

# EXEGESIS FOR PREACHERS AND TEACHERS OF THE BIBLE

## Guidelines for responsible expository preaching and teaching

### 1. Selecting the text

Allow me to make a case for the lectionary as the first port of call in the search for texts from which to preach Sunday by Sunday. There is no substitute for systematic, ordered preaching which has a long term purpose and structure to it, ensuring that the congregation becomes well informed; is exposed to the main themes of Christian belief and Christian life and, over a period of time, is guided through all the main sections of the Scriptures. Moreover, preaching the lectionary will ensure that you are willing to wrestle with the Biblical text, rather than just choosing a few well-known passages to support your own theme. Remember that the task of the preacher or teacher is to discover and communicate God's will and desire to God's people, not simply to present his or her own ideas or 'hobby horse'.

A well-coordinated preaching and teaching team can only accomplish this high calling through the use of a well-constructed Lectionary!

Working to a lectionary relieves the preacher of the anxiety of deciding what to preach on. It also ensures that what is preached is indeed an exposition of the Scriptures rather than an exposition of the preacher's favourite opinions, vaguely supported by some craftily selected Biblical texts! Be careful of trying to find 'proof texts' to make a point. Rather, study the scriptures to learn everything you can about God's character and will, and our relationship as God's creation to this wonderful God.

Very occasionally, however, it is necessary to preach on specific topics that are relevant to the particular needs of the congregation. In such cases, care should be taken to define as accurately and succinctly as possible what the topic is. Aim to encapsulate the topic in one word, like "Joy" or "Hope" or "Reconciliation" or "Community." Having isolated the topic, then look for Scripture passages that deal with it. For a well rounded worship service and preaching that is properly grounded in Scripture, you should locate readings in the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel all dealing with the same topic, then choose one of those as your "controlling lesson." Having done that, it is important to let the Scriptures speak for themselves, rather than you bending the Scriptures to say what you want them to say. The latter, a distortion of scripture for our own purposes, is called "eisegesis" or "reading into" the text what is not actually there.

Sometimes a group of preachers may decide to preach a series of sermons as a team. Holy Week would be a case in point, although team preaching over a succession of Sundays need not be limited to seasons like Holy Week. The selection of the texts would work in much the same way as selecting the text for a topical sermon, except that the overall purpose and topic of the series as a whole would have to be spelled out very clearly before each sub-topic was defined. Thereafter the lessons would have to be selected and treated with the same respect you would accord them if you were preaching from a lectionary, that is, *exegetically* rather than *eisegetically*.

### 2. An exegetical method

There are basically three successive "points of focus" when seeking to understand the message of a Biblical text for preaching or teaching:

- (i) *Getting behind the text*
- (ii) *Going into the text*
- (iii) *Working in front of the text*

Let's have a look at each one in turn.

**(i) Getting behind the text**

When setting out to understand a biblical text it is essential to understand what lies behind it. Ask at least the following questions about the piece of Scripture you are reading:

- *Who was the author?* You will have to consult Biblical commentaries for this. Often books of the Bible were ascribed to certain persons or groups but they were actually written by someone else, often long after the lifetime of the person or group to whom the book is ascribed. Hence it is not enough simply to go by either the name of the Book (e.g. "Daniel") or the traditional authorship (e.g. Paul as the author of Ephesians.) Understand who the author is will give you some valuable insights into the central theology, purpose of writing, and unique characteristics of your passage in the book.
- *To whom is the book addressed?* A common error preachers commit is to treat a passage of Scripture as if it is an unconnected piece of text without any history, context or intention. When that happens it becomes possible for a preacher to make a passage of Scripture say almost anything that takes the preacher's fancy! I have often heard preachers end a terrible sermon with the phrase "This is the word of God". I think in many cases God would not want to associate with some of the messages that get placed under that banner! Every passage of Scripture has an original historical context. Someone wrote it for someone else; it was written for a particular reason, at a particular time and in a particular set of circumstances. The challenge is to find all that out so that you don't mistakenly take a 'timely message' (i.e. some piece of advice or rebuke that was meant for a particular person or group in a particular time) and make it 'timeless' (i.e., make it applicable to all people for all times).
- *What was the historical context in which the passage was written?* This one is similar to the previous one. Here the challenge is to find out what life was like when the passage was first written. Was it a time of war or peace? What were the "big issues" of the day (Settlement in Canaan? Establishment of Israel's monarchy? A divided Kingdom? Exile? Restoration? Expectation of Messiah? Persecution of the church? Division in the Church? Etc.) The historical context would include important geographical, political, economic and cultural factors that would have an influence on the passage of Scripture you are examining. Remember that we live in a very different context from the one in which the books of Bible were originally written. If we blindly and literally apply everything we read to our context now, without understanding why it was written, who it was written to, what it was intended to address, we could make some serious errors in simply applying that 'contextual' data to our very different context. It does not mean that the Bible is locked in the past! Quite to the contrary. Scripture has a rich message for all people at all times, but we must discover that message with a bit of hard work and responsible study.

**(ii) Going into the text**

Having understood where the text comes from, and what it was originally intended to achieve, we now look at the text itself in greater detail. The intention, when focusing on the text itself, is to establish as clearly as possible what the passage is *actually* saying. Many a preacher has misrepresented a text by *assuming* that a passage means one thing when it actually means something quite different! It is also important that you go 'into' the text remembering what you learned about it by going 'behind' it. You are closer to the truth when you can relate your passage to the message and intention of the whole book in which it is located, and even to the themes that run throughout the whole of the Bible (e.g., love, justice, grace, etc.) Here are some essential exercises that help us to get as accurate an idea of the writer's intention as possible:

- *Identify the literary genre of the passage.* The Bible is a collection of various types of literature. There are passages of poetry, mythology, philosophy, historical narrative, hymnody, psalmody, prophecy, letters, apocalyptic symbolism, parables, biography, hagiography, legislation, liturgy and so on. If you do not correctly identify what kind of literature you are reading, you are likely to misunderstand the passage! For example, if you read a piece of poetry in the same way that you would read a piece of history you are likely to get a very distorted picture of the intended message! Understanding the genre and literary form of a passage is crucial to good exegesis.
- *Identify key words and phrases.* A worthwhile saying to remember in Biblical exegesis is: read every word. We so often miss important aspects of the message of a text because we gloss over terms, words, or phrases that could unlock a much deeper and richer meaning to the text. Actually writing these down as you slowly read the passage helps you to pinpoint accurately what the passage is about. The aim here is to establish what the *subject* of the passage is. I normally write a short summary of each verse's message (e.g., v.6 "Jesus is comforting the woman").
- *Compare different translations of the same passage.* Presuming that not many of us are familiar with the original Biblical languages, the next best thing to using either a Hebrew or Greek Lexicon in order to pick up the various nuances of meaning in the original text is to see how different English translations have handled significant words and phrases. If you read each verse in two or three different translations you'll be able to see not only differences in the translation, but also similarities (for example, if you read a verse in 4 translations, and 3 of them agree on one form, while one has a different form, the three texts that are in agreement are likely to be the most accurate translation of the original Hebrew or Greek text). Often we will be quite startled to see how differently various translations interpret some texts and words. Rewrite the text for yourself using the most accurate translations that you have discovered for each verse of your passage (so, for example, you may have a verse from the NRSV, followed by one from the NIV and so on. The point is to get the most accurate translation of the passage to work from).
- *Pay attention to textual variants.* Most study Bibles have footnotes which tell us if different manuscripts of the passage we are examining have variant readings. Often these variant readings help us to see levels of meaning in the text that we would otherwise not notice.
- *Be sure to identify what the passage is saying about the subject.* To put it another way, make sure you know what the passage is saying about what it is about! Formally put, it means identifying both the *subject* of the passage and its *complement*. At this point you are isolating what is called the "*exegetical idea*." The exegetical idea will be the germ of your Sermon! So, you should be able to sum up the exegetical idea of the passage in a short sentence for example "Christians should not be conformed to the standards of this world, we should be transformed by the renewal of our minds. This pleases God." The exegetical idea is: Pleasing God by renewing our minds through Godly transformation.

### (iii) **Working in front of the text**

The Bible has been around for a long time! Inevitably there are traditional interpretations of passages of Scripture with which we are familiar. There are even conflicting traditional interpretations of the same passages of Scripture. In other words, there is as much "in front of the text" as there is behind it and in it! That is to say, many interpreters before us have influenced our understanding and interpretation of much of Scripture. Responsible stewardship and use of Scripture requires that we recognize and acknowledge those influences and critically examine them in the light of our own examination of the text. Having done that, we must then decide what we understand the passage to mean for ourselves. Only then can we begin to ask what the passage means for the people to whom we are appointed to preach. We can reduce all this to these few exegetical/hermeneutical exercises:

- *Identify traditional and conflicting interpretations of the text.* How have various Christian communities understood this passage? For example, how do Catholics or Pentecostals see it? How do Biblical literalists (“Fundamentalists”) see it? How would someone using historical critical methods (a “liberal”) read it? What would a typical Reformed, Anglican or Methodist reading of this passage be? Which of these (or any other) traditions have influenced my reading of this passage most? Am I giving sufficient respect to views which may differ from my own as I seek to interpret this passage?
- *Identify your own understanding of the text as it applies to your own life.* As you perform this exercise you are beginning to make the critical transition from exegesis to ‘hermeneutics’, i.e. from understanding the text, to interpreting it. To put it differently, you are moving from the task of analyzing the text somewhat coldly and scientifically to discovering a meaning in the text that will make an impact on you in more than an intellectual way, it will begin to affect the way you live and feel. For example, you may now begin to ask: “What is God, saying to me through this Bible passage?”
- *Identify the contemporary human situation or problem addressed by the text.* People do not come to church, in the main, to hear a discourse or academic exegesis on a Biblical text! No, they come to get guidance on how to make sense out of life. To be sure, as preachers of the Gospel our principle source of inspiration and insight into the way to life is to be found in Scripture. Our task, however, is to translate the Scriptures into terms that are readily understandable by the ordinary folk who inhabit the pews Sunday by Sunday. That means that we have to take the trouble to correlate what we discover in the Bible with what we see in people’s lives day by day, and express that correlation in the everyday language that is familiar to them. People want to leave Church having heard something about their lives, needs, and struggles, addressed by God. That is a very responsible and challenging task for the preacher or teacher.
- *Translate the Subject and Complement that express the exegetical idea into non-religious or non-biblical language without altering their meaning!* This must surely be the toughest and most necessary step of them all! It involves reducing what we have done in the previous exegetical/hermeneutical exercise to as few words as possible in order to define what is called the “homiletical idea.” These are the words around which your Sermon will revolve and which will capture and hold the congregation’s attention. Perhaps an example is called for! My favourite is what Rick Warren does with “The Seven Deadly Sins that will lead you into Hell!” He refers to them as “The seven bad hang-ups and habits that keep messing up your life.” Some preachers may feel that a sermon isn’t “spiritual” if it isn’t laced with religious and biblical sounding terminology or theological jargon. The spiritual effectiveness of a sermon is not measured in its “stained glass language” but in the maturity and responsibility with which the preacher has analyzed the text and applied it to the life situation of the hearers.

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A recommended source for further reading:

Haddon W. Robinson: *Expository Preaching. Principles & Practice.* Leicester IVP 1997.