

**SBJT: What do you consider to be the essential elements of an expository sermon?**

**D. A. Carson:** The question is enormously important, and could easily call forth a book. I shall answer it in two parts.

*First*, before establishing the distinctives of *expository* preaching, we will do well to review the essential distinctives of preaching. Preaching is verbal communication of which at least the following things are true: (1) Its substance is the unfolding and application of what God has said in Scripture. (2) In the well-known phrase of Phillips Brooks, it is truth mediated through human personality.

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(3) It has an essential heraldic element; i.e., it is proclamation. (4) As in the past God disclosed himself so often in words, so, ideally, the sermon should in some measure be a “re-revelation”—not, of course, revelation in exactly the same sense that the word was revelatory when it first came, but in the sense that God mediates himself to us by that same word when, once again, it is announced. In other words, ideally the sermon is more than a communication of propositions and moral exhortation; it is the communication of God. (5) Its long-term goal is to glorify God, primarily by announcing God’s salvation and thus by the calling out of God’s people, and their edification so as to build up the church into the maturity and godliness that are its heritage and destiny. (6) Its immediate purpose is to instruct, inform, persuade, correct, appeal, condemn, invite response, encourage, edify, rebuke—in short, to convey God’s truth and God’s will in such a way as to elicit the appropriate response from God’s image-bearers.

All of these elements deserve prolonged reflection. Here I have space for only a few comments. (a) Preaching is oral communication. Derivatively, of course, we may create a metaphor by saying (for instance) that someone’s entire life is a sermon. Obviously we may *read* sermons. But neither is, strictly speaking, preaching. Essential to preaching is verbal/oral communication, with an inescapable heraldic element. (b) Preaching is far more than a merely intellectual exercise, for it is “truth mediated through human personality, “ and aims to communicate the very presence of God. By the same token, preaching is far more than a mere reading (usually unacknowledged) of someone else’s sermon—a practice far too common in this day of circulating com-

put discs with their “best sermons.” This practice is of course morally despicable, since it is theft (and for that matter illegal, since such material is copyrighted and yet is being circulated on the tapes of the local church). I am not referring to the almost inevitable borrowings of a person who reads a great deal, still less to the acknowledged borrowings of an honest worker, but to the wholesale reproducing of another’s work as if it were your own. My concern here, however, is not so much with the immorality of such conduct as with the desperately tragic way in which it reduces preaching and the preacher, and finally robs the congregation. The substance of a stolen sermon is doubtless as true (and as false) as when the originating preacher first said it. But here there is no honest wrestling with the text, no unambiguous play of biblical truth on human personality, no burden from the Lord beyond mere play-acting, no honest interaction with and reflection on the words of God such that the preacher himself is increasingly conformed to the likeness of Christ. Any decent public reader could do as much: it would be necessary only to supply the manuscript. (c) If both the long-term goal and the immediate purpose of preaching are as described above, the preacher’s aims are nicely established—and this will work out in terms of sermons carefully crafted to bring God glory and to transform and edify men and women. The goals are not artistry or a reputation for being a “great preacher,” still less the manipulation of people or the routine drone of a voice attempting nothing more than getting through one more Sunday. The goals are the glory of God and the good of his people.

Granted, then, that preaching, properly understood, has these ingredients, what

are the essential elements of an *expository* sermon? I shall assume that expository preaching is never *less* than what I have described. But precisely how is it *more*?

(1) Above all, it is preaching whose subject matter emerges directly and demonstrably from a passage or from some passages of Scripture. In other words, its content and structure demonstrably reflect what Scripture says, and honestly seek to elucidate it. The organizing principles of, say, topical sermons, may or may not reflect what the Bible says, for the sermon's organizing genius is less tied to Scripture.

This essential element of expository preaching does not assume that the passages of Scripture must all be contiguous, or that only systematic preaching through a book can properly be called "expository preaching." One might have a series on temptation, for instance, and preach serially on the temptation of Adam and Eve, the temptation of Joseph, the temptation of Hezekiah, the temptation of Jesus, and so on—and in each case the sermon might be genuinely expository. In this instance the organizing principle for the selection of texts is topical, but the expositions themselves are expository. Nor does this definition say anything explicit about the length of the passage. One preacher may work through Romans 1-8 in eight years; another may work through the same chapters in seven or eight sermons. I have heard it done both ways, both very effectively. Different times call for different styles; moreover, different literary genres in the Bible call for different lengths of text. Narrative must be covered at a faster clip than tightly-woven discourse or apocalyptic. For instance, Revelation will not be handled the same way as Leviticus. But one non-negotiable characteristic of expository preaching is that its subject

matter emerges directly and demonstrably from Scripture.

(2) Yet despite this emphasis on the content of Scripture, an expository sermon is no mere running commentary—in the style, perhaps, of what used to be called (and still is, in a few circles in Britain) a "Bible reading." The expository sermon distinguishes itself from a Bible reading in three particulars: (a) It has structure. (b) It coheres—i.e., it carries a unified burden, a sense of direction, a coherent message. It does not simply pick up the text from the previous meeting and wander through the next chunk of text. (c) It diligently aims to apply the Word of God. That point is sometimes forgotten by young expositors fresh from seminary. They have learned how to do exegesis, of course (if their seminary education has been any good), but now they devote, say, 85% of their sermon preparation time to careful exegesis. The remaining 15% is all that is left for developing structure, for creating thoughtful and telling application, for writing up. The result sounds more like a learned if unstructured lecture than a sermon. The best expository preachers will devote perhaps 50% or more of their (considerable) sermon preparation time to thoughtful and prayerful reflection on how to make the message of the text wound and heal, sing and sting.

(3) Ideally, expository preaching is preaching which, however dependent it may be for its content on the text or texts at hand, draws attention to inner-canonical connections that inexorably move toward Jesus Christ and the gospel. In other words, one of the dangers of expository preaching that ignores this last point is that it may so focus on one particular text at a time that the larger picture may be lost to view. The advantage of an older

style preaching in which the text served as a springboard for an entire systematic theology was that the big picture was constantly maintained—but the cost was distance from the text, and it was only rarely shown how this larger theological structure could be derived from Scripture itself. Inevitably, more and more of the authority for the structure depended on the preacher’s reputation, not on what Scripture demonstrably says. But the inverse danger in expository preaching is that Christians will pick up a great deal about various texts long and short, but somehow lose the coherence of the big picture. Expositors may go through weeks or months of Psalms or Jeremiah and never mention Jesus or the gospel, except incidentally.

The solution is not uncontrolled topical connections (though on occasion topical parallels may be justified). The solution is to learn the inner-canonical connections, the biblical-theological connections, so well that you can show how this passage rightly understood in its own setting, fits into the canonical setting, and is part of a massive mosaic that drives you to Jesus Christ. Not every expository sermon should attempt such a demonstration, of course. So perhaps I am pushing things to call this “an *essential* element” of the expository sermon. But though it may not be an essential element of *every* expository sermon, it is certainly an essential element of expository preaching, i.e., of the pattern of expository sermons. Otherwise biblical exposition will drift toward the atomistic, and lose sight of the Bible’s story line, which drives us toward Jesus and the gospel. That is too high a price to pay.