

EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING

HOW
WE SPEAK
GOD'S WORD
TODAY



DAVID HELM

“David Helm has written the most helpful, concise, and useful book on expository preaching I have ever read.”

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“David Helm’s skills as a preacher and his vast experience as a teacher of preachers make anything he says on this subject of great value. But I read him with greatest appreciation for what is most clear among his commitments: ‘Staying on the line, never rising above the text of Scripture to say more than it said and never falling beneath the text by lessening its force or fullness.’ Here is not merely skill and wisdom, but also faithfulness from which the truest treasures of preaching come.”

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“Helm has given us a finely wrought and utterly compelling brief on what needs to be understood and done in order to faithfully preach the Word. This is an important book.”

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“In this compact book, David Helm distills key principles and insights that have encouraged many at the Charles Simeon Trust preaching workshops. I have seen men reengage with the hard work of preaching preparation as David has taught this material. May that same result be multiplied by this book.”

Paul Rees, Senior Pastor, Charlotte Chapel, Edinburgh, Scotland

“I love to see people’s shocked responses when they learn that expository preaching is the first of the ‘9 Marks of a Healthy Church.’ This priority is affirmed and explained in *Expositional Preaching*. David Helm issues a stirring challenge to get the message clear and right. May God be pleased to use this book to help you preach faithfully for the health of the church and the glory of God!”

H. B. Charles Jr., Pastor, Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church,
Jacksonville, Florida

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SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church, plus one more on sound doctrine. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

Series Preface

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman
Series editors

INTRODUCTION

Old Bones

The great man's body rests in a vault beneath the stone floor of King's College Chapel in Cambridge, England, just inside the near west door. The site has two markings: "CS," and the year this man died, "1836." Both have been cut into the stone pavement and filled with lead. Should you ever get the chance to stand there—as I once did in awe—know this: the old bones beneath your feet belong to one who returned the Bible to the center of church life in England.

It was a sad November day in 1836 when no fewer than 1,500 gownsmen attended the funeral of Charles Simeon. In unprecedented numbers for the time, people came to pay their respects to this pastor and preacher.¹ Charles Simeon was a gift, God's gift, to the people of his generation.

He is a gift to our generation as well. His gospel instincts have stood the test of time and can make a fresh impression on preaching in our day. For Simeon's preaching had something that much of our preaching lacks.

What is it we lack? How can we benefit?

The answers are surprisingly simple and point us to the very heart of this thing called *expositional preaching*. In large measure, the great man's conviction about the Bible was the

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source of his influence. Simeon believed that a simple and clear explication of the Bible is what makes a church healthy and happy. Biblical exposition does the heavy lifting of building up a church. This abiding belief never left Simeon. For fifty-four years, and from a single pulpit in a university town, he tirelessly gave himself to the primacy of preaching. Week by week, year by year, and decade by decade he stood in the pulpit and declared God's Word with clarity, simplicity, and power. He defined his conviction about biblical exposition this way:

My endeavor is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.²

Simeon viewed the preacher as duty-bound to the text. He was committed to staying on the line, never rising above the text of Scripture to say more than it said and never falling beneath the text by lessening its force or fullness.

This conviction—this mature restraint—is often missed today by those who handle God's Word. Frankly, it is the undoing of so many of our churches, even doctrinally sound ones. Much of what we think is faithful biblical preaching actually misses the mark because of a lack of restraint. And let me be the first to admit that I have not always exercised the restraint of bringing out of Scripture only what is there. It is my prayer that this little book, among other things, might be used by God to help anyone explore the ways that teachers and preachers of the Bible might rediscover this conviction.

But it is not only Simeon's conviction that is worth con-

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sidering. Simeon's goals in preaching need to be recovered. He tightly framed his aims for biblical exposition this way:

to humble the sinner;
to exalt the Saviour;
to promote holiness.³

It doesn't get any clearer than that. And these aims should guide us today. Our world, like Simeon's, desperately needs to know how deep humanity has fallen, how high Jesus Christ has ascended, and what God requires of his people. The best and only way to help this world is to speak God's words in the power of the Spirit. How do we do this? What does it look like?

The answers are found in expositional preaching. Expositional preaching is empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text. In that way it brings out of the text what the Holy Spirit put there, as Simeon put it, and does not put into the text what the preacher thinks might be there. The process is a little more complex. That is what the rest of this book is about.

We will begin by thinking about the mistakes so many of us make, mistakes which particularly result from our attempts to contextualize. Then we will consider the challenges and demands of exegeting a text, understanding a text in light of the entire biblical canon, and then preaching it to our own context.

Though this book will serve adequately as an introduction to expositional preaching, one of my hopes is that the person who is already preaching or teaching the Bible will find that it

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offers a useful grid by which to examine what you are presently doing. It is almost meant as a “follow-up,” a way of giving you the chance to ask yourself, “Okay, is this what I am doing? Am I bringing out of Scripture only what is there? Am I doing so in ways that rightly humble the listener, exalt the Savior, and promote holiness in the lives of those present?”

The demands and challenges of expositional preaching are many. And making progress in our ability to handle God’s Word faithfully will not be easy. But I am certain of this: if preachers and church leaders today allow the simplicity of Simeon’s conviction and aims to speak to us from the grave, the health and happiness of the church can be restored.

So let’s get started.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Contextualization is essential to good exposition. And the sermon manuscripts we have from St. Augustine lead some to suggest that he did it quite well.

Thus when Augustine propounded ideas about society that were taken straight from the pagan classics, we should not think that he was doing this in a self-conscious effort to impress pagans with his culture or to woo them into the church by citing their favorite authors. He did it as unthinkingly as we, today, say that the earth is round. . . . He presented much of what he had to say . . . as a matter of common sense.¹

I love what Augustine's attitude toward contextualization teaches us about its relationship to preaching. His surprising ability to connect to his listeners was the result of his general interest in life; it was not a calculated outcome brought about by harvesting cultural references in hopes of coming off as relevant. This chapter will address the problems that emerge when contextualization of the latter sort takes over the preacher when he is preparing his message.

In the introduction, we caught a small glimpse of what expositional preaching should be. It is an endeavor to bring

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out of Scripture what is there, to never thrust into a text what the Holy Spirit didn't put there, and to do so from a particular text in ways that rightly humble the listener, exalt the Savior, and promote holiness in the lives of those present. While we haven't yet described how a sermon should do all of this, it is worth taking time here to consider some common ways our preaching can miss the mark.

THE BLIND ADHERENCE PROBLEM



What do I mean by contextualization in preaching?² In simple terms, contextualization in preaching is communicating the gospel message in ways that are understandable or appropriate to the listener's cultural context. In other words, contextualization is concerned with *us* and *now*. It is committed to relevance and application for today, which is why I will offer a constructive approach to the topic in chapter 4.

One of the problems with contextualized preaching today, however, is that it often has a misplaced emphasis. By elevating contextualization to a studied discipline overly focused on practical gains, some preachers treat the biblical text in a haphazard and halfhearted way. This is the *blind adherence* problem. Out of a healthy desire to move the mission of his

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church forward, the preacher focuses his preparation exclusively on creative and artistic ways he can make his sermon relevant.

Think about it. Some preachers spend more time reading and meditating on our contextual setting than we do on God's Word. We get caught up in sermonizing about our world or city in an effort to be relevant. As a result, we settle for giving shallow impressions of the text. We forget that the biblical text is the relevant word. It deserves our greatest powers of meditation and explanation.

To put it differently, the preacher is bound to miss the mark of biblical exposition when he allows the context he is trying to win for Christ control the Word he speaks of Christ. As I stated in the introduction, this is the undoing of many of our churches. Too many of us unconsciously believe that a well-studied understanding of our cultural context, rather than the Bible, is the key to preaching with power.

Blind adherence to contextualization alters our preaching in at least three ways, and none of them is for the better. First, it impairs our perspective in the study—in his preparation of his sermon, the preacher becomes preoccupied with the world rather than God's Word. This leads to *impressionistic preaching*. Second, it changes our use of the pulpit—the Word now supports our intoxicating plans and purposes, rather than those of God. This is *inebriated preaching*. Finally, it shifts our understanding of authority—the preacher's "fresh" and "spirit led" devotional reading becomes the determinative point of truth. I call this "*inspired preaching*."

Let's look at each of these a little more closely. I think we

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will find that some of what we think is expositional preaching actually misses the mark.

IMPRESSIONISTIC PREACHING

In the 1850s, the dominant artistic style of the moment was *realism*. It was a movement that aimed to represent, as closely as possible, what the artist had seen. Two young students being trained in realism were Claude Monet and Pierre-August Renoir. They had become friends and began to paint together, along with several others. This younger generation tended to use brighter colors than their realist instructors, and they favored painting contemporary life over historical or mythological scenes, consciously leaving behind the romanticism of previous generations, as well.

The tipping point for helping these young painters to begin to self-identify as a group came in the 1863 *Salon de Paris* (Exhibition of Paris) art show and competition. So many of their pieces were rejected by the judges that an alternative show was held later, the *Salon des Refusés* (Exhibition of the Refused).³ During the next ten years, the young artists petitioned to have ongoing alternative shows for their new styles of painting, but they were systematically rejected.

In 1873, Monet, Renoir, and several others formed an anonymous cooperative of artists to show their work independently. The first public exhibition of this new group occurred in April 1874 in Paris. Styles had shifted even further. Renoir had begun to experiment by altering the reality of what he saw—a distinct departure from realism. Monet had begun painting with looser brush strokes. This gave a general form

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of what he saw rather than a precise rendition, which was still preferred by the older generation. For example, his *Impression, Sunrise* captures the Le Havre Harbor at sunrise. Recognizing that it was not a realistic view of the harbor, he added the word “impression” to the title when asked for the name of the work. This title was later used by a critic to ridicule the artists, calling them the “impressionists.”

One of the boldest innovations of the group was its use of light. For example, Renoir’s 1876 *Dance at Moulin de la Galette* depicts a garden party with dancing in the Montmartre district of Paris. In the painting, Renoir paints white on the ground or on top of a blue jacket to indicate that the sun was shining there. The altering of light begins to exaggerate details and distort what would have actually been seen by the artist.

The impressionist method takes what the eye sees and interprets it, exaggerates it, ignores parts of it, and ultimately distorts it.

Now, think about what you do when you sit down to prepare a sermon. You open your Bible. You don’t have a lot of time. You probably have a meeting or two tonight. You might have a family or a staff to guide. You certainly have your hands full with pastoral work. Yet you need something to say on Sunday. So you begin by reading your text and jotting down things on your computer the way an artist might interact with a canvas—quick-hitting, colorful connections between the Word and the world as you know it.

You are looking for things that you know will make an immediate *impression* upon your listeners. You begin enjoying this momentary diversion. The work is not hard. Soon a main

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idea emerges. You contextualize well since, just like your congregation on Sunday, you are not that passionate about things historical. In fact, you got this job, in part, because they were impressed with how well you produced attention-grabbing messages from the otherwise inaccessible ancient realism of biblical scenes. A detailed study of the text can wait.

This week's message, like last week's, will concentrate on the relevant impressions you draw from the passage. Applications already seem to emerge like beams of light for you to spread across the congregation in bold color. You glance at your iPhone to catch the time. You have been at work for fifteen minutes.

This is impressionistic preaching.

It happens a lot. In fact, it may be the most significant problem facing preachers today. Impressionistic preaching is not restrained by the reality of the text. It ignores the historical, literary, and theological contours of the text. It brushes past—in a matter of minutes—many of the exegetical tools you spent time developing. Where the realist painter might look at his object ten times before painting a single stroke, the impressionist looks at his text once and puts ten strokes on the canvas of human experience. So, too, the impressionist preacher.

There is no doubt that impressionistic preaching is easier and quicker. It makes more sense, given your busy schedule. But you need to know that it means, at the end of the day, you are doing whatever you want with the text.

Let's look at an example. Imagine that you have to prepare a message for your "young parents" class. You decide to speak on 1 Samuel 2:12–21. Take the time to read it now:

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Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD. The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, and he would thrust it into the pan or kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you but only raw." And if the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force." Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt.

Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod. And his mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the LORD give you children by this woman for the petition she asked of the LORD." So then they would return to their home.

Indeed the LORD visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew in the presence of the LORD.

In your first reading of the text, three things stand out:

1. The text presents you with two sets of parents and children: Eli and his worthless sons, and Hannah and her little Samuel, who is serving God.

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2. You are impressed with the contrast between them. Eli's story reads like a manual on bad parenting, while Hannah's patterns get better results.
3. You land on two takeaways for your message. First, bad parents allow their kids to eat too much, while good parents don't. How repulsive it was for Eli's sons to gorge on sacrificial offerings! Second, bad parents don't take advantage of church settings to encourage their children toward godliness, while good parents are always present and available. How wonderful for Hannah to have Samuel at church whenever the doors were open!

There. You've got your outline. Most importantly, you know that your talk will resonate with the young parents in your congregation. After all, the news outlets in your city are reporting on the problem of physical conditioning among local children and the impending legislation to address it. It won't take much for you to contextualize similar principles that apply to their spiritual well-being as well.

You deliver your talk. The next thing you know, new children's programs are launched out of this sermon. Weekend retreats devoted to good parenting are planned. It's great, because people are talking about Christian parenting.

This kind of impressionist preaching is growing churches. It's really no wonder we don't spend time working on sermons. We don't need to. We can do this quickly and it works. It's almost improvisational preaching.

Then again, we also miss out on the richness of God's Word. We miss out on the point of the text. If we read it a few more times, we might realize that the primary concern of 1 Samuel

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2:12–21 is not parenting at all. It's the holiness of God. That's right, *the passage is about God* and how the bad leadership of God's people makes a mockery of God himself. The problem in the text is that God is not being properly worshiped. And if we keep digging in the book, we'll realize that there is a replacement motif here within God's family. The text brings up Samuel precisely at this point because he is the alternative to Eli's sons for leading the worship of God in accordance with the Word of God. God can't get his work done because his Word has been undone. Even so, when the situation looks hopeless, God will raise up another man and priest to lead.

Does this mean we cannot preach parenting from this text? Not necessarily. But it means we must not miss the primary point of the passage. The possible applications must never overshadow the primary point of the text. While we can say true things from the Bible about parenting from this text, we should do so in a way that respectfully submits to the emphasis of the text. This is the difference. This is the challenge. We read these stories and end up missing what the Spirit is emphasizing while reducing God's Word to nothing more than principles for godly living. In the example from 1 Samuel, we ended up completely omitting Christ as the replacement for a failed priesthood. We lost Jesus to impressionism. And in his place we have parents who are more committed to moralism than to the Christian message.

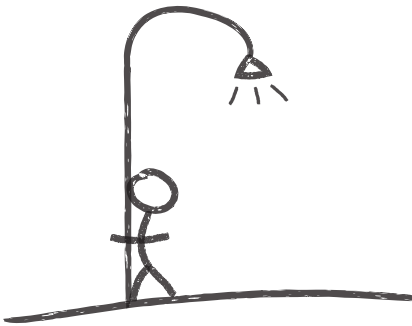
It is important to note that impressionistic preaching is not *the* problem. It is a natural outcome of *blind adherence to contextualization* and how such an adherence monopolizes our time. We need to remember the conviction that restrained Charles

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Simeon in the study: to bring out of Scripture what is there. It is easy to let an impressionistic approach dominate your study and preparation for preaching. Especially if you are intrinsically cool (i.e., fashionable or hip), or are trying to be, this approach can become the cocaine you snort in private. And if you have had a little success with it, you can begin to believe that you are an expositor. But as we will see in the coming chapters, biblical exposition requires a different approach in the study.

INEBRIATED PREACHING

Let's move out of the study and think about the way we use the Bible in the pulpit. Scottish poet Andrew Lang once landed a humorous blow against the politicians of his day with a clever line indicting them for their manipulation of statistics.⁴ With a slight alteration in language, the quip could equally be leveled against many Bible teachers today: "Some preachers use the Bible the way a drunk uses a lamp post . . . more for support than for illumination."



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This is the inebriated preacher. I suppose I don't have to tell you that you don't want to become one. The fact is, though, many of us have been one and just didn't know it.

Let me explain. On those weeks when we have stood in the pulpit and leaned on the Bible to support what we wanted to say instead of saying only what God intended the Bible to say, we have been like a drunken man who leans on a lamppost—using it more for support than for illumination. A better posture for the preacher is to stand directly under the biblical text. For it is the Bible—and not we who preach—which is the Word of the Spirit (see Heb. 3:7; John 6:63).

With decades of pastoral ministry now behind me, I can think of myriad times I have been the inebriated preacher. I have gone to the Bible to prop up what I thought needed to be said. It became a useful tool for me. The Bible helped me accomplish what I had in mind. At times, I lost sight of the fact that *I* am supposed to be the tool—someone God uses for his divinely intended purpose. I am to proclaim the light he wants shed abroad from a particular text.

What happened to me in the past can happen to any of us. There are a variety of ways we use the Bible the way a drunk uses a lamppost. Perhaps you have incredibly strong doctrinal views and these become the point of every passage you preach, regardless of what the text is conveying. Perhaps you draw political conclusions or social conclusions or therapeutic conclusions regardless of the mind of the Spirit in the text. In essence, our propensity for inebriated preaching over expositional preaching stems from one thing: we superimpose our deeply held passions, plans, and perspectives on the biblical

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text. When we do so, the Bible becomes little more than a support for what we have to say.

Let me give you a personal example of how quickly this can happen. Several years ago, I was preaching my way through 2 Corinthians. When I arrived at chapters 8 and 9, I decided to jump over them—forging ahead from chapter 10 onward. My reason for doing so was simple. I wanted to keep 8 and 9 in the bag for a later time in the life of our church. Those chapters are about money, right? I thought to myself, “The elders are going to come to me at some point and tell me to do a sermon on stewardship.” At that point, our church was doing well financially. It made sense to save that text for a time when we would need a financial boost to keep ourselves solvent. So I skipped chapters 8 and 9—something that is rare for me as a rigidly sequential preacher.

Sure enough, the time came. I went to 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 to prepare a sermon on the importance of generous giving. Now, it is important for you to know that even before I entered into my study, I had a very clear idea of what I would say from the pulpit. I was going to center all my comments on the three verses that highlighted the cheerful giver:

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

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As it is written,

“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.” (2 Cor. 9:6–9)

First, I would open with the attitude that God wants us to have toward money. Verse 6 says that giving generously means reaping generously. (I loved starting with attitude because it connected my introduction to the application of “give!”) After all, verse 7 says that God loves a cheerful giver. The motivation for giving (God will give back to you) would be my second point. Verse 8 says, “God is able to make all grace abound to you.” Finally, I would address the quotation from Psalms to show the divine incentive for generosity. For, verse 9 appears to indicate that God himself “distributed freely.” My three-point outline looked like this:

1. 2 Corinthians 9:6–7—Give to God (this is the attitude he wants from us).
2. 2 Corinthians 9:8—Get good things from God (this appeals to our motivation).
3. 2 Corinthians 9:9—Giving is a way we imitate God (the OT tells us so).

While I hadn’t listened very long to the text, I knew that I had a sermon that would be easy to hear. I was well on my way to delivering a very practical and poignant message. I knew what our people needed, and the Bible proved my point.

But then something interesting happened. Before Sunday arrived, and before entering the pulpit to preach, I began to

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study the background to these chapters. And what I discovered shook the foundation of everything I had planned to say. From 1 Corinthians 16:1–4 and Acts 11:27–30, I learned that my verses had something to do with a famine and a need among certain churches. My cheerful-giving text was not about giving regularly to the budget of the local church. It was about a collection for famine relief for churches filled with Jewish Christians in a different part of the world.

If that weren't bad enough, I found other things, too. From 2 Corinthians 11:5 and 12:11, I learned that the primary dispute in the letter was over Paul's seemingly weak ministry in comparison to the super-apostles, who possessed the kind of power the Corinthian congregation respected. Paul was unskilled in speaking (11:6), came in humility (11:7), was always in need (11:9), and had no financial resources (12:14–15). This was the context of the chapters devoted to an offering. Then it dawned on me. This offering functioned as a test! If the Corinthians gave generously, it would demonstrate that they identified with "weakness" and were willing to meet the needs of those who were weak. If, however, they gave sparingly to the famine relief fund, it would prove that they aligned themselves only with those who have it all. I suddenly realized that I was in real danger of misunderstanding the whole book!

Then the whole thing caved in. When I looked at the psalm quoted in 2 Corinthians 9:9—the psalm that I thought taught us that giving generously means we're imitating God—I found that instead, it demonstrates that we are like "the righteous man." Paul's point was not that the Corinthians should give

generously in order to imitate God. Rather, giving generously is the ordinary mark of those who follow God.

At this point I knew I was in trouble. While I had engineered a great outline from the Bible that accomplished my goal of addressing our budget shortfall, I was only leaning on the Bible the way a drunk uses a lamppost—more for support than illumination.

The only remaining questions I had to answer before stepping into the pulpit that week were: Who will be king? Me? Or the biblical text? Would I reign over it this week, or would it rule me? Would I lean on the Bible for my purposes and plans, or would I stand under it, allowing the illumination of the Holy Spirit to have his way with my people?

In the final analysis, the conviction that allowed Charles Simeon to exercise a mature restraint in the pulpit won the day for me. “I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.”⁵

From personal experience, I can say that my own struggles with inebriated preaching are always connected to a *blind adherence to contextualization*. And what I have learned is this: my congregation’s needs, as perceived by my contextualized understanding, should never become the driving power behind what I say in the pulpit. We are not free to do what we want with the Bible. It is sovereign. It must win. Always.

Our role as preachers and Bible teachers is to stand under the illuminating light of the words long ago set down by the Holy Spirit. Our job is to say today what God once said and nothing more. For in doing so, he still speaks.

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“INSPIRED” PREACHING

We have looked at two negative consequences that blind adherence to contextualization has for biblical exposition. First, we explored the impact this approach has on the preacher in his study. This method of preparation can lead to *impressionistic preaching*. Second, we looked at how blind contextualization can influence the preacher’s use of the Bible in the pulpit. The weekly pressures for relevance can result in *inebriated preaching*.

Now I want to take the preacher out of his study and out of his pulpit and look instead at how he reads his Bible in private. For even here, the contemporary reading strategies that people adopt for their “quiet times” can impair the public proclamation of God’s Word. In fact, if you combine these private reading strategies with a blind adherence to contextualization, you get something I call “*inspired*” preaching.

Let me explain. By way of divine authorship, the Bible is and always will be God’s authoritative and inspired Word. Sadly however—and this is the point I am getting at—preachers are increasingly appealing to their subjective reading of the text as inspired. More and more, Bible teachers are being told that whatever moves their spirit in private readings of the Bible must be what *God’s Spirit* wants preached in public.

One example of this kind of reading strategy has a long history. It goes by the name of *Lectio Divina*. This traditional Benedictine practice of scriptural interpretation was intended to promote communion with God and, to a lesser extent, familiarity with the Bible. It favors a view of biblical texts as

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“the Living Word” rather than as written words to be studied. Traditional forms of this practice include four steps for private Bible reading: reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating. You begin by quieting your heart with a simple reading of the text. Then you meditate, perhaps on a single word or phrase from the text, and in so doing intentionally avoid what might be considered an “analytical” approach. In essence, the goal here is to wait for the Spirit’s illumination so that you will arrive at meaning. You wait for Jesus to come calling. Once the word is given, you go on to pray. After all, prayer is dialogue with God. God speaks through his Word and the person speaks through prayer. Eventually, this prayer becomes contemplative prayer, and it gives to us the ability to comprehend deeper theological truths.

It sounds wonderfully pious. In fact, it seems to have a solid scriptural warrant: “These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10). Setting aside for a moment what Paul was actually saying in this passage, *Lectio Divina* advocates a method that is spiritual as opposed to systematically studious. It substitutes intuition for investigation. It prefers mood and emotion to methodical and reasoned inquiry. It equates your spirit to the Holy Spirit.

And *blind adherence to contextualization* loves it! What people today want more than anything is a “fresh word” from God, something from his Spirit that will nourish our impoverished spiritual lives.

While *Lectio Divina* is a historically Roman Catholic form of interpretation, it has found something of a resurgence in

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recent years, particularly among evangelical Protestants. And even where it is not practiced by name, it is remarkably similar to the way a lot of young preachers are taught to prepare. They are told to read the Bible devotionally, quietly, waiting upon the Holy Spirit to speak. For you can be assured that what God lays upon our hearts from a text in the quiet of the moment, he will use also in the lives of others. So, “Preach it! It must be inspired.”

Let’s take as an example one of those wonderful kitchen-calendar verses, Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

How do we approach this text? We start with reading it personally, as though Paul wrote it directly to us. Then we read “all things” as “anything.” We think that of course this text is referring to anything. When we are faced with any kind of obstacle, God gives us the strength to overcome. Do I need this promotion at work? God gives me the strength. Do we need a three-point shot in these last twenty seconds to win the game? God gives the strength. What an inspiration! It’s perfect for any of those moments when we need to succeed. And because we’ve understood the text devotionally, it’s tempting to get into the pulpit and preach it that way.

The problem is, digging just a little deeper reveals that Paul is not talking about “anything.” If we read just the few verses on either side, we realize that this verse is part of Paul’s discussion about suffering in jail. He’s talking about survival. He’s not talking about promotions and game-winning shots, but about enduring hardship so that the gospel may advance (cf. Phil. 1:12). It doesn’t take much to undo our very nearly

inspired, very devotional reading. It just takes two or three verses.

This kind of “inspired” preaching is a dangerous game to play. It is completely subjective. When we stop the hard work of understanding the words that the Spirit has given us and work exclusively in the “mind of the Spirit,” we become the final authority on meaning. We begin to lay down “truths” and “advice” that are biblically untestable or unsupportable. We may do so for good reasons, such as our sense of the moral health of our people or a genuine desire to renew the world we live in. But, nevertheless, we begin operating outside of orthodox doctrine. We confuse “thus sayeth the Lord” with “thus sayeth me.” We ask our congregations to trust us instead of trusting the Word.

Now, you and I probably do not hold to this theory when it comes to the Bible. Yet subconsciously, we often work as if we do.

What does this look like? A lot of preachers—particularly young preachers—go to the text first for their own edification or spiritual growth. This is not an inherently bad practice, and devotional preaching is not inherently a bad thing. We all should be spiritually convicted by and conformed to the image of Christ in the text. The problem is that we are easily tempted to jump from the way the Spirit impresses the text upon us to how the Spirit must be working among our people. In this way, it’s quite like impressionistic preaching, but dressed up in piety rather than practicality.

Just to avoid confusion, I am *not* saying that the Spirit has no role in expositional preaching. That would be a terrible mis-

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take. While it is true that people are converted and matured through expositional preaching, the word of the gospel must be wedded to the Spirit's work in order for conviction of sin, regeneration, repentance and faith, and lifelong perseverance to come. Or to put it differently, "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7).

As it turns out, this "recent" collaboration between a devotional reading of the Bible and preaching—and especially its appeal to contextualization's desire to be spiritual—isn't as new as we might think. A version of it played out among theological figures like Karl Barth and the neoorthodox movement in the early part of the twentieth century. German higher criticism had "proven" that the text of the Bible had been corrupted, or so it was thought. And because the text had been corrupted, readers of the Bible couldn't authentically work their way back to the author's intent. Barth and the neoorthodox movement had a generally high view of Scripture, but conceded on certain points to the higher critics concerning verbal inspiration. Thus, in a neoorthodox church, the notion of responding to the Bible by saying, "This is the Word of the Lord," was no longer tenable. Rather, the reader might say something more like "Listen for the Word of the Lord." The assumption was that all we have left is the Spirit, therefore we'd better be listening to someone who has heard from him.

It's only a generation later, and some within evangelicalism are already moving beyond Barth for inspired or spirit-driven preaching. But are we trustworthy? The Holy Spirit is undoubtedly trustworthy and can, miraculously, implant his

intent in us intuitively. But does this possibility absolve us from doing the hard work of exegesis? Why would he have bothered inspiring Scripture in the first place? Is it not possible that the Spirit works through both research and meditation? By pursuing such a subjective approach to interpretation as “inspired” preaching, are we not at risk of ignoring what God intended in his Word in favor of preaching our own? Are we not conforming ourselves to the spirit of the age (of which we are necessarily a part) rather than to the depth of his Word?

PUTTING THINGS TOGETHER BEFORE MOVING ON

Blind adherence to contextualization is a very real issue for preachers. It tempts us to uncritically and unrestrainedly pursue relevance, and these pursuits result in the shallowest possible work on the text. In this chapter we have looked at this problem from three angles. First, we explored what occurs in the preacher’s study when the cultural context drives the sermon, rather than informs it. We end up displacing the realism of the biblical text for something *impressionistic* at best. Second, a blind adherence to contextualization often causes us to miss the mark of a proper use of the Bible in the pulpit. Many of us suffer from an addiction to practicality and the notion that we can predetermine what our people need to hear. When we do so, we imbibe from the tap of *inebriated preaching*. Third, a blind adherence is increasingly connected to a preacher’s private devotional practice. Preachers want something “fresh” and “spiritual.” And then we pass off our own spiritual or fresh feelings as the message of God. As a result, “inspired” preaching displaces expositional preaching.

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We are right to ask: is there a simple way to express where our propensity toward contextualization ends up going wrong? I think there is.



The right side of this illustration shows the preacher's responsibility with the content of God's Word: *getting it right*. This is an essential part of our work. We all want to be faithful. The Bible gives us the words of the living God. The left side points us in another responsible direction: *getting it across*. This too is essential. Who among us doesn't want to be fruitful? The preacher stands in between these two tasks each week. They pressure him, each one wrestling for his time and attention. And more often than not, the preacher fears that a full commitment to one cannot be made without leaving the other behind.

As a result, the preacher begins to carry on conversations with himself that sound like this: "If I move in the direction of spending my preparation time *getting it right*, I'm afraid that I might end up being too heady, too intellectual, and lose the life impact of *getting it across*. After all, I can't afford to be known as a Word pastor if it means that I lose my identity as a Spirit-filled preacher. Don't I have a responsibility to speak to the heart, not just the mind? My messages need to show street credibility. I'm done with preachers who think only about spir-

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itual conversion. I mean, orthodoxy is important, but without contextualization leading me in my work, I'll never get to orthopraxis. I know I speak from a text, but finally I'm here to make an impact today."

Whenever this argument emerges in the heart and mind of those called to preach—this sense that getting it right and getting it across are impossible partners—you can be assured that a blind adherence to contextualization is lurking nearby with impressionistic, inebriated, and "inspired" preaching ready to take the lead.

Of course, the two commitments to getting it right and getting it across are not impossible partners. Charles Simeon and every solid expository preacher I know have found a way to hold on to both. It is my hope that the next three chapters will show you an approach for preparing sermons that will enable you to join them in the faithful and fruitful work of biblical exposition.



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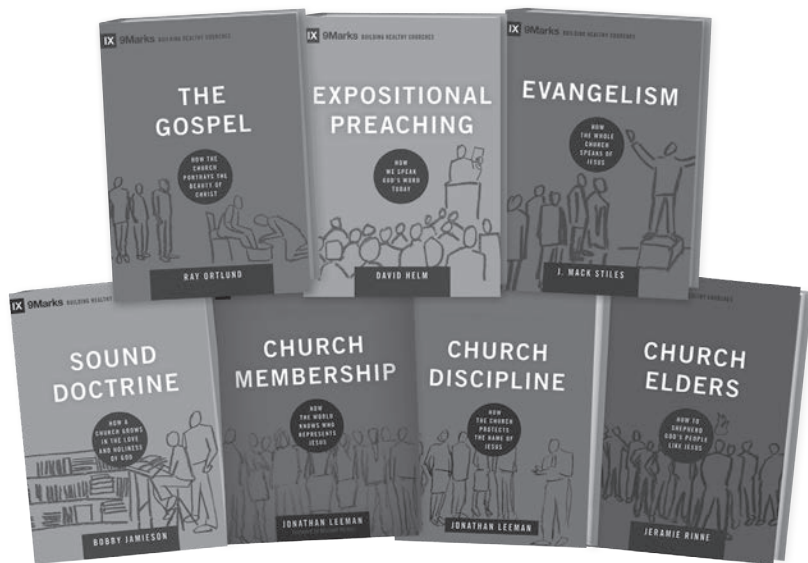
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