

Preaching the Gospel

A monthly magazine for preachers and those who want to preach.

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"And How Shall They Preach...?"

by Gary P. Eubanks, gpeubanks@juno.com, Condensed by PKW

We are wrong if we think we will know Satan when we see him. Instead, Paul warns that Satan disguises himself as “an angel of light” and his servants as “servants of righteousness” (2 Cor. 11:13-15). And Jesus said that false prophets would appear “in sheep’s clothing” (Matt. 7:15).

Expository preaching is one of the last places where anyone would expect to find Satan. For that reason alone, claims made for it deserve attention.

First, *there is nothing wrong with expository preaching*. It can be a very effective way to preach. On the other hand, the push to replace topical studies and preaching by the expository/textual approach is dangerous and can become a tool of Satan. Some are saying that it is not only the best method of preaching, but that is the *only* way we should preach. *We do not question the motives of those who press for topical preaching as the only proper way to preach, but it would be foolish not to consider the consequences if they are successful.*

Under the title, “A Wake-Up Call for the Church,” and the subtitle, “Have we stopped declaring the whole counsel of God?” one brother writes, “I submit to you that the only truly effective way to do this [i.e., preach] is with verse-by-verse, systematic, expository preaching. Start in chapter 1, verse 1 and preach His word one verse at a time. By systematic, I mean progressing through the text of scripture as it was given without skipping any of it. By expositionally, I mean preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented *entirely* and *exactly* as God intended it” (**Focus Magazine**, Dec. 1999, pg. 13). “I don’t think we jettisoned our commitment to preaching the whole counsel of God on purpose, but we may have let it happen by practice. ... There are three major categories of preaching: Topical, textual, and expository. ... Around 5% of preachers are expositors. It is my firm belief that neither the topical nor the textual method represents a serious effort to interpret, understand, explain, or apply God’s truth in the context of the Scriptures used” (*Ibid.*, pg. 14). “In fact, the word of God is replete with such examples [of expository teaching].... We must return to the Biblical pattern and example of proclaiming the whole counsel of God exactly and entirely as it was given to us. Failing to do this will lead to a generation of Christians that know very little about God’s word, who do not grow spiritually, and (worst of all) cannot reproduce themselves. We do not do justice to the word of God when we fail to proclaim it in its entirety” (*Ibid.*, pg. 15).

The editor specifically endorsed this brother’s article.

“... We appreciate _____’ emphasis ... on getting back to the Bible in our preaching ... and emphasizing the importance of a steady diet of expository preaching. While ... there are occasions [for] ... topical preaching ..., the way to guarantee that the whole counsel of God is being preached throughout the year is to preach expositively, giving attention to everything God has said in His word” (*Ibid.*, pg. 2).

What these brethren are saying should be clear in the reader's mind. With only few exceptions, the only kind of sermon a preacher should allow himself is expository. The writer of the article *says that no other kind of preaching will do the job God wants us to do*, and the editor says almost the same thing.

Hence, this method argues for making Bible "textual studies" out of every sermon, the only difference between the typical Bible class and a sermon being that the sermon may not allow feedback from the audience. What this author's words practically demand from preachers is an endless expository loop which begins at the first verse of Genesis and winds all the way through the text of the Bible to the last verse of Revelation and then wraps around to begin the process all over again.

Scripturalness

But consider. ***This method is unscriptural.*** Nowhere does the Lord command or commend this method of Bible instruction for His people as the only legitimate kind. New Testament authors cite the Old Testament many times but never go to the first verse and cover every one until they get to the one they want to use. Instead, they just "pluck and apply" with little, if any, notice of the context. **Indeed, out of the many sermons in the Bible, not a single one of them is expository!** The characters and writers of the New Testament preached and taught *topically*, using many texts to support their points.

To be specific, when Jesus spoke in the Capernaum synagogue (**Lk. 4:16ff**), he quoted Isaiah (61:1ff) but also cited the widow of Zarephath (1 Kgs. 17) and Naaman (**2 Kgs. 5**). In His sermon on the mount (**Matt. 5-7**), He quoted from Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Psalms. It is particularly noteworthy that, when Satan tempted Him (**Matt. 4:5-7**) with a promise in the Psalms (**91:11,12**), He did not go into an exposition of that promise in its context, as He might have done, but simply met its misapplication by an appeal to Deuteronomy (**6:16**). He took a topical approach with the two men on the road to Emmaus by going to Scriptures about Himself in Moses and the prophets (**Lk. 24:27**). When Peter preached on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2**), he quoted from Joel (**ch. 2**), then David (**Psa. 16**), alluded to God's promise to David (**2 Sam. 7**), and again quoted from another Psalm (**110:1**). When Philip found the Ethiopian eunuch reading from Isaiah (**53:7,8**), instead of going back to the first verse of Isaiah, "beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him" (**Acts 8:32-35**). When Paul wanted to show the sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles, he quoted from four different Psalms (**14:1-3; 5:9; 10:7; 36:1**), even injecting a quotation from Isaiah (**59:7**) among them, and strung the quotations together without interruption, as if they were one continuous passage (**Rom. 3:10-18**).

Thus, topical teaching is the Biblical pattern! The writers and preachers of the New Testament allowed the occasion to dictate the topic, and the topic to dictate the Scriptures they used. They started where they found their listeners or readers. They drew from whatever texts met their needs, *regardless of their location*.

Context

The importance of the context to preaching and teaching has probably been exaggerated. (How often have liars, false teachers, and slanderers been caught and then claimed that their words were "taken out of context"!) New Testament writers showed no need to look at the contexts of the passages they quoted. If they were able to use a text faithfully in the service of truth, they used it.

Of course, this is not to say that context is not sometimes, even oftentimes, critical, but only that it is not *always* the important thing in the interpretation of a text. People automatically interpret words and sentences in the light of their contexts. There is usually no need to call their attention to context.

A conscientious preacher of the gospel will make himself aware of the contexts of any texts he cites. He may bring this to the attention of his audience. But he does not need to give an exposition of the context of every verse he uses. This is because Bible verses are usually *self-contained*. Their basic meaning is clear apart from preceding and succeeding verses. In-depth study of a text probably will not change an interpretation gained from quick, superficial reading.

Jesus sometimes used the expression, "Have you not read?" (**Matt. 12:3,5; 19:4; 21:42; 22:31; Lk. 10:26**). A mere *reading* of a text will usually reveal its basic meaning.

A final and extremely important point about context is that *the most important context for any part of the Bible is the whole Bible!* This principle is honored in such statements as, "The Bible is the best commentary on itself." Bible students pay tribute to this principle when they strive to "harmonize the

Scriptures with themselves” (cf. **Jn. 10:35**) or “take into account every relevant passage on a subject.” Indeed, it is much more often the case that misinterpretation of Scripture, or false teaching, depends on ignoring, *not the immediate context, but the remote context of the whole Bible*. There are few, if any, false doctrinal systems which hinge merely on ignorance or neglect of a context. Usually referring to the immediate context will do nothing to expose the misuse of “proof-texts” to defend false doctrine, but the liberty of ranging far afield to take into account other relevant texts will certainly do so.

In fact, no one in Scripture was condemned for ignoring context. Rather, if anything, people would be criticized for not having the broad knowledge which allowed them to pull texts from a wide range and collate and integrate them into a whole to arrive at the teaching of Scripture (cf. **Matt. 4:5-7; 22:23-33**). More important than knowing the context of a verse, *it is knowing what the Bible says in every pertinent part that constitutes knowing what its teaching is on any subject*. In practical terms, *this means taking a topical approach to Bible study*.

Some may respond to this by arguing that it is right to refer to relevant texts in an expository sermon. Yet, if there is much reference to other relevant texts, what was supposed to be an expository study essentially changes into a topical study.

Topical preaching has this advantage over expository preaching. It allows the preacher to do what a preacher should do. *His task is to bring together those passages that are relevant to an idea and integrate them with one another in such a way that they yield a harmonious whole and give the student a complete conception of what the entire Bible says about it.*

Application

If one is under pressure to explain many verses thoroughly, it is difficult to spend much time applying these things.

Anyone who has ever taught the Biblical text or secular textbooks (in school) understands quite well the pressure teachers are under to “cover the material” or text. This would certainly apply to expository preachers or teachers who feel the need to “start with chapter 1, verse 1” and cover the whole Bible one verse at a time. If the expositor is to complete his task in any reasonable time frame, he will feel the pressure to curtail any excursions into applications of the text or inclusions of other Scriptures.

Impracticality

Expository teaching is not the kind of Bible study that meets the needs of the immature Bible student. What such a student needs from Bible study is an immediate infusion of *broad* knowledge, or at least a rapid acquisition of some knowledge of some subjects, rather than an in-depth knowledge of an opening text of a book or some other text.

For instance, a person who needs to know what to do to be saved needs to be taken quickly to those texts that answer his question. Such texts are scattered broadly through the New Testament. As has often been said, “A person cannot find all he needs to do to be saved in just one verse.” It would be irrelevant to his immediate needs to start at the beginning of Acts or Romans (books in which the “five steps of salvation” can be found) and go into an in-depth study of the book. To meet the needs of an inquirer, the teacher needs to go *directly* to the texts which answer his questions. Those texts do not usually lie at the beginning of a book.

When the rich ruler asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life (**Matt. 19:16-22**), Jesus took him directly to the Ten Commandments in the middle of Exodus (**ch. 20**). When Paul taught the Philippian jailer what he needed to do to be saved, it was something he could cover in an hour (**Acts 16:29-33**). Expository teaching as it has been set forth in the comments under review would not allow for this.

The expository preaching approach is not true-to-life. Life does not come at a person “in canonical order.” For instance, one cannot guarantee that a question about evolution will confront him while he is studying Genesis one, or premillennialism while studying Revelation twenty, or marital problems while studying Ephesians five. Issues, questions, needs, and problems occur randomly. For life as it is, a person needs to be able to range freely to and fro across the Bible from end to end in to find the texts which might hold the answers to his situation. The student almost never finds all the information he needs compactly presented in *one* text. Acquiring competent Bible knowledge typically requires a person to collate and integrate texts from a wide variety of books.

All of this draws attention to dangers involved in the pressure to make expository preaching predominant, if not exclusive, in the pulpit. Though it may not be the conscious intention of its advocates, it is certainly true that ***“a steady diet of expository preaching” will hobble the efforts of gospel preachers to treat subjects and situations in a timely and thorough manner.***

The expository-preaching-only approach also prevents, or hampers, the treatment of *controversial* topics. At the very least, strict adherence to a regimen of expository sermons slows treatment of problems, questions, or issues *as they arise*, because the preacher has entered into a commitment not to deviate from the text where he finds himself in his endless chain of expository sermons. If he is unwilling to interrupt his expository series on a book, he will have to ignore a problem from the pulpit.

No doubt, some find controversy so distasteful that it would please them that a preacher could not address it and would be constrained to avoid it to “stick with the text of the assigned lesson.” This is exactly where Satan is working. The system promotes itself as the superior, if not sole, method of bringing people to a knowledge of the Scriptures, while it actually produces ignorance of them and an inability to apply them to contemporary issues and problems.

Anyone who doubts the accuracy of the scenario just described has but to consider just how an expository preacher would undertake a comprehensive study of divorce and remarriage, for instance. First, he might have to wait weeks, months, or even longer before the rigid process of covering the Scriptures verse-by-verse brings him to a relevant text. Then, he must ask himself how far, if at all, a purist approach will allow him to go in pulling in other relevant texts, making applications, or even addressing the subject in more than one sermon. A thorough examination of some subjects would require a series of lessons, let alone the *occasional* sermon, and would incorporate scores of different texts. As another example, how would a preacher undertake a study of Biblical authority, and particularly how it is established, if he must essentially confine himself to one text?

Indeed, this author cannot now recall hearing a single expository sermon that could not have been comfortably received in any denominational congregation. This should not be surprising, since many, if not most, of the issues which people struggle with today are not problems which Christians had in New Testament times. Where in the Bible, for instance, is there an extended treatment on abortion, environmentalism, carnal warfare, infant baptism, institutionalism, instrumental music in worship, or a host of hot issues that could be named? It is only as the student gathers and pieces together relatively isolated Bible passages, and *inferentially* applies their principles, that he learns the will of God from the Scriptures for him in similar situations. *This is the very process involved in topical preaching!* It is a skill absolutely indispensable to the use of the Bible as God intended it to be used.

Of course, this by no means makes expository preaching wrong. Yet, it does say something about the effectiveness of topical preaching as a weapon in combating doctrinal error and Satan’s desire to eliminate it if he is to soften and prepare God’s people for another apostasy.

The author of an entry for “Churches of Christ” in an old Britannica Book of the Year wrote glowingly about their growth, work, and institutions. One comment in that article reveals much:

“Increasing emphasis was placed on expository preaching of the Bible and study of the Bible in classes.”

The year was 1962; the author: *M. Norvel Young, President of Pepperdine College.* (M. Norvel Young was a very influential leader in taking churches away from the truth into the error of institutionalism and the social gospel—PKW)

“In order that no advantage be taken of us by Satan, ... we are not ignorant of his schemes” (2 Cor. 2:11).

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