

Earl Palmer on Expository Preaching

An Interview

On May 21, 2019, Theology Matters' Managing Editor, Richard Burnett, interviewed Earl F. Palmer at University Presbyterian Church, Seattle, Washington, where he was ordained in 1956. One of the most gifted and sought-after preachers and teachers in America, Palmer also served as pastor of Union Church, Manilla, Philippines, First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, California, National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C., and continues his teaching ministry through Earl Palmer Ministries in Seattle. See www.earlpalmer.org.

TM: Thank you for taking the time to be with us today.

Palmer: Well, I'm honored.

TM: Your preaching has been such an influence on so many lives. You have been called "the best expository preacher in America of our time." I am curious to know and think others would be curious to know how this way of preaching became so important to you?

Palmer: It all started with how I became a believer. I went to Cal Berkeley as a young student, a freshman, and growing up in a very warm and supportive family. Our mother was a devout Episcopalian, and my dad was then really nothing as far as having any Christian background. So, it was not really part of our lives. Then I came to Cal. In my first two years I didn't particularly go to church or anything that I can remember. And then in the middle of my sophomore year, a man who became a dear friend of mine, who was in a study group with me in Barrington Hall, which was a male dorm at Cal. He said that we have an all-male Bible study group. Just a little group of us. It was a large hall, but I knew who they were, and they said, "Why don't you come?" So I went.

They were just sort of inching their way through New Testament books, and when I went, I had to look on because I didn't bring a Bible with me. So that week I went out and bought a Bible. And for one dollar extra I got my name on it! I still have that Bible, but it was a King James Version, which I'm glad I've got because I really like the King James. But I went to the Bible study group the next week and I said, "I have my Bible!" They said, "O that's nice, but we're reading the RSV." So, then I had to go out to the local Safeway and buy another Bible that week! To make a long story short, I thought to myself, "I think I would like to be a pastor like our college pastor, Carl Thomas," who was the college pastor at the church. I thought I'd like to do that because

I'm enjoying this so much. I went and talked with Dr. Munger [Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley] and he said, "Well, you have to go to seminary."

So, I applied to Princeton Seminary, and I went as a really raw recruit in terms of knowing really anything about theology or great historical verities. While I was there, I began to yearn for the same sort of small male Bible study group that I had had in Berkeley. So, I went over to the University and I'll never forget, Glen, who was a student there, stood up in this rowdy place and he shouted out, "Hey you guys! This guy is from the Seminary and he said he would like to lead us in a Bible study group. Do you wanna do that?" And they said, "Okay," and so that's how my three years at Princeton began. That was the beginning of my career. As a matter of fact, Princeton Seminary forgave me the need to have Field Ed. because I had five of these small Bible study groups at the University and at Rutgers University.

I became convinced that if I could get somebody to look at the text, sooner or later, the text would always point them to its Living Center. The Old Testament points in anticipation to Jesus Christ. The New Testament points in fulfillment to Jesus Christ. *He* wins their respect, and I concluded at that point, while a student at Princeton, that the best ethics would come when you are focused on Jesus Christ. That's far better than looking at grim passages to find guidance in the Old Testament that have yet to be fulfilled. And they were fulfilled by Christ.

I came up with a definition of exposition. It's enabling a text to make its own point. That's very important. You've got to let a text make its own point, within its own setting, its own context. And then, because it points to Christ, always, then, in its gospel fulfillment setting, you can let it make its point. But wait it out. Let it happen. When I came here to Seattle after Seminary, I decided to build my ministry with youth around small Bible study groups.

TM: So, your Bible studies then were the means by which you began to build this ministry, and it transferred to your pulpit ministry?

Palmer: Yes. C.S. Lewis has one of the best quotes: "Tell me what the hard words mean, and you've done more for me than a thousand commentaries." See the words and then ask, "Why was that word ever used? What did the word mean when St. Paul used it?" That's

important: for a person or a pastor not to jump in too quickly to give major interpretations. Let the text unfold. And I think that approach honors the text and also protects us from a lot of what you might say are extravagant statements. I always say about Bible study that lean is better than luxurious. The leanest interpretation is usually the best. The extravagant interpretation is usually an agenda foisted upon the text.

TM: Did you realize how deeply rooted this way of preaching was in the Reformed tradition when you began?

Palmer: I did when I read Luther's commentaries. I love Luther. And he's in our Augustinian-Reformed tradition. But Calvin also. What I loved about Calvin is how clear he is. And how words are so carefully chosen by Calvin, and the way he does his summaries at the beginning of each chapter. It's very expositional. As a Bible expositor he wrote a commentary on every book of the Bible except for the Book of Revelation. And his commentaries are always clear. Like Barth said, "He didn't much care whether you liked him, but he wanted to be sure you understood him." There is that clarity of letting the words say what they are really saying and that lean rather than luxurious model of interpretation which protects you from a lot of nonsense that can happen.

TM: But also this commitment to *lectio continua* preaching, that is, preaching through books of the Bible consecutively rather than from a common lectionary, or topical or thematic preaching. This is what distinguished the Reformed from the Lutherans from the beginning: *lectio continua* preaching. And you have modeled this so brilliantly for so many years. Did you see it modeled before? Had you heard that kind of preaching?"

Palmer: I wouldn't say that Bob Munger modeled it as much. Bob Munger was in the Pietistic tradition, almost the Methodist-Pietistic tradition. But he was also Reformed. His big secret was his Christ centeredness. But his approach to the text would be to honor the text and then focus on Christ, and that's what he did that really helped me.

But John Mackey [President of Princeton Seminary from 1936 to 1960] was expositional, and I always credit John Mackey as a bigger influence. And also Helmut Thielicke [German theologian, 1908-1986] because he always tries to make three or four observations. I borrowed that from him. I always try to make "observations." First, let the text speak as best you can, and then make some observations. And then the observations, like in John Mackey's sermons, are often fireworks. It's because the text is now being allowed to explode, being allowed to really break free. And I think that is a wonderful moment when that can happen."

TM: Does this kind of preaching tend over time to shape congregations in ways that thematic or topical preaching might not?

Palmer: Well, I think it does. ... Luther often ended his sermons rather abruptly (I discuss this in one of my articles on exposition). The influence of Luther's Lectures on Romans was quite substantial on me because he would often end a section by saying: "That's enough for today." So, in my own article, I said that exposition should end quickly. End your sermon quickly. Yesterday, even here at UPC I did it and people kidded me afterwards because they knew that George Hinman [Senior Pastor of University Presbyterian Church, Seattle] had asked me to preach on Romans 4 and Romans 5 in his series on Romans. So, I took him literally. In Romans 4, I set it up and didn't say, "Well, that's enough for today." I said, "Now next week." I was famous for that. "Next week we will watch how Paul makes this really clear. He's making it clear now. But he's going to make it *really* clear." But rather than to steal from Paul or take one of his great lines from the future, let it come when it comes. So, you're taking a risk with people because sometimes they want to hear the most spectacular line first. I try not to do that. So, I often ended the sermon, "Okay, next week then ..."

TM: "So not necessarily tying things up with a nice bow, you simply drop them. I've experienced that. It leaves questions open. ... You've spoken of Dr. Mackey and his influence. But are there others that have been major conversation partners over the years in preaching?"

Palmer: Dale Brunner and I have done a lot of things together and we have been great friends through the years. But Dale is very bold. Bolder than I am. When he does exposition, he always prepares his own translation. Just like the Anchor Bible. He prepares his own translation of the text. Now maybe he should honor the RSV or say that the NRSV or Jerusalem Bible puts it this way ... I often do that. I like to let people know the way that the translations will handle the text. Dale rarely will do that. He just does his own translations of the text and you discover it. You journey through it. And Dale has done that for years.

TM: Are there resources that you typically use when you prepare?

Palmer: *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.* And that takes time. I have them right there in my study at home in front of me. And I have, of course, Arndt and Gingrich, and all the lexicons. I have all the lexicons of the Hebrew and international lexicons. And they all help. It takes time to do the sleuthing. But I love the sleuthing of words. And I get

that from Lewis, and Lewis got it from Tolkien. Tolkien was absolutely captured by language. In fact, that's one way to describe it. Lewis was also captured by the surprise. The surprise of joy, the breakthrough. So was Tolkien. But Tolkien saw the surprise in language. Lewis said, "How did you dream up *The Lord of the Rings*? How did you create that story?" Tolkien says, "I didn't create the story. I found it. I found the story." Lewis asked, "Where did you find it?" Tolkien said, "In the language. I found it in the words." And I think that that is really what exposition is trying to do too.

TM: Are there theological resources that help you in that process of translation and using language?

Palmer: Bonhoeffer, for sure. I think Bonhoeffer is a really interesting expositor. Sometimes not as helpful as other times, but usually. Like his unfinished book, *Ethics*, where he talks about penultimate and ultimate. It is so important in handling the next to the last word and the last word. You cannot hear the last word until you've heard the next to the last word. That's Bonhoeffer. And that's an expositional comment. You have to let a text get you ready for a great breakthrough. And I like him and have read him extensively. And I love Karl Barth's attention to words as well. I just love it. Even in the little book, *Dogmatics in Outline*, his understanding of language is so good. And Lewis, of course, and Tolkien. I love Tolkien's brilliant essay "On Fairy Tales," which is in his *Letters to Charles Williams*. That's the best part of that book. Better than Dorothy Sayers' story. Better than Lewis. But Tolkien got it. That sudden turn of joy and his explanation of that sudden turn of joy. And really, he's sharing his 'eucatastrophe' argument that won Lewis to Christ. It was that argument from Tolkien. And it was a word study.

TM: [A follow-up question about C.S. Lewis ...]

Earl: You know I love this about Lewis. In 1939 he broke his silence because he'd blundered in *Pilgrim's Regress* and lost a lot of friends in Oxford. In fact, that's the real reason he was defeated for a professorship with three votes at Oxford. They were offended by the fact that he wrote this and was so careless about what he said about Sigmund Freud. That's why I love the play, *Freud's Last Session*, which is about Lewis. It's wonderful because Lewis did make fun of Freud, and he needed to make peace with Freud. That's another story. But, anyway, Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain* and James Welsh read it and didn't know anything about C.S. Lewis. But he read *The Problem of Pain* and said it changed his life. And then James Welsh, who was the head of the BBC's religious broadcasting, and the one who got Dorothy Sayers to do *Man Born to Be King*. But he got Lewis first, and did her episodes starting in December of 1941. Lewis starts in 1942 and the heart of

it is this: it's a grim time. James Welsh writes a letter to him and says, "I've read your book, *The Problem of Pain* and it changed my life. And I think England needs this now because we are in pain. Would you be willing to give some broadcast talks?"

TM: You mentioned Bonhoeffer a moment ago and there's this line in his lectures on preaching in *No Rusty Swords* that perhaps I heard first from you or at least I've heard you practice it. Bonhoeffer says:

The source of preached word is not the pious Christian experience of consciousness of the preacher, nor the need of the hour of the congregation, nor the desire to improve and influence others. All of these things quickly collapse and lead to resignation. These motivations and forces are not enough, the only valid source of the sermon is the commission of Christ to proclaim the gospel. The contemporary situation is not sufficient to determine the content of the sermon. The dealings with God and men as they are testified to in the Bible and made known through the teachings of the church is sufficient.

Palmer: O yes, of course, I agree with this too. If you have too much of an agenda it can't be a godly agenda. I've said this to a lot of young pastors. Don't throw in at the end of the sermon a lot of rhetoric that is all true, but it is not explained. [Then it becomes] almost a mantra. You're throwing it in. "We want to go to the foot of the cross." "Now the ground is level there." "And the blood of Christ will cleanse us." Notice all those amazing words being used but not explained and, therefore, are not understood. Don't do that. When you get to the end of a main discovery point that's been made in the text then stop! Stop earlier and don't feel that you have to say, "Now given all we're going through in the world today ..."

[As far as being relevant], I did get published by Will Willimon at Duke. He said, "What sermon did you preach at UPC the Sunday after 9/11?" So, I sent my sermon to him. He published it with a lot of very famous people, such as Henry Sloan Coffin, ... and then me! I was really the only one that just stuck to my text. And then we prayed, which is how I often treated national tragedies. In the pastoral prayer we are going to pray about it. But for the sermon we are just going to stick with the text that we're in, and let it speak, and hope that by the Holy Spirit's power He will make it relevant anyway. But it just so happened that the text that I had and was in the midst of turned out to be a great text for that Sunday, according to Willimon.

TM: I stuck to the *lectio continua* text as well, and I learned this from you and also from Barth and Bonhoeffer, that the text somehow absorbs the world,

and this business of trying to make the Bible relevant to “my world” is part of our problem.

Palmer: Barth has a line that shows he didn’t like Tillich’s approach. Tillich’s [method of] correlation is that we will discover what the huge crises are and then we will see where the Bible is relevant. But Barth had that great one liner. I think it’s in his letters to Bultmann: “If *we* are the ones that get to ask the questions, what happens if *God* can ask questions?” Let the text ask questions. And it does and it will.

TM: Many congregations—I suppose because they have experienced expository preaching in ways that have been boring or poorly executed—might be a little wary of having someone who says, “I would like to do expository preaching.” Many congregations do not want, or think that they do not want, this sort of preaching. What advice would you give to ministers or congregations who want expository preaching? Are there conditions for the possibility for this kind of preaching in a congregation?

Palmer: I would say, and I’ve said this to a lot of young pastors, “Model it without telling them what you are doing.” One way you can model it is to offer a special class that sounds very interesting to people and maybe it’s about something that is very current on their minds. And in that time find opportunities to let a text really speak in the midst of that in that study.

TM: Can you say something about the mystery of preaching?

Palmer: There *is* a mystery and I think it has several components. And I do think it includes the mystery of the Holy Spirit. The fact that God himself makes his own validation and does the validating. The other is the fact that we need “people fluency.” You need to know people. If you’re near a High School, you need to know about that High School. And you need to know the kids in that High School. And, of course, studying so that you do understand the text yourself. And that’s hard work. You have to make that a major goal.

Arrange your week so that your week has time. Don’t ever write a sermon on Saturday. I learned that a long time ago. I always had my sermon done by Thursday and that then brewed in my brain from Thursday until Sunday. Pastors who write their sermons on Saturday or even Sunday often fill them with analogies and stuff they borrow from somebody else. Or maybe they include something that happened to them that week. The text isn’t the big thing. If the text had been the big thing up until Thursday and you really go for following the text, then it’s just ruminating in your brain. And that

helps. I would call that the “message fluency.” You’ve really got to understand that message as best you can, and what the hard words mean ...

TM: Calvin has this line about preaching with one’s “eyes open,” that is, not being oblivious to who is sitting in front of you. You’ve said that reading people’s faces is important. Could you say more about that?

Palmer: Yes, it’s true. All the years that I was here, when I would meet people in grocery stores, airports, or wherever, I would have people say: “I go to your church.” And I would say, “Where do you sit?” And they would say, “I sit over on the left side.” And I would say, “I’ll watch for you. I now know where you sit.” And I did. ...

TM: Well, you have reached many people through your sermons, and you’ve reached a lot of people you could not see and I just want to thank you on behalf of many of us who didn’t sit under your teaching directly, but indirectly, from a distance, we’ve been so nourished by you and your ministry.

Palmer: I will tell you one funny thing. I was asked to give a sermon and tape on [the radio program], “The National Pulpit.” It was NBC and they had a crew come and did it in this church. They had to turn the entire air conditioning system off in this church because it was fouling up their recording and they had to turn it all off and I went into a room. And then I was really nervous because I don’t like to preach in front of a mic. And then one of them said to me (this guy was a pro), “When you talk I want you to see a truck driver in Nevada who’s driving his truck, and he might get a little sleepy ... but he’s driving his truck and he’s turned you on and he’s listening to you.” And you know, I got through that sermon that way. And I did two sermons. I don’t know if they are very good. But he [the truck driver] suddenly became a person to me. He did help me with that. ...

Palmer: It’s such a reward for me to see you taking on this post and I love *Theology Matters* and I love the whole idea of it, that it does matter. ...

TM: Thank you, sir, you have been such a blessing to our lives.

Palmer: Thank you.

To see and hear this interview in its entirety, go to the website of *Theology Matters*, theologymatters.com under the rubric, “Interview with Earl Palmer” or go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMFnDaMXLbo>