

# **The Myth of the Expository Method**

## Did Christ and the Apostles preach expository sermons?

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The preacher mounts the pulpit at the local reformed congregation, and announces that he is beginning a new series of sermons which will be life changing and will have a vital impact on the community and the world. “127 sermons on Psalm 23” is bound to be one of the best series he ever preached. It might bring a long needed revival of true religion to the church, and it is sure to spark a desire for true worship among God’s elect. Each week everyone is eagerly awaiting each new sermon in the series. But after sermon number 30 on verse number 3 something begins to happen. People start falling asleep in church. Maybe the preacher isn’t being expository enough? Maybe he isn’t drawing out of the text all of the glorious nuggets of the truth? Maybe he isn’t riveting the attention of the congregation on the tenses of the verbs and the hifel stems? Perhaps he needs to slow down and extend the series to 164 sermons instead of just 127! He notices that people aren’t coming up to him after the sermon and saying, “That was a really good sermon pastor Bob.” People aren’t asking him any new questions about the application of the text to specific problems in life. The attendance is dropping from small to smaller. Pastor Bob is in a quandary. He is diligently preaching the whole counsel of God, but God doesn’t seem to be blessing his work. Nobody has been led to Christ in months. There seems to be very little of the moving of the Holy Spirit in the congregation. Nobody is expressing interest in joining the church. There seems to be a dark cloud over the congregation. People aren’t smiling. Everything seems stiff and formal. All the emphasis seems to be on intellectualism. People are more apt to quote from Van Til than Jesus. What is wrong? Is this the way an enlightened reformed congregation should be? Is this the normative pattern of a New Testament Church? Does this picture fit the Biblical model? Is this happening in your church?

I did not intend the first paragraph of this article to sound facetious, sarcastic, censorious or judgmental, but I intended it to illustrate what I consider to be one of the biggest problems in the reformed movement today. The problem is the myth of expository preaching as the only true methodology of preaching in Bible based congregations. We seem to all be followers rather than leaders on some of these practical matters of how to properly edify the body of Christ. Since many of us came out of Arminian and Pelagian

backgrounds we tend to think that everything we do needs to be “reformed”. So we follow the lead of others who have made the journey into the light, and we model the things that have seemed to work for them. Needless to say this involves jumping on the expository preaching bandwagon. We quickly learn how to settle into the expository saddle. We no longer need to struggle with God, and search for a sermon text each week, because our text simply follows the one from last week. We don’t need to ask God what to preach? We know what we are preaching. We are following the expository plan. We plod along, word by word, sentence by sentence, verse by verse, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter, book by book, week by week, month by month, year by year. We convince ourselves that this is “preaching the whole counsel of God”. We believe that this is “edifying the body of Christ”. Is it? Is this a scriptural principal? After all, the Bible is to be the sole basis for our faith and our practice, isn’t it? Well, is the expository method Biblical?

This should not seem like an outrageous question. As a matter of fact, it seems like this question should be asked by any preacher who is planning “127 sermons on Psalm 23“. Is it Biblical? Is it scriptural? Do we have express commands, precedents or principals in the Bible to warrant patterning our preaching after this method? Should we bog down our pulpits with extended series of sermons on lengthy passages of scripture? Or should we be following a different preaching plan? These are not far fetched, unreasonable questions. They are questions of the most basic kind. Is your preaching scriptural, not just in content, but in method as well? If we are to pattern our preaching after Jesus Christ and the Apostles, then we have to ask the simple question: “How did they preach?” If you ask this question, and if you are honest with the Biblical answer, I’m afraid you might be very surprised at what you find.

Let’s start with our Lord Himself. Did Jesus follow a verse by verse expository method in His preaching and teaching? The first encounter with our Lord’s teaching and preaching methodology was when He was but a youth in the temple, where He was found teaching the aged and educated Rabbi’s about the things of God, Luke 2: 40-52. The account is clear and says some very interesting things: “***And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.***” There is nothing in this account that would suggest that Jesus was opening or applying passages from the Old Testament scriptures. It say’s that He listened, asked questions and gave answers which showed great understanding. If anything this appears to be catechetical and not exegetical teaching. We do not know what He asked, or what they asked Him, but we do know that questions and answers made up the bulk of what transpired on this occasion. So this early example of our Lord’s teaching does not show an expository thrust, but there can be no doubt...He was doing “His Fathers business” even though it was not expository (v. 49).

When we come to John chapter two, it is doubtful if we could call the event a full fledged sermon, but we will look at it anyway. After throwing the money changers out of the

temple it is recorded that: ***“Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said” (John 2: 19-22).*** There is no indication of exegesis or exposition in this account, however it says, that after the resurrection of Christ the disciples ***“remembered the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said”***. This certainly seems to indicate that Jesus at least may have had a scripture text for what He taught them on this occasion, but in no way can this be cited as an example of expository preaching.

I am not going to cite the discourse that Jesus Had with Nicodemus in John 3: 1-23, because you are very familiar with it, and it properly belongs in the category of “personal evangelism,” not “preaching” per se. It is however a wonderful and powerful teaching discourse. It seems to be filled with new content from the Lord, and there is only one reference in it to the Old Testament scriptures. In the middle of the instruction Jesus said: ***“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.”*** This was not a quote from the Old Testament, but merely an allusion to the Old Testament. It was an inspired illustration of a great gospel truth. But is this expository preaching? The answer is no.

The next glimpse we get of Jesus’ teaching and preaching methodology comes from the personal discourse with the woman at the well (John 4: 1-29). Is it expository? No. There is not one hint of Old Testament exegesis in it. Again it appears to be a new message, freshly derived from the Holy Spirit, and brimming with the life and wisdom of God.

Jesus soon began His Galilean ministry. It is recorded in Matt. 4: 17; Mark 1: 14-15 and Luke 4: 14-15. I am combining the accounts so that all the different words are represented. Here’s what it says: ***“And Jesus, when he had heard that John was cast into prison, returned came in the power of the Spirit into Galilee. From that time Jesus began preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God [and] heaven is at hand: repent, and believe the gospel. And there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all.”*** This is the first official mention of “preaching”. Is it expository preaching? No.

Next we find Jesus teaching and preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, Luke 4: 16-30. Let’s look at it. ***“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord [is] upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent***

*me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave [it] again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son? And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country. And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; but unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, [a city] of Sidon, unto a woman [that was] a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian. And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way.”* Here Jesus reads from a text in Isaiah, declares that it is fulfilled in their own ears this day. Then begins to preach about how a prophet is not accepted in his own country, because they had heard of His works in Capernaum, and wanted Him to do them in Nazareth also. He supported His works among the gentiles by citing two Old Testament examples where God sent prophets to Gentiles...The case of the widow of Serepta and the case of Naaman the leper. This sermon angered them so much, that they tried right then to kill Him, but they failed in their attempt. Is this a case of expository preaching? We might be inclined to say that it is, because He chose a text from the book of Isaiah. But actually there is no reference to any kind of exposition of the text other than saying that He was fulfilling it in their ears. This can hardly be claimed to be an expository sermon. Someone is sure to say: “But what of the two gentiles who were sited as illustrations?” “Surely that is exposition?” I don’t think so. They were simple proof texts to support His thesis. Sorry, but this is not expository preaching.

The Sermon on the Mount (Our Lord’s most Famous Sermon) is our next step in finding out if Jesus was an expository preacher. It is recorded in Matt. 5:1-8:1. It is too lengthy to print here in its entirety. I am trusting that you will, however, stop and read it and examine it’s content. I am convinced that you will search in vain trying to find anything here of an expository nature.

Luke 5: 33-39 is our next passage to examine. It is a short discourse on why the disciples do not fast. “*And they said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? 34: And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them? 35: But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days.*”

*36: And he spake also a parable unto them; No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old.*

*37: And no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish.*

*38: But new wine must be put into new bottles; and both are preserved.*

*39: No man also having drunk old wine straightway desireth new: for he saith, The old is better.”* There is nothing expository here. So, by now it seems that we have come upon the preaching method of the Master...it appears that He uses a topical method. Sometimes He also uses a textual method, whereby He chooses a text from the Old Testament as a springboard to launch His discussion. But so, far we have not found any instance of an exegetical expository sermon.

There is an example of a sermon which might be construed as being expository in Matt. 12: 1-8; Mark 2: 23-28; and Luke 6: 1-5. I've listed all three passages, because they describe the same sermon. It is a very short discourse based on a couple of old Testament passages. It probably shouldn't be classified as a sermon at all, but I am calling it a sermon simply because it could possibly be considered as an example of an expository message. It was preached on the occasion of the disciples picking corn on the Sabbath. It is an explanation of the true meaning of the Sabbath, and the fact that Christ is the Lord of the Sabbath. This is the first sermon which we have discovered which could possibly substantiate an expository method on the part of our Lord. In my opinion it is not really an expository message, but it is more along the lines of just a couple of proof texts which justify the actions of our Lord and His disciples with regard to the Sabbath, but if you read these verses and see there an exposition of these two instances, I will be willing to let you count this sermon as an expository sermon. If it is an expository sermon, which is very doubtful, it is totally unlike what we do in our Reformed preaching today. It is definitely not an extended series of expositions. As I said, to me, it appears to be only the use of a couple of proof texts. This is not exposition in my book. And it probably is not exposition in your book either.

Luke 6: 17-49 is a full fledged sermon, and it is an important one. It is Jesus' sermon on the plain. He covers many topics, and He never introduces even a single verse of scripture. It is very similar in some respects to the sermon on the mount, but it is 100% free of exposition. It is clearly a topical sermon, and not even a textual one. It is not an expository sermon.

Luke 7: 22-35 *“Then Jesus answering said unto them, Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached. 23: And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. 24: And when the messengers of John were departed, he began to speak unto the people concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? 25: But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in kings' courts. 26: But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. 27: This is he, of*

*whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. 28: For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist: but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. 29: And all the people that heard him, and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. 30: But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him. 31: And the Lord said, Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and to what are they like? 32: They are like unto children sitting in the marketplace, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept. 33: For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, He hath a devil. 34: The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners! 35: But wisdom is justified of all her children.”* Once again, after reading this sermon, we are forced to admit that it is not expository in method.

John Chapter five contains a powerful sermon of Jesus which was preached on the occasion of the healing of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda. Wered the contents of this message beginning in verse 17. *“But Jesus answered them, My Father worketh hitherto, and I work. 18: Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God. 19: Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. 20: For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel. 21: For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. 22: For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: 23: That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him. 24: Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. 25: Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. 26: For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; 27: And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. 28: Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, 29: And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation. 30: I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me. 31: If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true. 32: There is another that beareth witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesseth of me is true. 33: Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the truth. 34: But I receive not testimony from man: but these things I say, that ye might be saved. 35: He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light. 36:*

***But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me. 37: And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. 38: And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not. 39: Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. 40: And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life. 41: I receive not honour from men. 42: But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. 43: I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.***

***44: How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only? 45: Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. 46: For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. 47: But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?"***

I have been quoting these discourses of our Lord simply because I want you to see with your own eyes that I am not making this hypothesis up. It is not my invention, that the Lord did not utilize an expository methodology in His preaching and teaching. I think by now, you should see that this statement is true. I am not going to continue with lengthy quotes. You can look them up for yourself.

Here are some more places where you should look. Luke 6: 17-49 is the Sermon on the plain. Matt. 11: 20-30 contains the woes to the impenitent cities and Jesus' famous "come unto me" words. Matthew 12:22-37 & Mark 3:19b-30 should be read together.

There are some of Jesus' famous parables in Matthew 13:1-53; Mark 4:1-34; & Luke 8:4-18. They should be studied as a single unit. Then of course there is the famous Olivet discourse in Matt. 24 and 25. This is clearly not expository. You will also want to validate that Christ's discourse on the bread of heaven in John 6: 22-71 contains no exposition. At the feast of tabernacle we have discourses of our Lord in John 7: 2-53, but they are non-expository also. The light of the world discourse is found in John 12: 8-59. Check it out and see if you can find any expository preaching in it? Who is the greatest in the kingdom? Jesus preached a sermon about this in Matt. 18: 1-35 and Mark 9: 33-50. Is it expository? The answer is no it is not expository.

At this point I think I have presented ample proof that our Lord, the greatest preacher who ever lived, did not utilize the expository method in His sermons. This has tremendous implications for our churches and ministry methods today. Do not misunderstand me. I am not condemning the use of this method, as I use it myself in Bible studies which I conduct at my church. What I am pointing out here is the question of whether or not we should use it in the regular public services of our churches, when visitors might be most likely to be present. These services are more public than say, a Wednesday evening Bible study. It seems that when declaring the counsel of God to new ears, we may be neglecting the important matters of evangelism, outreach, cultivating faith in our hearers,

and general exhortations for the body of Christ. If we examine the preaching ministries of the Apostles, we will find that they too followed the Lords practice. There are few if any examples of the Apostles following the expository method. When they wanted to do exposition, they did it in their writings, not primarily in their preaching. Paul say's "I have declared unto you, the whole counsel of God", but he did not do it with 127 sermons on Psalm 23.

If we check out other great preachers of history such as Thomas Boston, George Whitefield and C.H. Spurgeon, we find that they too, tried to emulate the methodology of the Master and His Apostles. These men were eminently successful in their preaching and teaching, but they tried to follow a more scriptural approach than the expository method. They received their sermons on their knees, and through the direct illumination of the Holy Spirit. Each time they preached, they brought a different message and delivered it under the Holy Spirit's empowerment. I am not saying that the Holy Spirit cannot bless expository preaching. He does bless all types of preaching which centers upon His word. What I am saying however, is that extended series of sermons force the Holy Spirit to work in that sort of predetermined framework. An artificial grid that insists that God must speak linearly, verse by verse, chapter by chapter etc. Reading the Bible linearly is absolutely critical, because that is how God wrote the Bible. Effective Bible studies should be linear. But preaching it that way seems to me to be unfair to the church because it forces them into a straightjacket week after week. It gives them nothing, new and fresh and resonating with the warmth of a coal just taken off of the fire. My proposition to you is this...We should pattern our preaching methodology after the Lord and His Apostles. Each week should present a different topic, a different text, a newly received exhortation from the Lord, a new movement of the Holy Spirit's guidance. Something that fit's what's going on this week in the Body of Christ. Preaching should be exhortation not expository. Teaching a Bible study is a little different, but when the church gathers weekly to hear what God has for them, as a message from heaven, it should topical/textual.

It is very clear from the ministry of C.H. Spurgeon, that even though he was topical/textual he was a tremendous exegete at the same time. I am not discounting exegesis in any manner. We must be totally exegetical, but not expository. I believe that this kind of preaching is what is needed in our Reformed churches. It will make us more relevant to our modern society. It will make us more interesting to people who might visiting among us. It will captivate the minds and hearts of our hearers, so that they won't be apt to miss a week in church, because they know that that sermon will never be repeated and will never be reviewed the following week. With expository preaching if a person comes in in the middle of an extended series, he or she might be hesitant to return, because the might feel that they could never catch up for the many sermons they have missed. I know this is true, especially if you are in the middle of a book like the Book of Revelation, which is like a biblical Rubic's Cube to most people. It gives the Holy Spirit more room to work in directing the course which the services should take, so that they will be of maximum benefit for the church. It does not put Him in a straight



jacket, because it is He who is to remind us of all things concerning Christ. It is He who is the Chief Interpreter of the scriptures.

As far as I am concerned I can see no reason why we should not preach topically/textually on Sunday Mornings and perhaps on Sunday Evenings as well. Leave the expository method for teaching believers only, in Bible Study classes, Sunday School classes, small group classes etc. Let us be honest here, and let us follow the examples of our Lord and His Apostles. What we desperately need today is more Whitefield's and Spurgeon's in the body of Christ. We keep asking ourselves why we do not have revival in our midst? I submit unto you, that it is probably because we follow our tradition of expository preaching, and that is a mere tradition of men. We do it because we are "reformed" and that is the tradition in our denominations. Is this right? It is certainly not established by any scriptural precedent. We should be following God and not men in these important matters concerning the faith and practices of our local congregations. I truly hope that many of you able expositors, will pick up on this and try a different approach. I am convinced that if you do, while it may require a lot more work on your part, you will be blessed of God in your effort to emulate Christ and not men. You can keep on being as exegetical as you ever were, only present something fresh, vibrant, alive, new and inspiring each and every Sunday, instead of slipping into the easy rut of just tweeking along verse by verse.

I know that this will be a challenge to some of you. It will require a lot more work. You will have to get on your face before God each week to find out what portion you are going to preach about, or what topic you are going to expound. But God will reward you, and the people who have to listen to you each week, will thank you, because you are sparing them from a drudgery of the flesh. You are delivering them from the bondage of the legalistic proclamation of the Bible according to the teaching pattern of men, rather than the pattern established by God. I trust that you will at least pray about your unscriptural practice of dragging your feet through the Bible as one drags his feet through the snow. And that you will at least try to use this more scriptural approach. If you try it, I am confident that God will bless it. And after all, that is what we desire more than anything else, the approval of God, and not the approbation of mere men. God Bless you in your efforts.

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