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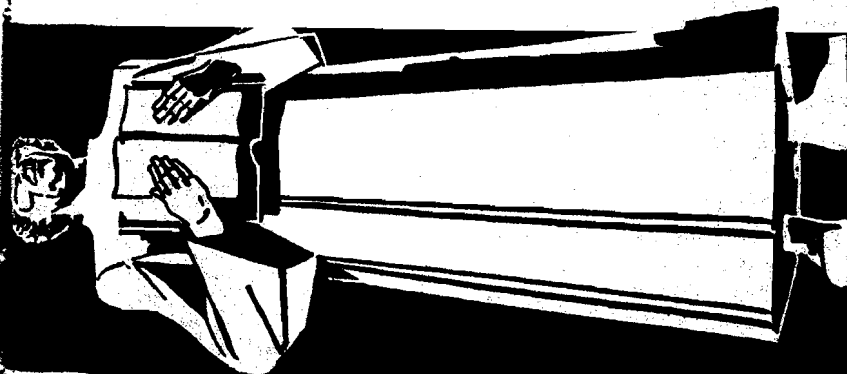
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Can Expository Preaching Still Be Relevant In These Days?

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ANY ARTICLE ON PREACHING that does not deal with the theology of preaching would seem trite and shallow. But once we get into the theology of preaching we are tempted to go on and on, in order to do justice to the subject. The result would be a theological treatise with very little practical application. But it is in the practical application of the theological principles that preachers especially want guidance and help. At least that is the impression that I have gained when speaking with pastors. I shall, therefore, merely allude to a few principles, each of which could be treated at length, thus making it possible for me to get to the preparation of sermons with practical hints and guidelines that may be helpful.

When dealing with theological principles, we are reminded at once that Christ has set high standards for our preaching. We are to preach Christ and Him crucified, which means much more than to take our hearers to Calvary. We are also to preach Christ according to His Word as it has come down to us from the pens of those whom God inspired to write it. We are to preach God's Word with authority as a "Thus saith the Lord." In doing so we are to preach the whole counsel of God to men. When we do that we are to use the Word of God as the basis of God-given messages to our people today.

In our preaching we need also to be mindful of the fact that we are addressing God's people, made the people of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. He is Himself the Word; men are, therefore, to listen when He speaks. He is the Creator; men are to know they are His creatures. He is the Provider of men's needs; men are to learn to cast their cares on Him. He is the Lawgiver; men are to know His holy will. He is the Judge; men must see their sins and their sinfulness as they stand before Him. He is also the Savior of men; men are to be assured of their salvation. He is the Life; men are to be helped to live in Him as He lives in them. He is the Victor over sin, death, and hell; men are to learn the joy of freedom in Him. He is the Lord; men are to be helped to serve willingly under His rule of love.

Through our preaching the Lord seeks to change men's lives. We are to be evangelists, to awaken men to their high calling in Christ. We are to be heralds, proclaiming the messages of God to men. We are to be ambassadors, calling men to be reconciled to God. We are to be shepherds, nourishing and caring for men day by day. We are to be stewards of the mysteries of God, giving men the proper Word for their every need. We are to be witnesses, telling men of all that God has done for them. We are to be overseers,

urging men to live their lives to God. We are to be ministers, preparing men to minister with us to others. As we reflect on each of these phases of our work, what emphasis each gives to the importance of preaching! What a task the Lord has given us!

In His holy Word God has also given us all we need to accomplish His good purpose. His Word shows men their sins and their sinfulness. It convicts them of their sins. It shows them their need of help. His Word then invites men to be saved. It does more. It actually saves them from sin and death. It frees them from the dominion of evil. Then it shows them the life that is pleasing to God. It makes them willing to do God's will. It even enables them to live in Christ and for Christ. Finally, it shows men their home in heaven. It fills them with the desire to reach their goal and in due time brings them safely home.

I have already hinted at the thought, but I want to state it clearly, that preaching God's Word involves God and men. Only the Spirit of God can enlighten men to accept the truth of God. Only He can create, sustain, and nourish faith. He it is who makes men to will and to do what pleases God. But we, on our part, must preach to men in language they will understand and in a manner that will not only interest them but will lead them to action.

Let us face the fact that the times we are living in have made preaching more difficult. We know more about the world and its needs than ever before. People on the move give us less chance to reach them with the Word. Intellectualism has substituted the wisdom of men for the wisdom of God. The Word of God is questioned today even by many a preacher of the Word.

Our environment adds to our problems. In the sea of faces in the inner city, man is an island. In the high-rise apartments walls have ears but no mouths to speak. In the metropolis man is often the center of his own life. In the suburbs people are apt to share everything but Christ. Even in rural areas men have no time for the minister of the Word.

Yet men need the preaching of the Word. Living the Christian life is impossible without it. Christians are not immune to even the worst sins and vices. They, too, can fall, though most are kept from falling by a gracious and merciful God. But the sins that so easily overtake them are the sins of every-day life. The desire for social acceptance brings with it the sins of society. The desire for self-preservation brings with it the temptation to place health, money, position before the needs of the soul. The desire for education is accompanied by greater risks than ever before. And sex has not ceased finding new ways to tempt men to sin.

It is important, then, that the Word of God be preached to the joy and edification of God's people. I am not ignoring the importance of private counseling in helping Christians to live as children of God. Private counseling may help an individual more than a hundred sermons. But the sermon will reach many who indicate no need of private counseling. The pulpit will continue for many

years—and may continue to the end of time—to be the best educational agency of the church, in spite of what many in and outside of the church are saying about preaching. It just has to be done right. And it can be done right. But how?

Every homiletical textbook offers sermon methods. Some offer a number of methods, possibly with the hope that every reader will find a plan that especially appeals to him. Confidentially, my method would never fill a book. The only trouble with it is that it requires about fifteen hours of work each week, in addition to the time the preacher may use in applying thoughts of the sermon he is working on while calling on the sick, the delinquent, or the mission prospect. Can you afford the time? Or, better, can you think of a better use of your time, if you are convinced, as I am, that God is at work in the hearts and lives of men as we preach His Word?

My method isn't really my own, though I have made it my own. I am sure it has been used by consecrated servants of the Word as long as preaching has been going on in the church. It can be stated as a formula: The analytical outline of the text in its context, plus the needs of the hearers, plus the particular occasion, plus the relation of the preacher to his task and to his hearers should result in a good sermon outline. To this must be added such rhetorical and sermonic elements as a fitting introduction, a valid conclusion, interesting and appropriate illustrations, all of them fused together into a message of a loving God to His children in Christ. Such a sermon is dependent not only on the work of the preacher, but also on the guidance and blessing of the Holy Spirit at every stage of the work.

Let us imagine ourselves getting at such a task for next Sunday's sermon. I am taking for granted that we are preaching on one of the pericopal series of texts or on a series that we have developed ourselves and are already well informed on the over-all theme of the particular season of the church year.

It is Sunday afternoon or evening. We have a half-hour or more to ourselves. We open our Bible to the text for next Sunday and slowly, prayerfully read it in its context as our private devotion. That is all. The real work begins on Monday morning. The desk is laid out for work, with the text in the original, lexicon, concordance, a Bible dictionary, possibly an atlas, a loose-leaf notebook with separate pages marked for textual study and outline thoughts. Commentaries may be consulted later.

At this stage of the work I advise you *not* to think of your congregation, if you have fifteen hours in the week to devote to the sermon. If you think of your congregation while studying the text, you are too apt to see a message in the text and you begin to concentrate on your message instead of first allowing the text to say all that it wants to say to you. The very word "text" suggests to me that in it we have woven together many important threads of truth. I like to pull out one thread after another. As I do, the threads

begin to ravel and each thread produces a few more, all of them actually present in the text.

When we have a number of such threads of truth, drawn from the text and its context, often on the basis of careful study of a particular word or phrase, keeping in mind the writer of the book or letter, we are ready to consider these threads of truth in relation to each other. The result is an analytical outline of the text in its context. It is not a sermon outline. It is a clear presentation of the truth which the Holy Spirit caused Paul or Peter or David or Moses to write down for our learning. And it is now our own. But how quickly the time has passed. We have been at this for three hours. And we forgot about our hearers, about the church, and the world, for we were permitted to sound the depths of an important word of God.

But we cannot stay on the mountain top. We must come down to the plain, to our hearers, to the church, to the world. A word of caution here. We are filled up with the message of the text. We are so apt to read this Word into the lives of our people, imagining them to be like the people to whom our text was first addressed. The danger of such a course of action becomes very apparent when we seek to address our hearers in the words of the seven letters of Revelation. What a confusing picture we would have of our congregation if we applied the seven letters to them. We would then describe them as faithful to the Word, bearing up under tribulation, yet having lost their first love, in fact, so lukewarm that God must spew them out of His mouth, and all the while an ardent mission congregation with an open door for converts to Christianity. Obviously, except for general truths that apply to all, we must guard against reading the conditions of our text into the lives of our people. Instead, we must start with our people at this point of our sermon preparation. We will still be mindful of our text and of the particular areas of concern to which it speaks. But we will make every effort to see in what way the textual truth applies to our members, what particular needs of our people are supplied, if the text deals at all with a malady or need. We are not doing this on Monday morning. That day was fully taken up with textual study. We are doing this as we make our pastoral calls, sick calls, mission calls. We may get a good idea for our sermon as we are preparing for the voters' meeting or for a meeting with the women of the church. Having done our textual study on Monday morning, we see possible application of the truth while reading the daily paper or a periodical during the week. I hope we can even take note of things to say to the children as we see them at play. They also need the Word.

We now have the analytical outline of the text in its context plus the needs of our hearers, young and old alike. It is Thursday or Friday. It was usually Friday with me. We are now ready to give some consideration to the particular Sunday of the church year, to see the relation of our text to the propers, to put down the

chief thoughts that we feel we should bring into our message, and then to formulate a theme that will be interesting, arresting, and relevant. This isn't done while we are on the go. This is desk-work, as important as that of Monday morning. We are planning the structure of our sermon, finalizing the particular message, the particular aim and purpose of our message, and putting it down in outline form.

Here you and I may part company. You may want an outline fully worked out to the parts, subparts, and sub-subparts. I can work better with a broad plan, letting the sermon gradually take shape as it is being thought out. I do not see this "thinking out" of a sermon as paper work. The writing should be begun when the preacher is full of his message, so that the sermon fairly flows on to the page. If the preacher makes a practice of writing after he knows what to say, he can easily dispense with the writing, though few pastors would advise the young man to do this too soon. Give yourself at least ten years of careful writing out of the manuscript, writing it after you have it clearly in mind. Then try preaching it without taking the last step. Preach it extempore. You will be thrilled with the greater freedom this gives you.

I spoke of writing as the last step. Actually it isn't that. The written sermon should be carefully edited. Is every part of it true to our aim and purpose? Is the language clear? Above all, is it God's word to men, not just doctrinally correct, but God speaking to our hearers, saying what we are sure He wants to say to them? The young preacher needs a manuscript to make such an analysis of his message. Some pastors feel the need of the manuscript after forty years of preaching. Here I can only say: Use the gifts God has given you. But don't rate yourself too high. Whatever way you do it, it is going to take work, which the Lord will bless in answer to your prayer.

The actual preaching of the sermon is another matter. The pastor who knows what he is going to say before he writes will not have to spend much time recapturing the thoughts which he has put on paper. He won't have to memorize. That can so easily lead to a recitation of the sermon. Preaching is speaking to people as the mouthpiece of God. It isn't the transmission of mere words from our minds to our mouths. We need to communicate. Preaching is dialog. People have been talking to us all week. They should still be speaking to us as we speak to them on Sunday morning. They will do it with a nod, a smile, a frown, sometimes even a tear. Don't cheat yourself out of this dialog by gluing your eyes to a manuscript. You are an ambassador, (remember?) an overseer, a pastor, a steward of the mysteries of God, with the obligation to give the proper word to each of your hearers. What a privilege for sinners like ourselves! Every Sunday we have a message of God to men, every sermon just a bit different from the others, since no two texts are alike. Every pastor who preaches on these texts is likely to have a slightly different sermon, since no two preachers are

alike and no two congregations have exactly the same needs. Some may need more warning than others, some more encouragement, some more instruction, as it was with the seven churches in Asia Minor.

The needs which we deal with at a given time will depend on one of two things. If we are preaching on a prescribed text for a given Sunday of the church year, then our careful study of the text and our careful analysis of people will force us to speak to those needs about which the text has something to say. We don't gather the truths of the text with the thought of setting them aside when speaking to our hearers. We find the way in which the truths of the text are relevant in our day. If, however, we are so moved by an immediate need of men that we feel we must speak to it at once, then a careful analysis of the need will suggest an appropriate text or pertinent teachings of the Word drawn from a number of portions of the Word. For the most careful analysis of people's needs will not solve their problems. Only the appropriate Word of God properly applied to those needs will do this.

Here the task will be to find that appropriate Word. If it is a need that should be supplied by the preacher, God will have something to say about it. If He says nothing, we should be honest enough to admit that the need is not our concern as preachers. We may have to tackle it elsewhere or ask others for aid in handling the problem, asking God to guide us to a proper solution.

With that I am saying that the portion of the sermon in which God's message comes through to men must be based on the Word of God. Only then do we have the right and the authority to speak as God's messenger. It stands to reason, then, that in the portion of the sermon in which we are offering our own analysis of conditions in the world we must guard against giving men the impression that all we say is the Word of God. That suggests that we keep these portions at a minimum. We are not sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, though we can learn from all of these. We are sent to arouse secure souls from their sleep in sin, to lead those who have been aroused to faith in Christ, to give believers assurance of their state of grace and salvation, to lead those who have become assured of this to sanctification of their lives, and to confirm the sanctified and keep them in their holy and blessed state unto the end. That is the way Dr. Walther summed it up in his lectures on the proper distinction of law and gospel. He who conscientiously devotes himself to these tasks in his preaching will not be tempted to look for a more relevant, timely message. There is none.