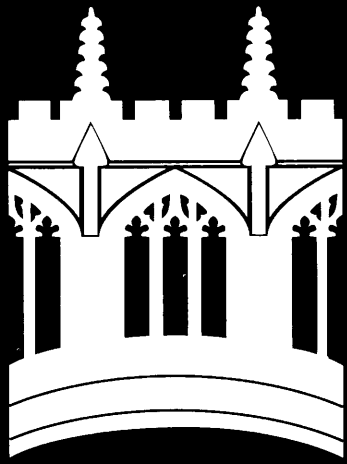


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# *Expository preaching in a postmodern world*

by Roy Clements

*'Anyone wishing to save humanity today must  
first of all save the word'*

Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*

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## Summary

The relevance of expository preaching to a postmodern culture is being questioned today. This paper argues that while the style of preaching may well have to be radically revised if it is to communicate effectively in our contemporary world, the expository method must continue to inform the public teaching of any church which wishes to remain securely biblical in its ethos.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Evidence is mounting of a growing disillusionment with *expository* preaching. In *Picking up the Pieces*<sup>2</sup> David Hilborn has recently argued that exposition is a feature of Enlightenment modernity and quotes a number of contemporary evangelical leaders who are convinced that 'the expository age' is coming to an end. New methods of evangelism and new styles of worship must be developed if the church is not to suffer the fate of a maladapted dinosaur in the postmodern cultural environment which increasingly dominates the Western world. Preaching is likely to occupy a much less privileged place in that new pattern.

## The postmodern perspective

A major change in Western culture is certainly taking place and epistemology lies at the root of it. Modern thought is based on the presupposition that there is an absolute reality external to the human mind, and that the rational processes of the mind are sufficiently congruent with that reality to give us reliable knowledge of it. Such knowledge is the business of science. In fact, positivists insist that anything which cannot be verified by the rigorous methods of science is not knowledge at all, but opinion. The boundary between the domains of objective 'facts' and subjective 'feelings' is a fundamental characteristic of the philosophy that has shaped European culture since the Enlightenment.

As time has gone by, however, more and more areas of human thought and experience have been relegated to the latter category. Theology was consigned there first. Aesthetics, ethics and history have followed. In the middle of this century question marks began to be placed by writers like Thomas Kuhn against the objectivity of science itself. Was the scientist discovering immutable 'laws of nature' or merely inventing descriptive paradigms? And most recently, under the assault of deconstructionist literary criticism,<sup>3</sup> doubt has been expressed about the objectivity of language. This general drift towards subjectivism has resulted in an emphasis on image over against words, on feelings over against concepts, and on intuition over against logic.

The emergence of virtual reality in the computer world is symbolic of the way in which the boundary between the external world of public facts and the inner world of private perceptions has been blurred by this erosion of cognitive certainty. Truth is increasingly regarded as something self-manufactured and provisional. Postmodernity rejects all tyrannical meta-narratives and offers instead the philosophical equivalent of LEGOLAND, in which everyone is free to gather whatever pieces they like and build them into their own do-it-yourself Disneytruth to play with.

1 This paper is a revised version of a public lecture which has been published in *Foundations*, British Evangelical Council, Vol. 40, pp10-17

2 David Hilborn, *Picking up the Pieces*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1997

3 See Michael Ovey, 'Deconstruction: Gaggling the speaking God?' *Cambridge Papers*, 1993, Vol.2, No.4

## Expository preaching under attack in a postmodern world

It is easy to see why David Hilborn suggests that exposition may have to be abandoned in this new cultural situation. He identifies several charges which postmoderns will lay against it.

First, expository preaching is *rationalistic*, pursuing a detailed analysis of the biblical text. But postmoderns are impatient with that kind of mental discipline. They are interested in emotive images not cerebral ideas, personal experiences not Greek verbs.

Secondly, expository preaching is *elitist*. It only appeals to intellectuals who have the concentration span and linear logic to benefit from it. Gerald Coates provocatively comments<sup>4</sup> that the intellectual demands of expository preaching exclude 95 per cent of the world's population. He observes that very few leaders in those parts of the worldwide church which are experiencing the most prolific growth employ expository preaching.

Thirdly, expository preaching is unacceptably *authoritarian*. Postmoderns wish to affirm the validity of all insights and emphases. A didactic monologue feels altogether too much like an assertion of power. Political correctness now requires an open listening attitude characterised by dialogue and consensus, rather than proclamation by a single individual in a clerical gown.

To cap it all, its opponents argue that expository preaching is *unbiblical*. In his matchless parables Jesus pioneered an alternative style of preaching which, by the vividness of its imagery and narrative style, is brilliantly adapted to the needs of our postmodern culture. The Christian communicator of the future, they insist, will have to display similar creativity.

These criticisms, however, are all open to challenge.

### Reason and the Word

It is certainly true that Western culture is less enamoured of rationalism than it once was. But are we really about to turn our backs on the gains of the scientific revolution and return to medieval myth and magic? Society today is hugely dependent on technology and the scientists who sustain it. It is significant that very few scientists buy into postmodern subjectivism, at least as far as their professional work is concerned. The majority are critical realists who retain a sanguine confidence in the correspondence of their models to objective reality.<sup>5</sup> Postmodernity will find it hard to convert this powerful lobby to its side. Talk of the abandonment of exposition for the sake of cultural relevance may well be premature. Postmoderns represent only one section of contemporary society and they have not yet carried the day.

Furthermore there are very good grounds for holding that the scientific method grew originally out of a biblical worldview. It is true that European culture has been significantly influenced during the last two centuries by an atheistic rationalism which has bequeathed a spiritual wasteland as its tragic legacy. But the answer is not to swing with the cultural pendulum into irrationalism or mysticism. Rather than surrender to such an anti-scientific backlash, a more strategic response on the part of Christian apologetics would be to embark on a spirited biblical defence of the proper place of reason in the construction of human knowledge.

It is vital in this connection to note the central role of the *Word* in the Bible. The majestic opening lines of John's gospel, with their affirmation of the primacy of the *Logos*, point to the profound significance of human language and reason. Notwithstanding the vast diversity of human culture, everybody uses and understands both *words* and *logic*.

Accordingly, the Bible consistently witnesses to a God who *speaks*, and is suspicious of the religious use of *images*. Without going to iconoclastic extremes or disparaging the visual arts,<sup>6</sup> the Bible insists that words are capable of a vital precision, enabling the listener to distinguish truth from lies and obedience from disobedience. Images, while they undoubtedly communicate powerfully at the emotional level, leave too much room for idolatrous speculation.

The anthropocentric subjectivism characteristic of postmodern thought is not new. It finds parallels in the religions and philosophies

of ancient Greece and Asia. It was the objective divine Word that distinguished the biblical prophets and apostles from this pagan environment. The departing commission of Jesus himself to 'teach everything I commanded you'<sup>7</sup> would be unintelligible without access to such a normative verbal revelation. And in his valedictory warnings about intolerance of 'sound doctrine', disillusionment with 'truth' and preference for 'myths', Paul was anticipating precisely the kind of gnostic trend which postmodernity represents. Significantly, his response is to urge Timothy to 'preach the Word'.<sup>8</sup>

### Is exposition elitist and authoritarian?

Ever since the Reformation expository sermons have tended to appeal to educated audiences. Even among the Puritans, populist preachers often used a dramatic and emotionally-charged style of preaching which was very different from the carefully argued expository lectures that their colleagues presented in university chapels.<sup>9</sup> They were not unaware of the elitist tendency in their Word-centred theology. Their long-term response to the danger was to encourage universal literacy. Instead of a pragmatic surrender to popular culture, they aspired to redeem it.

Those who dismiss expository preaching because it is 'over the heads' of the majority are in danger of displaying the same kind of patronising attitude which kept the Bible as a clerical monopoly in the medieval church. Rather than collude with ignorance and superstition, reformed Christianity has always seen public education as part of its mission. In this connection, Gerald Coates' comment about revival is as naive as it is perceptive. The explosive growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America has certainly not been generated by expository preaching. But what will happen to that movement as the people become upwardly mobile and better educated? Evidence suggests that poorly taught revivalist churches lose as many adherents as they gain in such circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

As to the related allegation that expository preaching is authoritarian, any faith which confesses allegiance to a divine revelation is likely to be thus misunderstood. The learned philosophers of Greece found Paul's *kerygma* just as politically incorrect as any postmodern. But he does not soften the note of proclamation in order to accommodate himself to their Socratic presuppositions. It is his duty to 'command' repentance in the name of the God of whose message he was the herald.<sup>11</sup> No doubt there are ways of communicating the authority of the gospel which do not unnecessarily inflame postmodern sensitivities. But the asymmetry between preacher and audience is not to be regarded as a dispensable cultural anachronism. It witnesses to the non-negotiable nature of the divine Word. The apostle Paul involved himself in dialogue only with the goal of persuading people of the truth of that Word, never as a capitulation to the pluralistic 'open-mindedness' of the pagan pantheon.

### Is exposition biblical?

The suggestion that expository preaching is not to be found in the Bible itself is also only superficially plausible. Much of the time the apostles are self-consciously declaring new revelation<sup>12</sup> which in some respects stood in contrast to the religion of the Old Testament and relied upon their first-hand knowledge of Jesus and the gospel. This was a unique situation. How can later generations of Christians remain faithful to 'the faith once delivered to the saints' except by accurately expounding that apostolic deposit?<sup>13</sup>

Much of the preached material that is reported in the New Testament arises in an itinerant evangelistic context rather than that of a settled Christian congregation. Even so, gospels and epistles utilise biblical argument and they are not lacking in logical structure. It is significant that the letter to the Hebrews, which as a 'word of exhortation'<sup>14</sup> may well be a typical early church sermon, displays many of the marks of a piece of expository preaching, blending

7 Matt 28:20

8 2 Tim 3:14-4:5

9 See Francis Bremer and Ellen Rydell, 'Puritans in the Pulpit' in *History Today*, 1995, Vol.45, pp5-54.

10 David Martin, 'Space for the expansive Spirit' in *Times Lit. Supp.* 28 March 1997

11 Acts 17:30; see also Paul's rejection of Hellenistic *sophia* in 1 Cor 1:18-2:5

12 Gal 1:11

13 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:2 and Jude 3

14 Heb 13:22

4 In D. Hilborn, *op. cit.*

5 See Denis Alexander, 'Science: Friend or foe?' *Cambridge Papers*, 1995, Vol.4, No.3

6 The story of Moses' brass serpent is perhaps intended both to affirm the role of image and to illustrate its dangers.

biblical interpretation and pastoral application. There are in fact four word ministries mentioned in the New Testament: proclamation (*kerygma*), teaching (*didache*), prophecy (*propheteia*), and exhortation (*paraklesis*). If exposition cannot be simplistically identified with any of these it is because its ambition is to embrace all four.

Jesus' use of parables is certainly a fascinating feature of his public teaching. But he taught in non-narrative ways too.<sup>15</sup> It is also significant that he adopted a much less opaque mode of instruction when he was with his disciples alone than with the general public.<sup>16</sup> More fundamentally, though, it is a mistake to think that expository preaching cannot make use of more imaginative homiletic techniques like parables. One of the major reasons exposition has a bad press these days is that many identify it with a style of preaching that is colourless and pedantic. But expository preaching is not primarily a matter of *style* at all. The thesis of this paper is that, first and foremost, the adjective 'expository' describes the method by which the preacher decides *what* to say, not *how* to say it.

## The distinctives of expository preaching

The task facing any preacher is to fuse the 'two horizons' of the biblical text and the contemporary world in the experience of the listener.<sup>17</sup> The expository method is marked by two distinctives in this respect.

### 1. The expository method pays equal attention to both horizons

They receive equal consideration in preparation and equally inform the sermon when finally delivered. A sermon that concentrates wholly on contemporary problems or interests with only tangential reference to the text of Scripture, while it may count as preaching if it is seeking to communicate orthodox Christian truth, is not expository because the Bible is not sufficiently central to it. On the other hand, a sermon that concentrates wholly on the biblical text with little application to the contemporary scene is better termed exegetical rather than expository. An expository sermon must have a 'prophetic' dimension. It is a living word for a particular time and place, targetted onto the life situation of the audience.

### 2. The expository method begins with the biblical text

It would be possible of course to begin on the horizon of the contemporary world. This is precisely where topical preaching does begin. The preacher identifies some contemporary issue and scans the Bible for relevant material. Its weakness is that the world may control the agenda. Issues which the Bible wants to address, but to which our contemporary culture is insensitive, may well be filtered out of the curriculum by the sieve of its selective enquiry. It is the noble distinctive of expository preaching that it gives initiative to the Word. By its very methodology of beginning on the horizon of the biblical text it challenges the influence of human tradition and cultural assumption, exposing the church to continual reformation according to the Word of God.

## Two questions

The expository method consists of systematically asking two questions of each book, chapter and verse of the Bible:

(i) *what is the intention of the divine author in this text?*

(ii) *what is the relevance of this discovered divine intention to the contemporary situation?*

The first question deals with *meaning* and the second with *application*. The text, by the answers it provides to these two questions, sets the agenda for the sermon's content. How the structure and style of the sermon are then developed is a separate and secondary matter.

## Can we discover objective meaning in the text?

One of the central tenets of postmodernity is that the meaning of a text is controlled by the reader. Thus, for a deconstructionist like Derrida, the first question posed by the expository method is fundamentally misguided. It is pointless to ask 'what does this text mean?' The only question we are empowered to ask is 'what does this text mean to me or my community?' We cannot read out of a text the author's intention. We can only read into a text our own

subjective response.<sup>18</sup>

It is important that we do not fall into the trap of neurotic over-defensiveness here. Some of the literary genres used by the Bible do invite a high degree of reader involvement. It is part of the author's intention in telling a parable, for instance, to leave the text provocatively 'open'. Furthermore, the Christian community does have an important role in discerning the meaning of Scripture, and an untutored slave may well understand the Exodus narrative more profoundly than a Hebrew scholar.

However, it must also be said that, pressed to the extreme, post-modern literary criticism denies the very possibility of divine revelation through a verbally inspired text. Expository preaching challenges such scepticism. It insists that God successfully communicates through the Bible. True, words can be misunderstood and the cultural gap between the Bible and the modern reader increases the risk of such misunderstanding. But these admissions do not mean that there is no objective meaning in the text. No, words work – and God's words work best of all.

In so far as an expository sermon succeeds, then, it undermines a fundamental plank in the postmodern mindset. Its methodological commitment to seeking the intention of God in the biblical text stands against the subjectivism and polyvalency of deconstruction. It alerts the listener to the transcendental reality of a God who chooses to reveal himself through a Word. He may have turned a blind eye to the idolatrous speculations of subjective opinion and imagination in the past. But now he commands the whole human race to repent and obey that Word.

## The mental-arithmetic sermon

A preacher then may accommodate postmodern concerns too much. For instance, in one popular adaptation of the expository sermon, though the textual exegesis is done well, all evidence of it is deliberately hidden for fear of boring or exasperating the audience. The result is that, like someone who is brilliant at mental arithmetic, the preacher gives the right answer in terms of *application*, but neglects to show how the *meaning* of the text was arrived at. As a result the sermon sounds suspiciously subjective and arbitrary. The preacher does not seek to convince the listener that *this* reading of the text is a responsible one; and in failing to do so there is a danger of subtly reinforcing postmodern presuppositions.

For many today read their Bible as if it were a Zen text from which they get private mystical experiences and insights, without any consideration of whether these are appropriate or correct. A church fed on mental-arithmetic sermons will be ill-equipped to resist such trends. Expository preaching when it is done well has the side effect of developing good Bible-reading skills. By providing a model of rigorous interpretation, it educates the people of God in responsible hermeneutics. But this means taking time to explain to the audience not only what the text means but how we have come to that conclusion. It is no longer enough to feed our people. These days we must also show them how to cook.

## How expository preaching must change in a postmodern world

Nonetheless, in one respect postmodern concerns should enrich expository preaching. As we have seen, postmoderns are reacting against rationalism and wish to affirm the value of intuitive and subjective modes of human awareness. Arguably such a corrective reaction was necessary. Bryan Appleyard suggests that modern science has, quite literally, disenchanting our world, reducing all the mystery and magic of existence to molecular formulae and mathematical equations.<sup>19</sup> Although this is an exaggerated caricature, the general public perception of science today is more negative than it used to be. Postmoderns protest against the two-dimensional reductionism which technocracy seems to have fostered. They are suspicious of scientific materialism and open once again to 'spirituality'. But they demand subjective involvement with that spirituality rather than mere cerebral information about it. And expository preachers cannot speak with relevance to a postmodern audience unless they take this new situation to heart.

15 Eg. The Sermon on the Mount

16 See Matt 13:10–11

17 John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, Eerdmans, 1982; A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, Paternoster, 1980

18 For a more detailed treatment, see Michael Ovey, *op. cit.*, and D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, Zondervan, 1996

3 19 Bryan Appleyard, *Understanding the Present*, Picador, 1992

In this respect we must listen humbly to the criticism that expository preaching has been too wedded to rationalistic modes of interpretation. The intention of God in Scripture is certainly to impart objective knowledge of himself, but it goes far beyond that.<sup>20</sup> In addition to informing the mind, God seeks to address the will and the feelings. He may wish to encourage or to warn, to praise or to challenge; he may wish to make us weep, or laugh, or frown. The purpose of the imperative 'rejoice!' is not just to impart objective knowledge about joy, but to make the reader feel joyful! Any Bible exposition will have failed if it locates the intellectual content of the text, but neglects to communicate the emotional texture in which that content is embedded. Good exposition invites the listener to feel with the text as well as to think about it. The leaders of the evangelical revival in the eighteenth century broke away from arid and cerebral dissertations on divinity in order to preach to the heart. And in a postmodern culture we neglect that subjective dimension at our peril.

### ***The propositional paraphrase sermon***

One type of sermon which easily fails to rise to this challenge seems at first sight to be close to the expository method. But it puts a different initial question to the text. Instead of asking 'what is the intention of God in this passage?' the preacher asks 'what doctrine does this passage teach?' or 'where does this passage fit in my biblical theology?' As a result the intention of the passage is reduced to a list of propositional statements – commonly three in number! This kind of preaching is not without its strengths. A sound theology is an indispensable aid to determining the canonical meaning of a text. It prevents the preacher ascribing to the text a meaning which would be contradictory to the plain meaning of other texts, and thus confirms that the Bible, in spite of its many human sources, is nevertheless one book with a single divine author and a coherent message.

However, by substituting 'doctrine' for 'intention' in the expository method, the propositional paraphrase sermon fails to seize the homiletic opportunity which a postmodern world presents. Such an approach is very likely to lack emotional engagement with the text. There will be little sensitivity to literary genre. Apocalyptic, poetry, narrative, parable, all are flattened to the prosaic level of a theology textbook. To analyse a biblical text into a few propositional points is

<sup>20</sup> To use the semantic vocabulary developed by J.C. Austin and John Searle, speech not only conveys information, it has illocutionary force and purpose. See Kevin VanHoozer in (ed.) D.A. Carson & J.D. Woodbridge *Scripture and Truth*, Baker, 1983

potentially as reductionist as the chemist who says that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is just paper with printing. Our propositional points may be true, but they ignore those aspects of the text which do not relate to cognitive knowledge. We have approached the text like a biologist dissecting a specimen and failed to relate to it in a fully personal way as a result.

### **A danger and a challenge**

Postmodernity, then, poses both a threat and an opportunity for expository preaching.

The threat is that under the pressure of its hostility to the disciplined application of reason, and its scepticism about the accessibility of ultimate Truth, the preacher may abandon exposition and go in search of other foci to public worship that seem more in tune with the culture. Within limits such a quest may be justified. Expository preaching is certainly not the be-all and end-all of church life. Music and drama, liturgy and sacrament, *charisma* and *diakonia*, all have contributions to make as we seek to contextualise the Christian faith. But in its methodological reliance on the conviction that God has spoken intelligibly to our world, expository preaching is an indispensable weapon in the Church's testimony to Truth. Only careful attention to the normative Word will prevent contextualisation from turning into syncretism, and the search for relevance becoming a slippery slope to compromise.

Postmodernity brings also a great opportunity: the opportunity for expository preaching to explore more fully the purpose of the biblical text. Too much Bible teaching in the past has felt like a catechism. God intends to communicate to the heart as well as the mind. The task of the expositor is to find ways to communicate that heart involvement to a world that is once again hungry for it. The opportunity awaits, in the twilight of modernity, to rediscover that integration of truth and passion which has always been the mark of real expository preaching. Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly called it 'logic on fire!'

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