedious and boring. However, most people need a point expressed several times before they understand it. Most people also need a point to be clothed with concrete illustration before they understand it. The preacher is wise to use such illustrations that have an applicability to the congregation. This means that he does not save up all the application to the end. It means that x, y and z can be peeping through the explanation of a, b, c. The capacity for being simple, well organised and clear in this section of the sermon is what marks out great preachers. Any fool can make it complicated; only those who have done their homework can make it simple. It is crucial to aim for clarity in this section of the sermon. To be able to reduce the argument of the passage to two or three clearly explained propositions enables the hearer to lock into the logic of the whole sermon.

The summary stage is frequently combined with the conclusion. Whether you need a separate step for summary depends upon the ability of the congregation to listen or of the preacher to explain. A complicated, difficult argument (that is, a bad sermon) or an inexperienced congregation will need a summary step. This step should not introduce any new material but try and get the overview of the content. In broad, bold strokes the whole argument is to be recapitulated. It is crucial here not to get bogged down in detail. New material and/or footnotes are strictly forbidden. The connection between the argument a, b, c and its conclusion x, y, z must be seen to be clear and compelling.

The conclusion is to drive home the aim of the whole sermon. Thus the conclusion must be about x, y, z. By this stage the congregation should see that the Bible passage is teaching a, b, c and that, a, b, c clearly implies the conclusion x, y, z. Thus the preacher has the right and solemn duty to call upon the congregation to undertake x, y, z. It is important to be wary of repeating the whole sermon at this stage. If the work has been done properly, the conclusion need not be long and drawn out and should not need to refer back to the content of the argument. However, it is important that, without legalism, the application be drawn in concrete and specific terms. Part of

the conclusion must be our own obedience. For the congregation learns not only from our words but also from our actions. It is important that they see our progress in obeying the Word of God. The preacher must always be part of his own congregation. To preach without acting is not only to deceive yourself but also to preach against yourself.

## The Importance of Context

The whole exercise of expository preaching requires considerable preparation. The chief area of preparation is to understand the Bible and its application correctly. In order to understand the passage properly it is crucial to place it in its right context. That is, we must place the sentence in its paragraph in its chapter in its book. However, the context of the Bible's teaching is more than just the grammatical context of any particular sentence. We need to see what is being said in terms of its historical background. When was this book written, to whom, under what circumstances and for what purpose? We also need to see any part of the Bible in the perspective of the Bible's total theology. This total theology is partly doctrinal in terms of ideas, propositions and concepts that the Bible teaches. But the total Bible context is also the historical development of God's plans and purposes in the world. An overall Biblical theology, especially of how the Old Testament and the New Testament relate to each other, is essential for placing any part of the Bible in its right Biblical context.

However, if we are to apply the Bible to our day we will also find it helpful to understand the philosophical presuppositions and moods of the ancient world as well as the modern world. For we need to not only affirm the truth but deny the error. Frequently it is when people see the light of God's Word in contrast to the darkness of the world that they rightly understand and appreciate the truth of God's Word.

## Understanding the Hearers

Similarly, an understanding of people and of human nature enables the preacher to apply the Word of God to the consciences of the hearers. This understanding of human nature comes in part from a perceptive interaction with people through the experiences of life. However, it is important not to underestimate the Scripture's teaching about the nature of humanity in equipping the preacher to relate the Scripture's teaching to people. The whole Bible's message, the Gospel itself, teaches about the nature of mankind. However, some books such as Proverbs, the wisdom literature generally and the Psalms are a particularly rich field of human perceptions.

## Resources

Certain books are helpful in our study of the Scriptures. Commentaries will answer some of the interpretive questions that our own Bible reading creates. Commentaries raise other people's questions that we possibly have not considered. A Concordance and a good cross reference Bible enables us to find parallel teachings of the Scriptures. The New Bible Dictionary enables us to find background detail for most parts of the Bible. An atlas of Biblical times helps us place things in their historical context. However, our total reading diet, theological and non-theological, is the grist to the mill that enables a preacher to produce sermons. One great danger in reading is the regurgitation of commentaries. Their aim and orientation is quite different to sermons. A preached commentary is a recipe for indigestion.

## Coaching Exercise

Part of the key to learning how to expound the Scriptures lies in finding simple and easy passages upon which to start. Some passages, like Colossians 3:1-4 and Colossians 3:1-17 almost preach themselves. A useful exercise is to prepare a talk on each of those passages at least to the point of an outline structure of the talk.