

Then Something Happened

The Case for Exposition of the Bible

By Rev. Earl F. Palmer

Then something happened, something that has changed and transformed my life to the present day. For the first time I discovered the Bible... since then everything has changed. I have felt this plainly, and so have other people around me. It was a great liberation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer⁽¹⁾

The Bible became a book I really wanted to read during my sophomore year at U.C. Berkeley. It was there in Barrington Hall, a large student coop, at a weekly student-led Bible discussion group that the random pieces of my worldview began to come together. It was there that my discovery of the Jesus Christ of the Bible made all the difference. A new wholeness began to take shape for me. At the end of that academic year I went to a retreat at Lake Tahoe with some of my friends from that Bible Study and I heard The Rev. Dr. Robert Boyd Munger, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley speak. He said one sentence during the Bible Study that caught my full attention. "If on the basis of the evidence of what you now know about Jesus Christ you are willing to trust in his trustworthiness, then you are on your way to becoming a Christian believer." Because of what I had learned from the Bible I did just that – I put my trust in Jesus Christ.

The Bible as Witness

Who is this Jesus Christ? He is the Jesus of history to whom the Bible points to in the Old Testament by its own story and anticipation, and in the New Testament through its witness to the fulfillment of the ancient prophets and songs. If I agree that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ in whom I trust and follow, I have joined myself to the Bible and to Biblical faith. To quote Joachim Jeremais, "Every verse of the Gospels tells us that the origin of Christianity is not the kerygma, not the resurrection experience of the disciples, not the Christ idea, but an historical event, to wit, the appearance of the man, Jesus of Nazareth"⁽²⁾

The Old Testament prepares an ordinary reader to meet Jesus of the First Century and to discover His story in the narratives of New Testament writers. My attention turns to the New Testament. When I reflect upon how I came to consider the story about Jesus I can understand that it is a journey. One can begin with serious reservations, even skeptically. Nevertheless, sooner or later a person is drawn into the accounts of the life of Jesus with the realization that "Matthew, whoever he is -tells about Jesus." Mark, Luke, and John also tell of Jesus' works, his ministry, his death and his victory over death. For me as I read on - the letters Paul writes to believers throughout the first-century world, I began to see more parts of the puzzle come together showing who the person of Jesus Christ is.

Whether gradually or quickly, this New Testament Jesus wins me to Himself. He gains my respect, my trust, my faith. Karl Barth writes, "Holy Scripture is the document of the basis, of the innermost life of the Church, the document of the manifestation of the Word of God in the person of Jesus Christ. We have no other document for the living basis of the Church."⁽³⁾ What I learn about Jesus makes sense to my complete being –intellectually, spiritually and emotionally.

This happened to me. After the retreat I returned to Berkeley and became more active in the Barrington study group. I saw men discover Jesus, and one by one become Christians. The Lord honored that small Bible study group. I was so turned on by what was happening and by my experiences in our Christian fellowship that in the middle of my senior year, I took a leap from my pre-law, political science major. I approached Rev. Robert Munger, with a question, "You know, I wonder if I could be a minister?" He replied, "Why don't you apply to a seminary and see?" So I applied to Princeton Theological Seminary. I am sure that I was the greenest recruit they had for that year 1953.

Princeton was a renaissance experience. I discovered John A. MacKay, a great biblical preacher with the world on his heart. His way of preaching became a model to me. Along with fellow seminarians, I started Bible study groups (5) across campus with young men at Princeton University. As I watched students discover Jesus through these Bible studies just as I did at Berkeley I learned that if I could encourage people to read the biblical text, it would do its own convincing. Blaise Pascal reminds us “People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others.”⁽⁴⁾ Since that time I have centered my pastoral teaching ministry upon this basic premise in Seattle, Manila, Berkeley and Washington, DC.

I define this undertaking as **exposition: a teaching/preaching form that enables a text in the Old and/or New Testament to make its own point here and now, and, in turn, positions the content of the text within the whole biblical and theological witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.** Exposition of the Biblical text becomes a natural way to make a theological and discipleship truth relevant and allows people to discover it for themselves. The goal is to help a person meet this Jesus and be able to say, "Ah, I see the truth for myself in the portrayal of the life of Jesus." For me personally, I have found that a small group who study the Bible together is a perfect setting for exposition.

How to Prepare for Exposition

Exposition of the Biblical text is fundamental to my call as preaching pastor in Christian ministry. The question is, “How then do I prepare for this kind of preaching/teaching as a working pastor?” In brief, I have learned that the place to begin is to write your own commentary on the Biblical texts under study/consideration. There are five steps I use to guide me with questions to ask in this approach:

Establish the text

This begins with learning what is the context/background for the language/words used in the text. The types of questions include:

- Who is the writer?
- What is the date of the writing?
- Who are the first receivers of the writing?

The tools to find answers are universally available and applicable. Searching for this information means access to a good library. I use *The International Dictionary of the Bible (4 volumes)*. I recommend, Hasting’s *Dictionary of the Bible (1 volume)*. I suggest doing your own study in the original language texts using Greek and Hebrew Lexicons such as *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament and Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

It is important to pay attention to the extensive and rich resources in the many different English translations of the Bible available today. I advise using a minimum of five different translations to see how various translators handle the text. Examples include *The New RSV, NIV, American Standard Version, the Jerusalem Bible, and The Message (contemporary)*. Watch as translators endeavor to establish the best English rendering of the Greek/Hebrew text.

This is the interpretive journey that requires careful reading to seek the meanings of the sentences and especially the meanings of the words used. Ask:

- How were the words understood in the first century?
- Why is one word used instead of another?

For word study specifically I like *The Eerdmans’ Analytical Concordance to the Revised Standard Version of The Bible*.

Focus on the historical setting of the text itself

Consider:

- What might a news reporter discover with questions about time, place, people, atmosphere, and crises present or about to happen?
- Are there interior clues about why the book was written?
- What problems are surfaced in the material/content itself?

Background books and dictionaries of the Bible as an aid here are essential. A helpful and broad overview is *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (4 Volumes)*. But the key to discovery is your own inquisitiveness.

Determine the meaning and purpose of the text

Figure out:

- What do the words say?
- What do the words mean?

This leads to the theological content questions. C.S. Lewis put it this way: “Find out what the author actually wrote and what the hard words meant and what the allusions were to, and you have done far more for me than a hundred new interpretations ...could ever do.”⁽⁵⁾ It is prudent to move slowly and carefully to learn from the whole context of the book and keep asking

- What is the writer saying and why?

The general rule I follow is that the meaning of each separate part is principally governed by the meaning of the larger part. For example, to find the meaning of one sentence by Saint Paul I must look to that sentence’s larger paragraph; then to the collections of paragraphs, even other books written by Paul. For instance, read how St. Paul in Corinthians 13 frames the concept of “love” as a greater truth than the lesser value of “speaking with the tongues of men and angels.”

Get information on the relevance to the present

Expand inquiry to the present:

- What are the challenges, even dangers that threaten faith within the church that receives the document?

This question unfolds the contemporary significance. For example, notice how Paul teaches about first century dangers of harmful tribalism (Romans 12, Ephesians 2) or learn from the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). How are these teachings relevant to 21st century problems of tribalism and hatreds between people? Biblical exposition opens up situations to deliberate in our present century just as it did in the first century thus useful for guidance and understanding the “now”.

Understand how the text applies to discipleship

These questions include:

- What does this text say to me?
- What are the implications for my life?

In every study of the Bible we must always include ourselves and try to understand the ramifications of the teaching on choices we make daily in what we do and how we do it. The best teaching uses “we” language more than “they” or “you” language. To understand the personal impact of the passage, I need to include myself as a learner in this whole journey/quest.

These five general steps take time but they are essential in the preparation for the teaching and preaching tasks of the pastor. This work of sharing the discoveries of the study of texts sets the tone for worship. When I prepare a sermon I always ask these types of questions of the Biblical text. I look first for logical connections or the progressions in meanings that enable me to make two or three or even four observations from the interpretation of the text. In so doing my sermon outline is underway!

Additionally, I like to add windows into the main discovery points. These windows come in the form of illustrations, and are often present within the story elements of a text itself. An illustration might come from my own life, or from the literature I read. The right illustration helps to make a truth clear. What helps me is to ask these types of questions of the text:

- What is this like?
- What is what I read in the text like what something I know about?

The preaching goal is to conclude the sermon quickly when major discoveries from the text are hopefully made understandable. It is important to allow the power of the text to stand without elaborate and extensive closing comments by the preacher. Martin Luther was an inspiration to me in his *Lectures on Romans*. He would explain a meaningful part of a text from Paul and then say, "That's enough for today." I try not to be that abrupt but yet in that spirit – exposition at its best happens when that the listener has an "ah-ha" moment and sees for himself or herself what the text says and means. At such moments as the preacher I am not needed to over interpret or insist on my own final summary of the meaning.

The Pastoral Mandate in Preaching

The use of a single Biblical text selected out of context to promote a particular idea is a temptation in pastoral leadership and preaching. The downside can be sometimes described as a thematic domination of the sermons. While the themes may honor and include biblical references, the key source of the message can be the pastor's own personal life experiences, convictions of faith and even political outlook. When this happens, a subtle shift in the sermons' validating affirmation moves into the territory of story/platform rather than a message from the text. The message can morph into the claim that "you should have hope or love or an ethical concern because I do."

Rather than relying on the learning from the expanse of the Biblical text the source of the message is contained/restricted. The pastor's own personal issues can become the practical source of the message because the choice of theme is managed and controlled by a previously decided agenda. This can result in a thematic captivity of a preaching goal. To counter this possibility is to engage in thoughtful study of texts where the biblical witness has its chance with our minds.

Along this same line of thinking I want to also raise a related question, "Is my own experience of blessings and inspiration from the Holy Spirit the appropriate/proper instructional guideline that gives broad authoritative importance for those I serve as a pastor/teacher?" This is not to discount my life experiences nor undervalue lessons that support truth and provide windows of encouragement. However, I need to recognize that my story is not of the same weight as the word of the Lord in the Gospel, which is sourced in Jesus Christ's life and teachings.

I am called to faithfully preach the Gospel as derived from life of Jesus. The weight is on the Gospel. It is not within my purview to claim that my experiences and viewpoint hold the authority or preach authoritative guidance for living. The mandate is to point to Jesus Christ. I am called to make the life of Jesus knowable as the Gospel reveals and open a door for people to discover through their own personal lens the meaning for themselves.

I do not dispute that the sharing of personal stories in preaching can be vital. The preacher is a human being and sees through a personally influenced lens which can become a key ingredient in the making of a sermon that can connect with every listener who also sees and experiences life through a personally influenced lens. God's grace in

our lives does not cancel out the channel of human influences. Rather we are enriched and made more alive and able to focus on the Grace of God at work; it helps our sense of being human too. I only suggest such sharing not be the focus/be tempered.

Again, please understand, this is not to diminish the sharing of personal stories as illustrations to support the text. It is just **not** the central message/main focus to be delivered from the pulpit. As a pastor it requires a humility and explanation that restrains me so I can speak to the central message in the Biblical text that tells of the life of Christ.

This thinking also applies to the telling of harmful life experiences and suggesting final permanence as if the negative is the last word. Every human story is a mid-story. The Lord of the Good News stands alongside and His grace is beyond our own mid-story conclusions. This basic understanding/theology undergirds the role of the pastor to serve as the under shepherd of the people with hope for the future. The premise is that the last word belongs to Jesus Christ.

The Bible Rightly Honored

Dorothy L. Sayers writes “The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination...the plot pivots upon a single character, and the whole action is the answer to a single central problem: ‘What think ye of Christ?’”⁽⁶⁾ We worship Jesus Christ, not the Holy Bible. The Bible, taken seriously, never stimulates false worship, but through its texts and themes, its history and poetry, its yearnings and prayers, the narratives of real people from Moses to John, the Bible always finally points us to its Lord of the text: The Old Testament by anticipation, the New Testament in witness.

Because of the timelessness of Jesus Christ himself, the Bible’s witness to his ministry is across generations and multicultural. Biblical faith does not blunt our ability to be a wise and streetwise observer of the contemporary scene. I believe the healthy pressure of the gospel rather creates just the opposite result – a sharpened sensitivity and inquisitiveness that grows out of a stance toward life that does not need to fear truth wherever we find it.

There is one word of caution: A doctrinal wanderlust can sometimes take hold of a student of the Bible. It may create its own momentum, and with it an insatiable appetite for the new and the different. This wanderlust should not be confused with the research instinct that we have been describing, or the hard work of theological inquiry and honest debate about meanings and teachings. The restlessness in research is founded upon the whole principle of testing followed by meaningful response to truth discovered. Wanderlust is not freedom, though it may disguise itself as freedom but often it results in an intellectual, moral and spiritual loneliness.

I can think of no more exciting task in our age, so often adrift, and yet underneath it all so hungry for the real, than to have the privilege of sharing in the witness to Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. It is the Biblical text of the life of Jesus that brought the young pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer to write these words that offer a steady hope:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16). The Old Testament day begins at evening and ends with the going down of the sun. It is the time of expectation. The day of the New Testament church begins with the break of day and ends with the dawning of light of the next morning. It is the time of fulfillment, the resurrection of the Lord. At night Christ was born, a light in the darkness; noonday turned to night when Christ suffered and died on the Cross. But in the dawn of Easter morning Christ rose in victory from the grave.⁽⁷⁾

Sources and Notes

1. Bethge, Eberhard. (2000). *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press *page 205*. These are the opening comments by Bonhoeffer who wrote these words in a letter to a friend in 1936.
2. Jeremais, Joachim. (1958). “The Present Position in the Controversy Confronting the Problem of the Historical Jesus”. In *Expository Times 69*. *page 333*. Jeremiah is always clear and “to the point.”
3. Barth, Karl. (1954). *Dogmatics in Outline*. New York: Harper & Row. *page 40*. Barth’s first three chapters in this book are a very helpful introduction to Biblical Theology.
4. Pascal, Blaisé. (1941). *The Pensées: The Provincial Letters*. New York: Random House. *page 7*. Pascal (1623-1662) has a lasting power to inspire and turn our eyes towards Jesus Christ.
5. Lewis, C.S. (1961). *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. *page 121*. This is Lewis’ book about how to read a book. I think it is one of the best aids to Bible study I know.
6. Sayers, Dorothy L (1969). *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans. *page 13*. See also her brilliant war time BBC broadcast drama “The Man Born to be King.”
7. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. (1954). *Life Together*. New York: Harper & Row. *page 40*. The brief book was the result of his experience at the informal confessing pastors’ lived-in seminars at Finkenwald.

This current article is a revised version from its first appearance as a chapter, “The Pastor as a Biblical Christian” by Earl F. Palmer in the book *Biblical Authority* (Jack Rogers (Editor) Word, Incorporated. 1977. I am grateful for the assistance and input of my Study Assistants, Landon Bennett and Tate Busby here at Earl Palmer Ministries in the further rewrites of this material.

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-serving to encourage and build up faith in Christ

exposition *noun*

ex • po • si • tion \ ek-spə-zi-shən \

A preaching form that enables a text in the Old and/or New Testament to make its own point **here and now**, and, in turn, positions the content of that text within the whole biblical and theological witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ...the responsible teaching of the scriptures is at the center of the preaching ministry **today**.

