Text, Church, and World: A Theology of Expository Preaching*

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Introduction

All over the world, every Sunday, countless thousands of sermons are delivered. What is happening—or should be happening—when a human preacher stands to proclaim God’s Word? There are many forms of pulpit address that might go under the name of preaching. In the best of them the Bible is always present in some defining way but a preacher with an open Bible is simply a necessary, not sufficient, requirement. Plenty of sermons take their starting point from the biblical text, but the shape and aim of the sermon end up far removed from the purpose of the passage used. It is possible to do as much damage with the Bible as good.

In this essay I want to suggest that it is expository preaching which should be the standard issue of the pulpit and the staple diet of the congregation. To advance this claim I will offer a brief working definition of expository preaching as the interaction between three main domains, and then try to probe more deeply by thinking theologically about each of the three areas.

Three horizons: towards a definition of expository preaching

John Stott has suggested that the task of any preacher is to fuse the ‘two horizons’ of the biblical text and the contemporary world in the experience of the listener. This provides a fundamental orientation to expository preaching. Here the preacher understands their task
as being first to exegete the meaning of the biblical text but then also to bring this text into contact with the contemporary world, showing how the text both illumines and challenges the world. Stott argues that expository preaching is marked by two convictions (the biblical text is both inspired and in need of being explained), two obligations (faithfulness to the text and sensitivity to the world) and two expectations (that God will speak and his people will respond).

Arguably, however, the two horizons suggested by Stott need to be complemented by a third equally necessary horizon—the church. In this way expository preaching is not simply fusing text and world, but text, church and world, and the preacher’s task is to travel along Scripture’s historical time-line recognising the biblical drama as primarily the story of God’s relationship with his covenant people. Expository preaching seeks to apply the gospel message as much to believers as to the watching world.

The three-fold horizons of text, church, and world work together as dialogue partners in the act of expository preaching. The text provides the key content for the preacher’s address, restricting a use of the Bible as merely the spring-board for a few personal thoughts from the preacher. The church provides the context of believing reception of the Word, and reminds the preacher that their task is not to harangue the ‘outsider’ but to comfort and instruct the ‘insider’. The world provides the stage of history which is governed by God and as such provides the points of contemporary connection for the Word. This point of contact exists due to the doctrine of creation – the world is owned by God and derives its being from him, and as such is capable of hearing address from God. If text, church, and world are the vital ingredients of expository preaching, then what role do each of them play in the act of exposition? Here I want to
suggest that we can get at this question by considering the three horizons and the sermon, and then the three horizons and the preacher.

I. The three horizons and the sermon
Expository preaching comes from the text. This is so obvious that it is easy not to give it much thought. But consider the following two points. First, only the Bible in the lectern distinguishes a pulpit from a soapbox. The Bible provides the authority base required to speak for God in the act of preaching. Expository preaching engages in a genuine dialogue between text, church, and world but it does not assume that the act of preaching is merely a dialogue, as if the three horizons are equal conversation partners. They are not. God himself speaks in the words of the Bible and the aim of the sermon is an encounter with him. For this reason, a repentant believer, a comforted congregation, or a worshipping convert are all legitimate goals of a sermon, and none could be realised without the conviction that what the text says, God says. This conviction also ensures a clear distinction between the authoritative Scripture and an authoritarian preacher. The former is theologically warranted by Scripture’s ontology and gives preaching its cutting edge; the latter denies the very definition of expository preaching by substituting the messenger for the message.

If this first point stresses that expository preaching comes from the biblical text, the second highlights that it comes from the biblical text. Expository preaching is forced to reckon with Scripture’s multi-faceted collection of writings, diverse genres and vastly different homiletical challenges: the text ensures that expository sermons on Lamentations will not be identical to expository sermons on Romans. The form of the
text sets the agenda for the content of the sermon. Good preaching wrestles with, for instance, the issues of whether narrative texts demand narrative sermons, and how best to express poetry and lament, tragedy and satire in exposition. The text exercises a constraining influence on the preacher: these words, spoken at this particular time in salvation-history, in this particular way, demand to be re-spoken so that they can be heard, felt and acted on anew.

Second, expository preaching from the biblical text is for the church. Here I want to make the simple suggestion that our thinking about the church—and thus about preaching in the church—can go astray if we locate the church at the wrong point in history. Let me explain. Many discussions about what the church should look like take their fundamental bearings from where the church currently is in history: post-Christian, Western, post-modern, relativistic, pluralistic and so on. This ensures that the dominant factors in our conception of what the church actually is, or what it should be, are descriptions of the church drawn from the cultural framework of our present location. We look at where we are in the world and so debate whether we should be ‘traditional’ or ‘seeker-sensitive’ or ‘emergent’ or ‘post-conservative’, and so on. But the Bible actually uses the world to come to define the church. A key strand of New Testament thinking views the church as the eschatological outpost of God’s bringing everything in heaven and earth together under the headship of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10). With the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile destroyed through Christ, God is now working out his manifold wisdom by bringing Jew and Gentile together in the church as sign to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms of what God will one day to the whole cosmos (Eph. 3:10). The church is God’s new humanity, an example of the future new creation given in
advance to the old creation, a sign of the world to come where everything is brought together under the unending reign of Jesus the King.

This means that expository preaching, because it is addressed to people whose very existence is defined by the world to come, constantly draws on the reality of the next world to help make sense of the present world. The doctrine of the church ensures that preaching is addressed to ‘strangers in the world’ (1 Pet. 1:1) and provides the challenge to ‘live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ’ (Titus 2:12-13). Preaching for the church roots its ethical imperatives in the eschatological reality of both coming judgment and promised reward (2 Pet. 3:11-14). It interprets suffering as a participation in the frustrated groans of a cosmos waiting for its liberation, and holds out the comfort that ‘our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us’ (Rom. 8:18-21). It also means that the proclamation of the gospel does not offer a dualistic ‘saving of the soul’ or merely a ‘ticket to heaven’. Instead, ecclesiology ensures that expository preaching heralds a whole new way of being human in the world—reconciliation to God and to others by participating in the first-fruits of the new creation.

The doctrine of creation is vital here. Creation also underpins the third horizon of the world. Made by God and owned by God, the world provides the structures of thought, language and rationality that are needed to process and understand the divine address that comes in preaching. There is a sense in which expository preaching is not just to the world but actually comes from the world. As Francis Watson shows, the church is not an ‘enclosed, self sufficient sphere, for its members can never leave behind the broader
socio-linguistic formation that continues to permeate every aspect of their lives’ and therefore any expression of the church’s faith in the world through its preaching ‘will occur only within and through the medium of contemporary discourse.’ Indeed, the gospel message can ‘only be proclaimed through the mediation of a language normally employed by a broad socio-linguistic group for quite other purposes.’ This amounts to the simple claim that it is the doctrine of creation which requires the Bible to be translated into the languages of the world. It also demands that the preacher’s speech belong to the twenty-first century and not the seventeenth.

Approaching the world theologically will allow the preacher to connect the text with culture and affirm its God-given goodness, as well as to address the world in its rebellion and alienation from God. The world is neither a value-neutral entity to be affirmed by the preacher, nor an irrelevant distraction to the other-worldly spiritual concerns of the sermon. The preacher needs to listen to the world and fuse the biblical text with its joys, aspirations and agonies; the preacher needs to understand the way the world feels, argues and thinks, what plausibility structures it erects and what its primary objections to the gospel are. Careful listening to the world may even have a significant bearing on the form and structure of the sermon. For instance, due to the suspicions many in a post-Christian culture will feel towards an authoritarian preacher, or in light of the problems created by epistemic relativism, a winsome approach may require the preacher to take time to explain to the congregation not only what the text means but also how they have come to that conclusion. There is a need to show the ‘working out’ behind the sermon. In this way, any postmodern fears about authority and abusive power paradigms are totally disarmed through the preacher’s constant clear call to examine the text—the
listener is invited to engage the Bible with their minds. Sermons structured like this begin to untie folded arms and help prevent a congregation made up of merely passive recipients being told what to think.

It is also this kind of approach to the world that must govern the issues of illustration and application in the sermon. They are not optional bolt-ons to the really important issue of theology in the sermon. Rather, expository preaching loses the right to adopt that name where application surfaces only as an appended after-thought. Neither is it the correct approach, however, to pepper the sermon with references to contemporary culture and current affairs in an attempt to show that the preacher is ‘with it’. What is required is not anecdotal reference to the world, but penetrating engagement with the world to show that only the God and gospel of the Bible make sense of the world and can bring comfort and clarity to its pains and confusions. A congregation quickly discerns whether their preacher really lives in the same world which they inhabit from Monday-Saturday outside the few hours of pew dwelling on Sundays, and at least two negative reactions set in where the preacher operates without a strong doctrine of the world. First, the congregation begins to stagnate spiritually by losing connection from a gospel that is capable of connecting with every area of their lives. Sermons become a half-hour journey through an increasingly alien world of theology-speak. Second, the congregation will associate this alien theological world with what it means to be truly spiritual and, because they cannot survive in it, some will conclude that theology is only for certain types of people who are more spiritual (or clever) than they are. In such cases, where other-worldliness is implicitly communicated from the pulpit, not only do believers never learn how to engage with this world but they simultaneously grow bored at the prospect of the
next. When believers begin to find their present physicality a distraction from the task of being ‘really spiritual’ then the hope of a future physicality becomes something hard to relate to or look forward to.

II. The three horizons and the preacher

Expository sermons are formed and delivered by persons. The relationship of the preacher to the three horizons has a vital bearing on the act of preaching. Expository preaching requires the preacher to adopt a range of theologically necessary relational stances towards the text, the church, and the world.

First, excellent expository preaching is nurtured by preachers whose foundational relation to the text is a self-abased humility which issues in patient willingness to listen and be addressed by someone other than themselves. Anthony Thiselton has shown the value of the concept of the ‘hermeneutical circle’ for appropriating the meaning of texts, although the sense of Thiselton’s term is perhaps better explained in Grant Osborne’s depiction of a ‘hermeneutical spiral.’ In coming to the text, the preacher brings a pre-understanding-horizon which shapes their perception of the text-horizon. However, the text is capable of reshaping the preacher’s understanding, so that repeated exposure to the text results in a closer approximation of its message. Much like conversation with a good friend deepens understanding, so constant listening to the text allows the exegete to ‘spiral in’ on its meaning.

For the Christian preacher, this is a moral and theological issue as much as a hermeneutical one. Luke 1:2 portrays the first eyewitnesses of the Christ-event as ‘servants of the word’--the stance is that of humility in the presence of something greater.
Expository preaching demands that the preacher allow their pre-understanding of the text to be confronted by the text, lest they serve only themselves in their preaching. Similarly, Paul presents his own ministry as one which has renounced secret and shameful ways, which does not use deception and does not ‘distort the word of God’ (2 Cor. 4:2). The implication is that distorting the word is a real possibility. The preacher is required to be a listener before being a speaker, for only a clear grasp of the text’s other-ness will prevent distorting it into the preacher’s mould.

Theological principles such as these must impact praxis at the deepest level, even right down to issues of how the preacher structures their week and organises their priorities. To listen, and to listen well, takes time. A lot of time. This means that where the preacher does not protect sermon preparation time with prosecuting zeal, the end result of the sermon will be the work of someone who speaks before they listen. The sermon will reveal the kind of person who thinks they know best before they’ve heard both sides of an argument—the text will be handled in ways which ignore its details and nuances and miss its structure or surprises. One of the clearest signs of a sermon that is not born out of sensitive listening is that the congregation actually gets more Bible, not less, as the preacher draws on a reservoir of knowledge to speak about the text, expanding it, but does not explain the text, expounding it. (It is said that Winston Churchill once remarked after a lengthy address that he hadn’t had time to prepare a short talk). It is conceivable that the preacher’s approach to the sermon text will go hand in hand with the approach to other facets of their ministry. Where the sermons are under-prepared and ill-conceived, so too pastoral relationships will often be under-developed and stunted because genuine listening as a moral imperative is not being adopted as
intrinsic to the theological task. The minister will very likely be hurried and busy, an activist, and on the fast-track to becoming a church manager doing God’s work rather than a preacher speaking God’s word.

Second, expository preaching demands of the preacher a particular set of relational stances towards the church that are mandated by the biblical text. Stott has provided a telling outline of some of the pastoral metaphors enjoined on the preacher. To give two examples, there is the domestic metaphor of the ‘steward’ (1 Cor. 4:1; Titus 1:7), entrusted with goods for the well-being of others, and the familial metaphor of the father (1 Cor. 4:15), a position of responsibility and loving leadership. Within the context of a ministry that is constantly appealing to the people of God, these relational stances are to shape and mould the manner of the preacher’s appeal—it must be neither self-interested nor over-bearing, but rather faithful and affectionate. In this way, pastoral practice becomes married to pulpit address so that the preacher sees the task as being not just to deliver a sermon, but to help form Christian character that is in line with the gospel.

One of the most powerful sermons that I have heard in recent years was from 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13. In this passage Paul reveals the nature of his care while absent from the church he planted and which he deeply loves. With insightful handling of the text and a rich capturing of the intensity of Paul’s emotion, the sermon urged us to see Paul’s concern as an example for us to follow – the preacher gently asked us if we sometimes settle for second-best when it comes to our love for other believers and to what we hope for them. But it was not these things in themselves which made the sermon so moving and effective. It was the fact that they came from a preacher who clearly knew
what it was like to long for people in this way. Without drawing attention to himself, the preacher’s own life functioned as a testifying partner to all that we were hearing because of the nature and reality of his pastoral care outside the pulpit. The result was that more than any application ‘telling us what to do’ in the sermon, we knew as we listened what it would look like to love in the way we were being asked to because the preacher’s own life showed it to us. Here, eschatology was not doctrine which simply impacted the sermon’s orientation in an abstract way; it actually became the content of the preacher’s heartfelt pastoral longing that this flock, these individuals, these people who he loves and cares for will be there on the last day ‘blameless and holy before our God and Father at the coming our Lord Jesus with all his saints’ (1 Thess. 3:13). Visiting preachers can certainly be effective and powerful because it is always God’s word and not their own which they bring; some in the kingdom are so gifted by God that their ministry should be national or global, not merely local. But pity the pastor who feels more comfortable in an itinerant pulpit than he does speaking to the same people week after week. Pity the congregation whose preacher is more drawn to the conference platform than he is to loving them as his hope, his crown, his glory and joy (1 Thess. 3:19-20).

There are other relational stances too that the minister of the gospel needs to adopt, at different times and in varying circumstances—Derek Tidball outlines these as ambassador, athlete, builder, fool, pilot, scum and shepherd. Such metaphors emerge out of relationships with new converts and articulate the biblical pattern of Christian growth and maturity. To take just one more example, consider the injunction in 1 Peter 5:2 to elders: ‘Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care’. Note how the imperative is followed immediately with a hierarchialised conception of the office. Peter does not say
‘Be shepherds of your flock’, but rather of God’s flock. They do not belong to us. They are not ours to treat as we like. Any authority the preacher possesses in the church is necessarily delegated authority, exercised in view of the Chief Shepherd and his appearing (1 Pet. 5:4). Rather like the way a baby-sitter cares for children in their care while the parents are out for the evening, so the pastor lovingly cares for what does not belong to him and for those who are unspeakably precious to whom they do belong. Richard Baxter expresses the profound weight of this fact:

Oh, then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless; ‘Did I die for these souls, and will you not look after them? Were they worth my blood, and they are not worth your labour? … How small is your condescension and labour compared to mine!’ …Every time we look on our congregations, let us believingly remember that they are the purchase of Christ’s blood, and therefore should be regarded by us with the deepest interest and the most tender affection.  

What does this ‘deepest interest and the most tender affection’ actually look like? It might mean more time carefully weeding my heart of the frustrations my people cause me--this increases my love for them as I preach to them. It may mean less time blogging (or reading the blogs of people we will never meet) and more time spent in the homes of people under our care--this increases the depth and range of our pastoral application when we preach.
Finally, a particular set of relational stances towards the world, mandated by the biblical text, are also required for expository preaching. Again Stott provides two metaphors which illustrate this: first, the political metaphor of ‘herald’; second, the legal metaphor of ‘witness’. To consider just the first of these, Paul states that ‘we preach Christ crucified’ and makes it clear that it is through this heralded proclamation that God is pleased to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21-23). As Stott states, ‘whereas the task of the steward is to feed the household of God, the herald has good news to proclaim to the whole world.’

If expository preaching comes from the world, in that it uses the language of the world, it also demands a functional ‘distance’ from the world. The distance is not that of moral superiority, but simply urgent necessity—the preacher is the bearer of a message, a go-between, and as such carries the authority of the sender and entreats on their behalf.

Stott shows that the stance of being a herald means that the preacher must neither appeal to the world without proclamation, nor proclaim to the world without appeal. The former runs the risk of manipulating and brow-beating a congregation into a crisis of faith that has not been provoked by the gospel. It also ignores the varied stress on the intellectual endeavour of expository preaching—preaching must teach, argue, dispute, confound and prove and to seek a response without this prior engagement is deceptive. The latter approach to preaching ignores another of the relational metaphors used to describe the preacher, that of the ambassador: ‘We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God’ (2 Cor. 5:20). The appeal is necessary simply because the preacher is
not in the pulpit to communicate information, but rather to call for a relationship between the listener and God.

**Conclusion**

I do not mean to give the impression that the theology of expository preaching is the last word on the matter, nor suggest that many practical issues such as diction, style, or presentation, are inconsequential. On the contrary, it is possible to have a solid grasp of all of this and still to bore a congregation half to death! However, I have argued that the horizons of text, church, and world provide the big picture of preaching, even if they do not fill in all the details. They place into the preacher’s hands a framework for good preaching that orients the preacher away from themselves to the other-ness of words from God, to people redeemed by God, and to a world owned by God. These convictions are capable of creating excellent expository preaching.

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ENDNOTES

2 This vision of the theological (and hence homiletical) task is suggested by Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).
3 Watson, *Text, Church and World*, p. 9.
8 Stott, *Preacher’s Portrait*, p. 29.
9 Ibid., pp. 48-52.
10 Ibid., p. 49.

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