

FROM TEXT TO TEACHING

A GUIDE
TO PREPARING
BIBLE TALKS

DAVID
JACKMAN

FOREWORD BY DAVID HELM

Teaching people from the Bible is a weighty responsibility for anyone. You may be speaking from the pulpit, or at a men's or women's event, youth group, Christian camp or Bible study group—whatever the setting, preparation is key. If you're looking for some clear guidance to help you in that preparation, this little book is for you.

David Jackman has spent decades training preachers all over the world—young and old, experienced and inexperienced—to correctly handle “the word of truth”. In *From Text to Teaching*, Jackman has now distilled the essence of his training ministry into written form.

Whether you're just starting out or you're a seasoned Bible teacher looking for refreshment, this short practical guide—combined with Jackman's lifetime of wisdom—will help equip you for your task. This is a masterclass from one of the evangelical world's most trusted Bible teachers.




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ISBN 978-1-875245-82-6



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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

From Text to Teaching

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

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ISBN 978 1 875245 82 6

Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.



FOREWORD

If this short book achieves its aim, you will be better off for having read it. And not only you, but others also—every person on the receiving end of a talk you give or a discussion you lead from the Bible. The goal of this book, then, is connected to the growth and development of people—both your own progress, and that of those who will come under the sound of your voice. And in this I rejoice, for it is nice to read a book that is genuinely concerned with the spiritual welfare of men and women. We have quite enough books already in which the real aim (even if subconscious) emerges from the author's need to blindly impart a set of principles they deem most important. Three cheers, then, for *From Text to Teaching*, because it genuinely has the spiritual betterment of God's people in view.

I can say all this because of what I know of the author. I have known David Jackman (and his wife, Heather) for more than a quarter of a century. David genuinely loves people. In fact, he has in all kindness

given his life to helping establish godly men and women. He has done so cheerfully, sometimes in small, out-of-the-way places, gladly enduring long journeys away from home and across the globe. For decades, David has humbly helped thousands of men and women who span every age and season of life. As a pastor, he has loved them. As a preacher, he has shepherded them. And as a prized trainer of young would-be pastors and Bible teachers, he has invited them into his home and not merely into his study. David's material is the stuff of sterling, and his life is the stuff of gold.

One of the things I admire most about David's handling of the Bible is just how reproducible it all becomes for us. What he says and does are things that we, too, can learn to say and do in our own Bible teaching. And so, while it would be a joy to commend to you anything David decided to put into writing, it is a special joy to commend this book. For its author knows that God's people will be loved best by those who are constantly growing in their ability to handle God's word. Put simply, David is aware (as he has reminded us many times) that the word of God must be the engine room if God's people are to lovingly give themselves to Christ's mission.

Having said a word on both aim and author, it only remains for me to touch briefly on the book's argument. Between its covers you will find a beginning sketch—a pencil drawing, as it were—and not a full-blown treatise on everything you need in order to say something

worthwhile from the Bible. And yet you will find its brevity one of the greatest reasons for its success. This brief volume is simply out to get you started and point you in the right direction. The introduction provides some basics, and then the main section, devoted to the process of preparation, gives even the novice a pathway that can be trusted. The roadway put down here is not something new (it is not the brainchild of the author's originality); rather, it is a path that is well-worn and time-tested. By following the signposts, you will be both faithful to God's word, and fruitful with the people who hear your words on God's word.

True to form, David provides a very human element in the second part of the book. Here he takes us into his study and allows us to see how he works out the principles in practice. For the beginner, this section of the book will provide a conversation partner, even before you develop your first Bible talks. Beyond that, this short volume goes on to include some of David's valuable maxims on the making of messages. And one can almost hear him saying them aloud even as they now appear here in print.

Well, enough from me. I now happily turn you over to him. For not only will you be better off for it, but so will the people whom God gives you to love.

David Helm

Senior Pastor, Christ Church Chicago

Chairman, The Charles Simeon Trust

CONTENTS



Foreword	i
Introduction	3
The art and science of preaching	5
The process of preparation	15
Putting the principles into practice	45
Using more tools from the toolbox	57
How the text drives the talk	67
Tools from the unashamed workman's toolbox	79
Ten 'commandments' for preaching	83
Appendix: Template for preparing a Bible talk	89



INTRODUCTION

When you see the word ‘sermon’, what comes to your mind?

Most dictionaries connect ‘sermon’ with two other words: ‘clergyman’ and ‘pulpit’. And that’s probably fair; I’d guess that most people think of a sermon as the talk given in a Sunday church service by the pastor.

Of course, the origin of a word doesn’t always tell you much about its current usage, but it suits my purpose to tell you that the word ‘sermon’ actually comes from a Latin word, *sermo*, which means conversation, discussion, speech, talk or discourse.¹

So, emboldened by that Latin meaning, I want to claim that this book is about preparing sermons—but sermons of a fairly broad type. That is, I’m not just talking about preaching from a church pulpit. **My goal**

1 ‘sermo’, *Wiktionary* website, 2020, accessed 12 January 2020. en.wiktionary.org/wiki/sermo#Latin

is to help you prepare any type of presentation in which a Bible passage is being explained and taught. So, for example, it could be a youth group leader teaching the Bible to a group of teenagers on a Friday night. It might be a speaker opening up the Bible to children on a camp. It might be a woman teaching other women, as in Titus 2. Or, for that matter, it might even be a presentation by a Bible study leader to a group that needs quite a lot of guiding through a passage of Scripture.

Nonetheless, because we tend to be in the habit of thinking of a 'sermon' narrowly as something given in a church gathering, throughout this book I will refer to what I am dealing with as a 'Bible talk' (or sometimes simply a 'talk'). It's not an ideal term. I don't think, for example, it really conveys the seriousness and weightiness of the task in the way the word 'sermon' does. It's not some light and frivolous thing we are doing when we give a Bible talk; it is communicating the very word of God, as revealed in Scripture.

But I can't think of another simple term to use, and rather than spend a chapter of your time debating the pros and cons of various alternatives, let's agree to use the term 'Bible talk' (or 'talk'), knowing that *preparing* it is undoubtedly much more important than deciding *what we call it*.



THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PREACHING

Preaching is both a science and an art.

Science works with certain given materials, by careful observation and experimentation, in order to deepen knowledge and propose hypothetical solutions to existing problems. But it is not a dehumanized mechanical process. The materials, the knowledge and the hypothesis are all in the hands of the scientist. When I remember back to my school days in the chemistry lab, we did experiments in pairs. We all had the same raw materials, the same equipment, the same purpose and the same goals, but some were always much more successful than others in achieving the desired results. The human factors quickly came into play—careful observation, accurate measurements, controlled outcomes—and some of us were much better at doing it than others. Conducting a successful scientific experiment was, in fact, an art form.

At the same time, most accomplished artists will spend at least some time studying the more ‘scientific’ aspects of their art form. Consider two painters: one has great artistic instincts, and so grabs the nearest set of paints and brushes and begins work immediately; the other has equally great instincts, but takes the time to learn the various qualities of oil-based paints and water-based paints, when to use paint thinner, or the difference between a flat brush, a fan brush and a filbert brush. All other things being equal, which artist is more likely to produce a masterpiece?

Any instruction about preaching needs to recognize both sides—the science and the art of the operation.

There are certain processes the preacher needs to operate, in preparation, which are centred around the careful observation and analysis of the text in question. The preacher has not chosen to write that text; he or she is under its authority, in the sense that all reflection and consequent explanation is dictated by the black marks on the page.

And yet no two preachers will deal with the text in exactly the same way. There is a creativity involved in constructing a persuasive Bible talk, which includes the art of choosing the right words, constructing the most engaging and persuasive argument and presentation, and varying the pitch and pace of the talk to maintain and heighten interest. Preaching is not an art form in the way that a painting or a poem might be, but it is an art nonetheless, and no two of us will

do it in exactly the same way.

Does this mean, then, that we need to look for the most charismatic personality to let loose on the congregation his or her 'art' of communication? I think not!

But in order to justify that position, we need to track back to the roots of the purpose of preaching and its role in the contemporary church.

Expository preaching

The sort of preaching I want us to consider is usually called 'expository'. Of course, there are plenty of pulpits around the world where expository preaching (which I'll define below) is not the norm; rather, the approach is to describe a Christian perspective or make a Christian comment or two on the issues that are currently uppermost in the prevailing culture. The focus will be political, or social, perhaps philosophical or speculative. The value depends largely on the quality of the preacher's mental ability and the attractiveness of the presentation. This is the art of the weekly religious commentator, submitting his piece, with its latest notions. It lasts for a few minutes and changes virtually nothing.

But my hope is that you are reading this book because you have a much higher view of the value and significance of preaching than that. Almost the last recorded words we have of the great apostle Paul, to Timothy, his young protégé, is the charge to

“preach the word” (2 Tim 4:2). This highlights for us a concern that runs throughout the apostolic ministry and which threads itself all the way through both the Old and New Testaments: that the Scriptures are the written expression of the mind of God; that they are his living and abiding word (see 1 Pet 1:23) given through human channels, but with infallible authority and relevance to the whole human race, in every period of our history. It is this conviction that animates the expository preacher. When the Bible is properly preached, the listeners hear the authentic voice of God. This is not because the preacher’s word carries authority in itself, however scholarly, brilliant or engaging the Bible talk may be. Rather, it is because the preacher is captive to the biblical text and recognizes that faithful exposition of the message of the text is the primary responsibility.

Everything hinges, of course, on what it means to preach the Bible ‘properly’, and that is what we need to explore together in the pages that follow.

Defining characteristics

It is difficult but important to define expository preaching.² It is still common to think that if a preacher picks up a Bible, reads some verses, then uses something in

2 I have written an extended defence of expository preaching elsewhere: D Jackman, *Why Expository Preaching?*, Christian Focus Publications, 2019.

them as a launch pad, that is expository preaching. It is not. Expository preaching takes the Bible much more seriously than that. Preachers may claim that they have a ‘Bible-based’ ministry, but often the Bible is merely a springboard from which they bounce off into all kinds of ideas that cannot be justified from that Bible text in any way.

Let me encourage you, instead, to aim for a genuinely biblical ministry, not just preaching that is loosely ‘Bible-based’. Our goal should be to emulate the great Puritan pastor John Bunyan, of whom it was said that his blood was bibline—that if you cut him, the Bible would flow out of his veins.

Let me suggest three important characteristics of expository preaching. We shall explore each of these in more detail a little later on, but for now we need to recognize them, since they form the parameters of what we are seeking to do as we move from the text to the talk.

First, **expository preaching focuses on the clear explanation of the meaning of the biblical text.**

I have sometimes expressed this as the text being in the driving seat of the Bible talk. The preacher must never consign the word of God to the back seat of the car, from where it is mostly ignored. Nor is it enough to have the Bible sitting in the passenger seat—the preacher hoping he can find his own way and set his own agenda, with the word of God as some kind of road map to be consulted if the preacher gets a bit

lost. The Bible must set the agenda and the direction for where the talk is going.

Another way of making the point is to say that the text is king. As the preacher, I am not in a position to change or amend it in any way. I am its prisoner, its loyal servant. My task is to understand and convey the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth of the text being preached. That could be a single verse, or more likely a paragraph, or a story unit, or a prophetic oracle, or even a whole book of the Bible. But whatever the length, the requirement and the process remain the same.

We must always ask: What does this text mean? Please note that we are **not** to ask: What does this text mean to *me*? That removes the focus from God's divinely inspired word and onto the human interpreter, which will inevitably introduce a strong element of subjective preferences. The expositor's role is to understand the text as completely as possible and to convey its objective meaning as faithfully as possible, because "the word of the Lord remains forever" (1 Pet 1:25). Any word that is merely the preacher's may last a few hours, or days, in the memory of the hearers, but "Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Ps 119:89). Jesus made the point even more powerfully when he told his disciples, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31). Since all Scripture is breathed out by God (2 Tim 3:16), our task is firstly to draw out the

meaning of the text, so that its message can be faithfully and accurately conveyed to our hearers.

The second characteristic of expository preaching is that it **sets the text in its context**.

It is often said that a text out of context is a pretext for a proof text, and that is undoubtedly the case. No passage of Scripture has dropped out of heaven as an isolated unit; every passage is situated within a book. What goes before it and what follows both have an impact on our understanding of its purpose. Moreover, no one book of the Bible is separate from the other 65 books. Being the product of its one divine author, the Bible is one book, with one overarching, big-picture story from Genesis to Revelation. Every book has its own particular message and distinctive purpose in the context of the whole Bible, and it is vital that the preacher discovers the purpose of the text under study within the whole-book context.

That can best be achieved by continually asking the question “Why?” Why is *this* passage in *this* place in *this* book? We want to set the text in its immediate literary context, in its historical whole-book context, and in its theological whole-Bible context. This enables us to look more deeply, not just at the meaning, but also at the *significance* of the text. God has set every passage of Scripture in its context for his specific purpose, and we are called to discover that purpose and work with it.

Paul exhorted Timothy, “Do your best to present

yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). That is the challenge to every preacher. Our task is not only to work hard in order to state the meaning or message of the passage, but also to explain *why* the passage has that meaning and significance. We will only be able to do that when we ourselves are clear about its intended purpose from the context of the book and, indeed, the whole Bible.

This leads us to the third characteristic of expository preaching, which is to **build the bridge from the text in its original context into the minds and hearts of its contemporary hearers, so that its intended effect may be experienced in our lives today.**

This is sometimes called the *pastoral purpose* of the text, or, perhaps better, the *transformational intention*, and it is essential for the application of our preaching to be aligned with God’s inspired revelation.

A skilled woodcarver will observe how his raw material is constructed and then be careful to work with the grain of the wood, not against it. For the preacher, the same careful observation and diligence are of prime importance. It is not a matter of thinking up the application, or dragging from the reservoir of our frustrations some tenuous connections with the text, enabling us to ‘have a go’ at a problem in the congregation. Our listeners will soon learn to switch off when the ‘application’ comes from the preacher’s obsessions, rather than from the significance of the

passage. Our task is to convey the intended application of the text to accomplish its intended purpose in our lives, as we respond to its unchanging truth.

Now that we've defined expository preaching and thought about our task as preachers, it's time to start thinking about a process we can follow in our preparation.