

Sermon: Expository Preaching as a Mark of a Healthy Church

Mark Dever

Mark Dever is pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C. A graduate of Cambridge University, Cambridge, England, he is the author of *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. His next book is a study of Richard Sibbes. He is a contributing editor to *The Founders Journal*.

Introduction

In my study, I have shelves and stacks of books that deal with the topic: What makes a good church? The answers range from friendliness to financial planning to being sensitive to visitors to vibrant music to pleasant surroundings to pristine bathrooms to plentiful parking to exciting children's programs to elaborate Sunday School options.

You need to know the marks of a healthy church, especially if you are a visitor looking for a church. Even those who are members need to consider the marks of a good church, for we live in a transient age. Regardless of how happy you may be living here, you, too, might move, and perhaps sooner than you think. You need to know what your goal is in looking for a church, and you need to identify the right foundation. Even if you stay, you need to know what makes a good church. For you will have a role in building and shaping it. "Experts" will tell you it is everything from how religion-free your language is to how invisible your membership requirements are. Are secure nurseries and sparkling bathrooms really the way to church growth and church health?

Expository Preaching

The most important distinguishing mark of a healthy church is expository preaching. It is the most important because careful and thorough preaching of God's Word will bring many other blessings to a church. Without expository preaching, other signs of health may be

accidental. They may be discarded or distorted all too easily because they did not spring from the Word, nor are they continually being reshaped and refreshed by it. But if you establish the priority of the Word, then you have in place the single most important aspect of the church's life. With the Word established, a church may experience growing health; without the Word, a church's health is imperiled.

What is this essential mark that is called "expository preaching"? Expository preaching is usually contrasted to "topical preaching," which is the kind of preaching in this sermon, when I take a subject and talk about it, rather than a text from the Bible and spend the whole sermon explaining it.

The topical sermon begins with a particular topic on which the preacher wants to preach and then assembles truth from various texts of the Bible. Stories and anecdotes are combined, and all are woven together around one *theme* rather than around one text of Scripture. A topical sermon may also be expository, insofar as it uses texts carefully and well, but the point of the sermon was already determined before the preparation for the sermon had begun. I already knew what I wanted to say when I set out to prepare this sermon, as opposed to what is usually the case when I preach expository. In the latter instance I may be surprised by the message of the text.

If expository preaching is so important, it needs to be defined. Expository preaching is not simply producing a verse

by verse commentary from the pulpit. Rather, *expositional preaching is that preaching which takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture*. This is clearly *not* what I am doing in this sermon. But it is what I have intended to do every other time I have entered the pulpit to preach.

Expositional preaching is preaching in service to the Word. It presumes a belief in the authority of Scripture, but it is something more: A commitment to expositional preaching is a commitment to hear God's Word. Even as Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles were given not just a commission to go and speak, but a particular message to deliver, so Christian preachers today have authority to speak from God *only so long as* they speak His words. Preachers are not merely commanded to preach, but they are commanded specifically to preach *the Word*.

Pastors may happily accept the authority of God's Word and even profess to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible; yet if that preacher in practice (whether intending to or not) does not regularly preach expositionally, he will never preach more than he already knows. A preacher may take a piece of Scripture, and exhort the congregation on a topic which is important, without really preaching the point of that passage. You may pick up your Bible right now, close your eyes, pray for guidance, and allow it to fall open to one particular place, open your eyes read the verse on which you have randomly placed your finger and get great blessing to your soul; but you will not necessarily learn what God intended to say through that passage understood in its context. What they say in real estate is true in understanding the Bible, too: the three most important points are *location, location, location!*

So, I repeat: Someone may happily accept the authority of God's Word and even profess to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible; yet if that person in practice (whether intending to or not) does not preach expositionally, he will never preach more than he already knows. A preacher may take a piece of Scripture, and exhort the congregation on a topic that is important, without really preaching the point of that passage. When that happens, the preacher and the congregation only hear in Scripture what they already knew upon coming to the text.

In being committed to preach a passage of Scripture in context, expositionally, taking as the point of the message the point of the passage, we hear from God those things that we do not already intend to hear when we set out. And, friends, from the initial call to repentance to the latest thing the Spirit has convicted us about, our whole salvation consists in hearing God in ways which we would never have guessed. To charge someone who does not in practice show a commitment to hear and to teach God's Word with the responsibility of the spiritual oversight of the flock is to hamper the growth of the church, practically encouraging it to grow only to the level of the pastor. The church will slowly be conformed to his mind, rather than to God's mind. And what we want—what we *crave*, if we are Christians—are God's Words!

The Central Role of the Word of God

The idea behind thinking that preaching should always (or almost always) be expositional, is that preaching is to have the Word at its center, and to have the Word directing it. In fact, each and every church should have the Word at its cen-

ter, and should have the Word directing it. And this is because when we read the Scriptures, we see clearly that God has decided to use His Word to bring life. His Word is His own chosen instrument.

I remember being at a reception in Washington D. C. when the conversation turned to a recently-published book which had just come out. I had read it because I was about to speak on the topic of the book elsewhere. My friend standing there had read it, too, because he had just written a review of it. I asked him what he thought. "Oh, it was very good," he said, "except it was marred by the author's repeating of that old Protestant error that the Bible created the church, when we all know," my Roman Catholic friend said with assurance, "that the church created the Bible." Well, I was in a quandary. What should I say? It was his party, not mine. But I decided that if he could be so openly dismissive, then I could be as forthright and honest as I wished. "That's ridiculous," I said, trying to sound as pleasantly contradictory as I could. "God's people have never created God's Word! From the very beginning, God's Word has created His people. From Genesis 1 where God literally creates all that is by His Word, including His people, to Genesis 12 where He calls Abraham out of Ur by the Word of His promise, to Ezekiel 37 where God gives Ezekiel a vision to share with the Israelite exiles in Babylon about a great resurrection to life that will come about by God's Word, to John 1 where we read of the supreme coming of God's Word in Jesus Christ, His Word made flesh, to Romans 10 where we read that faith and spiritual life come by the Word, *God has always created His people by His Word*. It is never been the other way around! God's people have never created

His Word." I cannot remember what happened in the rest of that conversation, but it solidified my own understanding of the absolute centrality of the Word. And it would be helpful to follow this path through Scripture and see what it tells us about the centrality of God's Word in our lives, and then conclude by considering what this means for the nature of preaching and for the importance of this preaching in our churches.

The Role of the Word in Bringing Life

We should begin where the Bible does—in Genesis 1. If you read the chapter, you see that it was *by His Word* that God created the world and all the life in it. He spoke and it was so!

In Genesis 3 we read of the Fall. When our first parents sinned, they were cast out of the Presence of God. They lost sight of God. But in God's great grace, they did not lose all hope. Though God was vanishing from their sight, He mercifully sent His voice to them. And His Word came to them, and so His Word was the germ of their hope. When God cursed the serpent, he warned him that the offspring of the woman would crush him.

It was by God's Word that Abram was called out of Ur of the Chaldees. This Word of God's promise recorded in the first few verses of Genesis 12 was used by God to call Abram out of Ur to follow God. And so God's people were created by God's Word. Abram never set up a committee to craft God's Word. No! He was made the father of God's people because God's Word came specially to Him. We know the story of how the children of Abraham multiplied in the promised land, and then went down into Egypt, eventually falling into slavery there for centuries.

And just when that bondage looked permanent, what did God do? He sent His Word. God's Word called out to Moses, initiating His redemptive work (Ex 3:4). It was by God's Word that Moses was called. And God's Word came not just to call Moses and his descendants, but the whole nation of Israel to be His people. Similarly in Exodus 20 God gave His Law to His people. And by their acceptance of it they were made His people, so that it was by God's Word that Israel was constituted God's special people.

As we progress through the Old Testament we see that God's Word plays a pivotal role. This is illustrated in the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18. "After a long time, *the word of the LORD came* to Elijah: 'Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land.'" How many hundreds of times in the Old Testament do we read this phrase "the word of the LORD came"? It is typical of God's activity in the Old Testament as he created and led His people by His Word. God's Word always came as the means of faith in the Old Testament; you could even say it was a secondary object. God is always the primary object of our faith. But in another sense, His Word or His promise is to be trusted, with all of the faith that we would invest in His person.

Do you understand why the Word of God is central? Do you grasp why it is the instrument that creates faith? It is because the Word of the Lord presents the object of our faith to us; it holds out God's promise to us, from all kinds of individual promises (throughout the Old Testament and New Testament) all the way to the great promise, the great hope, the great object of our faith, Christ Himself. The Word presents that which is to be believed. (It's almost as if, for the Christian, the

speed of sound is greater than the speed of light. News of the future reaches our ears before it reaches our eyes.)

One of the climactic chapters in the Bible that shows God using the Word to bring life is Ezekiel 37. In this great vision we see most remarkably that *life comes by the Word of God*. The remarkable vision is described in the first 10 verses:

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army (Eze 37:1-10, NIV).

In verse 11, God interprets this vision for Ezekiel. He says that these bones stand for the whole house of Israel who say "our hope is gone" (37:11). What a moving

presentation! God poignantly represents as death their own hopelessness and despair. And His answer to the people, as it was to the dry bones, is that, "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live" (37:14). How does He do this? He does it by His Word. In this vision, He does not do what we would do if we were trying to author a credible vision—make the army live so that they could listen, and then have Ezekiel prophesy to them. No! He has Ezekiel speak His Word to them while they are dead, and as he does *they come to life!*

This is an arresting picture particularly because it is analogous to the way God had called Ezekiel to speak to a people that would not listen. God Himself had spoken into the void and by the power of His Word created all things. His Word also came into the world, as John says in his gospel, "and though the world was made by him, the world did not recognize him" (Jn 1:10). And by that Word, the Lord Jesus, God has begun creating His new society on earth. In the same way God told Ezekiel to speak to these dried bones.

An inseparable connection exists between life, breath, spirit, speech, and word. It is reminiscent of the account in Mark's gospel (Mk 7:32-35), when "some people brought a man to Jesus who was deaf.... Jesus looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to the man 'Be opened!' At this, the man's ears were opened...." Jesus *spoke* to a deaf man, *and life came back into his ears!*

In the ministry of Jesus, we see Jesus calling out His people to Himself, in just the way that Ezekiel prophesied: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Eze 36:26-27). This is the glorious reality that we Christians have experienced. As I said

to a Jehovah's Witness some months back, we Christians know that in and of ourselves we are spiritually dead, and that we need God to initiate His life-giving love to us through His Word, and to reach down and to rip out our old stony hearts and to put in us a new heart of flesh, a heart of love that is soft and supple, pliant to His Word. And that is precisely what Jesus Christ does! He is creating a different kind of people, a people who show God is life in them.

This brings us to that supreme picture of the Word of God bringing life. In John 1:1-4 we read, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Supremely, the Word of God has come in Christ. It is in Christ that the Word of God has fully and finally come to us.

Jesus modeled the centrality of the Word in His own ministry. In Mark 1:38, when His disciples came seeking Him, telling Him that many people were looking for Him so that He could do miracles and heal them, "Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else ... so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.'" Now, if you keep reading in Mark's gospel, you see that Jesus knew that He had come fundamentally to lay down His life as a ransom for many (10:45), but in order for that sacrifice to be understood, He must first teach.

God's pattern with us is unwavering. As you read through the Bible, it is clear that God acts and then God interprets. He does not only speak (though I am not sure one could even conceive of "only speaking" in reference to God); rather God acts, but then He does not leave His acts sitting there to speak for themselves, if you

will. No, He then speaks to interpret His great saving acts.

And this speaking nature of God fits with the way that He has made us. Consider for a moment the importance of words in relationships. Our words are important for our relationships. To illustrate this point consider the dog, proverbially man's best friend. You love your dog, and you tell me that you have a great relationship with the dog, though he could never cognitively communicate with you. You see the tail wag, and the rush towards you, the licking and that oh-so-sympathetic look in the eyes, and you figure this is love! So who needs words, right? Wrong. If you go home today after church, and you greet your dog, and in response your dog runs up to you and asks you how church was today, I suggest that that would change your relationship with the dog!

We have separated ourselves from God by our sin; therefore, God must speak if we are to know Him. This is why the work of Carl F. H. Henry has been so important. In his great work, *God, Revelation and Authority*,¹ Dr. Henry makes just this point—that it is God who must reveal Himself, because we, on our own, due to our sin, could never know Him otherwise. Either He has spoken, or we are forever lost in the darkness of our own speculations.

Finally consider Romans 10:17: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." This "word of Christ" is the great message of the Gospel—of the call for us to repent and to believe in Him, in His atoning death and resurrection for us as our only hope. And since this saving faith comes by hearing, we know that we must give the primacy to the preaching of that word by those

whom God has specially called and gifted to do this.

Paul writes in Romans 10:9 that "if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Trusting in, relying on the truth of God's raising of Jesus Christ is the way to salvation; to inclusion in the people of God. Again, God has always created His people by speaking His Word, and without doubt, His greatest Word is Christ. As the writer to the Hebrews began his letter, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe" (Heb 1:1-2).

Faith is central. Therefore, the Word must be central because God's Holy Spirit creates His people by His Word. Now, we can, in a sense, create a people by other means. We can create a people around a fully-graded choir program. We can create a people around a building project, or a denominational identity. We can create a people around a series of care groups or dress codes. We can create a people around service to the community. We can create a people around opportunities for socializing for young mothers, or singles doing Christian cruising, or men's groups. We can even create a people around the personality of a preacher. But we can only see the people of God, the church of God, created around the Word of God.

Do you recall what Martin Luther said of his experience at the Reformation? When asked how he had done it all, he said, "I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. . . . The Word did it all."² *The Word of God brings Life!*

The Role of the Word in Sanctification.

We must also consider the role of the Word in sanctifying. You see, friends, the Word of God must be central to our lives as individuals, and as a church, not only because it is the Word of God which God's Spirit uses to create faith in us (as we have seen), but also because it is the Word of God which His Spirit uses to cause us to grow! We shall limit our discussion, since this point is just as clear in scripture as the last one. For instance, in Deuteronomy 8:3 we read the words that Jesus later quoted to the devil, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." The psalmist affirms in Psalm 119:105 that "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." When we turn to the declining days of the kingdom of Judah during King Josiah's reign, the Law, the written Word of God, was rediscovered and read to him in 2 Chronicles 34:18-19, 30. Josiah tore his clothes in repentance, had the word read aloud to the people, and a national recovery followed. God uses His Word to sanctify His people and to make them more like Himself.

Jesus taught the same truths. In His high priestly prayer, he prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (Jn 17:17). Paul wrote that "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word" (Eph 5:26). We need God's Word not only to give us life, but also to give us direction, to keep remolding us and reshaping us more and more in the image of the God who is speaking to us.

At the Reformation the Roman Catholic church had a Latin phrase which became something of a motto: *semper ea-*

dem ("always the same.") The Reformed churches also had such a "*semper*" motto: *Ecclesia Reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum dei* ("The church reformed, always being reformed according to the Word of God"). A church that is constantly being washed in the Word, being sanctified by God's truth, now *that* is a healthy church. Friends, for our own health, individually as Christians, and corporately as a church, we must continue to be shaped in new and deeper ways by God's agenda in our lives rather than our own.

The Role of the Preacher of God's Word in the Church

Lastly, we must think of the role of the preacher in the proclamation of the Word. What we have studied thus far shows why preachers are called to preach. You see, all of this is why in the church, preachers are called to preach. Recently, a *New Yorker* article's lament about what is lost in the brave, new "audience-driven" preaching of the day was brought to my attention:

The preacher, instead of looking out upon the world, looks out upon public opinion, trying to find out what the public would like to hear. Then he tries his best to duplicate that, and bring his finished product into a marketplace in which others are trying to do the same. The public, turning to our culture to find out about the world, discovers there is nothing but its own reflection. The unexamined world, meanwhile, drifts blindly into the future.³

But we preachers are not called to preach only what is popular according to the polls. What good is that? What life does that bring? We are called to preach not merely moral exhortations, nor history lessons, nor social commentaries (though any of these may be part of it) but we are called to preach the Word of God to the

church because God's Holy Spirit creates His people by His Word! Therefore, Paul told Timothy, "Form a committee"? No! "Take a survey"? No! "Spend yourself in visiting"? No! "Read a book"? No! He told him clearly: "Preach the Word" (2 Ti 4:2). Thus, when the apostles determined that there were problems with the equitable distribution of financial aid in the church, they still insisted that the church must find others to solve these problems because they must "give [their] attention to prayer, and the ministry of the word" (Ac 6:4). For this word, as Paul said in Philippians 2:16, is "the Word of life!"

We are not surprised to discover that Jesus and His apostles quote the Old Testament and refer to it as an authoritative guide to the will and ways of God. I know that some suggest that we need a less rational, more artistic, less authoritarian and elitist, more communal and participatory way of communicating God's truth than this ancient method of one person standing and talking to others in a monologue. But I am not so sure. In fact, this ancient method may even be especially appropriate today, in our isolatingly subjectivist, anti-authority, confused and confusing culture. There is something appropriate about us meeting together to listen to one who is standing in the place of God giving His Word to us, and to which we contribute nothing other than our hearing and heeding.

Of course, there will come a day when faith will give way to sight, and sermons will be no more. And no one will think that day more glorious than I. Revelation 22:4 presents that day when faith will finally give way to sight, when we shall, as the apostle says, *see God!* But now we are in a different time. We are in a day of faith. And so, like our first parents before

us, like Noah and Abraham, like the Israelites and the ancient apostles, we rely on God's Word.

Conclusion

So what does all this mean for our church? Simply that the preaching of the Word must be absolutely central. Thus, it should not surprise you to hear that sound expositional preaching of God's Word is often the fountainhead of growth in a church. Martin Luther found that such careful attention to God's Word is the way to salvation and the beginning of reformation. The same is true today, for we need to hear God's Word afresh. We live in a strange day, when even Christians who claim to be born again, and churches which claim to be evangelical, who say that the Bible is God's Word, ignore that Word. So is it any surprise that in George Barna's latest round of statistics, 35% of self-professed, born-again Christians say they are still searching for meaning in life, the same percentage as non-Christians? Friend, what good does it do to think you have the Word of God if you will not give attention to it? If you will not heed it? If you will not heed *Him*?

Preaching should have a certain content, and should ideally even have a certain transparency of form. Preachers should preach God's Word, and church members should encourage them in it, and pray for them in it, and look for such preaching, and thank God for it. It is good to preach the truth, and to preach in such a way that people can see where they can get the truth. That is what we need as Christians more than anything else.

So what is it that makes a really good church? More than the parking and pews and greeting and programs and nurseries and music, and even more than the

preacher, it is what is preached—the Word of God.

ENDNOTES

¹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, TX: Word, 1976-1983).

² John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 1st American ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 25.

³ Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 59.