

The Essence of Expositional Preaching: Finding and Preaching the Textual Theme

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I. Establishing the Hermeneutical and Homiletical Foundation

A. The Hermeneutical Foundation for Exposition of the Textual Theme.

1. Hermeneutics and Language

“Hermeneutics entails the principles of interpretation, the science and art. Exegesis refers to the application of those principles to the text in order to get the meaning. Hermeneutics supplies the tools to get the meaning; exegesis uses them.... Hermeneutics is logically prior to exegesis” (McCune, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” p.16).

“The basic principles of interpretation come with the image of God that makes one a language-user. These principles are the so-called ‘received laws of language’ without which communication would be impossible.... In hermeneutics man uses these received laws of language to come to the Bible in order to discover these laws and in order to refine them and use them in interpreting further the Scriptures.” (McCune, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” p.16).

2. Hermeneutics and God’s Revelation through Human Language

Since hermeneutics is built on laws of language rooted in the Creator and created order, Dr. Sam Dawson maintains that the interpreter should expect:

- a. God to use language grammatically (or normally)
- b. God to use language historically, i.e., as it was being used at the time given
- c. God to say what He means in the text and for that meaning to never change
- d. God to use language univocally
- e. God to use language truthfully
- f. God to use language harmoniously
- g. God to speak clearly

Therefore, the interpreter should expect to use a grammatical, historical, theological hermeneutic to get at the meaning of Scripture.

3. Hermeneutics, Human Language, and the Textual Theme

“The smallest unit of discourse is the simple, grammatically complete, declarative sentence. Such a sentence constitutes by definition a single idea; it consists of something being predicated about something else. These smallest units we typically organize—at least when we are communicating effectively—into larger units such as paragraphs, sections, pericopes, or stanzas, depending on the genre of communication we have chosen. Moreover, each of these larger units—again, when we are organizing our thoughts most effectively—will have its own unifying idea. This is in fact what renders them ‘units.’ In other words, it is precisely the presence of a central idea that provides each unit its ‘unit-y,’ its ‘unit-ness,’ so to speak” (Duane Litfin, “New Testament Challenges to Big Idea Preaching,” in *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, pp. 54-55).

“Because God chose to communicate his inscripturated revelation in the form of ordinary human language, that communication of necessity will consist of organized units of discourse. Thus, to understand that revelation we must discern these units and discover the ideas they embody” (Litfin, p. 55).

On the basis of these facts, that interpretive analysis must always seek the answer to these two questions: (1) What is the text talking about (subject)? And (2) What is the text saying about the subject (complement)? (Keith Willhite, “A Bullet Versus Buckshot: What Makes the Big Idea Work?” in *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, p. 17).

B. The Homiletical Foundation for Exposition of the Textual Theme.

1. The Content of the Sermon

“If God superintended the writing of Scripture and protected its details, the biblical preaching must reflect God’s thought both in theme and development” (Robinson, *Making A Difference in Preaching*, pp. 75-76).

“Expository preaching, therefore, emerges not merely as a type of sermon—one among many—but as the theological outgrowth of a high view of inspiration. Expository preaching then originates as a philosophy rather than a method. It reflects a preacher’s honest effort to submit his thought to the Bible rather than to subject the Bible to his thought” (Haddon Robinson, *Making A Difference in Preaching* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], pp. 69-70).

Expositional preaching is a method of preaching which: (1) unfolds the original meaning of a biblical passage(s), (2) integrates it with the unified message of Scripture, and (3) makes appropriate application to its contemporary hearers.

2. The Communication of the Sermon

“If we are to communicate effectively with our audience, our own messages should also be the embodiment of a central idea,” and “if that idea is to bear the authority of Heaven, it must be an idea ‘derived from’ and, ideally, ‘transmitted through’ the study of a biblical passage in its context” (Litfin, pp. 55-56).

Thus it follows that a faithful exposition of that passage will also display a central idea.... The expositor’s sermon constitutes a unit of discourse—that is, a more or less elaborate development of a single, significant idea—because it consists of an exposition of a biblical unit of discourse” (Litfin, p. 56).

II. Applying Hermeneutics to Homiletics: Finding and Preaching the Theme

Goal: Identify the eternal thematic truth presented in this self-contained unit of Scripture.

A. Learn the background of the passage.

1. Who wrote it?
2. Who received it?
3. When was it written?
4. Why was it written?
 - a. What prompted it?
 - b. What is its aim?
5. What type of literature is it?

B. Limit the passage to a thematic unit.

1. The Principle

The preaching text should be a self-contained unit of thought. The preacher must determine the length of passage and number of subordinate ideas to address, but the guiding concern is to honor the integrity of the text's content.

2. The Process

- a. Common sense is your greatest ally, i.e., is there a natural beginning and ending to the thought? Force yourself to provide even the obvious answers to why the text stands as a distinct unit of thought.
- b. Check the original text and several translations.
- c. Be suspicious of the chapter and verse divisions.

C. Find the eternal thematic truth.

1. The Principle

Every passage/unit of logical communication, oral or written, has one major idea being presented, and everything within that unit is a development of that idea.

2. The Process

- a. Identify the Key Terms
 - 1) Repetition
 - 2) Placement
 - 3) Theological Significance
- b. Identify and Trace the Argument
 - 1) An argument is built on its propositions.
 - 2) State the relationship between the propositions.
- c. Identify the Questions and Commands
 - 1) Every assertion implies a question.
 - 2) Imperatives indicate intention.
- d. State the topic and assertion in a single sentence.