

# THE TEN HOW-TO'S OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING

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The work of expository preaching demands extraordinary labor. It is an exacting discipline that requires as much perspiration as it does illumination. The apostle Paul told Timothy that the elders who preach must “work hard at preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17). This is to say, he who would excel as an expositor must labor to the point of fatigue and exhaustion. A biblical preacher must push himself to the limit mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. To be an effective expositor requires all that a man *is* and all that he has to give, and nothing less.

What is required in this labor of expository preaching? What price must be paid if the expositor is to excel? What is the cost factor for him?

Certainly, the preparation required in being a biblical preacher is great. He must devote himself to the disciplines of studying, reading, researching, digging, gathering, compiling, ordering, structuring, comparing, thinking, meditating, contemplating, writing, editing, rewriting, synthesizing, and praying as he focuses upon the task at hand. Perhaps no other discipline requires so much of a man as that of being a biblical expositor. It necessitates the sacrifice, as I said, of all that a man *is* and all that he *has* to give.

There are so few expositors, in part, because so few are willing to pay the price. This discipline of the personal study of the Scripture and the careful writing of the manuscript requires a great sacrifice of time and energy. It requires giving up other pursuits in order to make this commitment a priority. John Stott speaks to this commitment:

Expository preaching is a most exacting discipline. Perhaps that is why it is so rare. Only those will undertake it who are prepared to follow the example of the apostles and say, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables....We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:2, 4). The systematic preaching of the Word is impossible without the systematic study of it. It will not be enough to skim through a few verses in daily Bible reading, nor to study a passage only when we have to preach from it. No. We must daily soak ourselves in the Scriptures. We must not just study, as through a microscope, the linguistic minutiae of a few verses, but take our telescope and scan the wide expanses of God’s Word, assimilating its grand theme of divine sovereignty in the redemption of mankind. “It is blessed,” wrote C.H. Spurgeon, “to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language, and your spirit is

flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows from you.”<sup>1</sup>

As we consider this commitment to expository preaching, it would be helpful to survey the steps involved in compiling such a sermon. The following are ten basic stages required in the preparation of an expository message. There is room, admittedly, for some diversity in the manner of study in which I have laid these out before you. But on the whole, here is the essence of what is required.

## **STEP #1: PREPARATION**

For any expositor, the preparation phase is foundational and critically important. This is where any effective sermon begins. Here is the *soul* preparation before the *sermon* preparation. There must be the humbling of oneself before God and seeking His direction in what to preach.

### **SANCTIFY YOUR LIFE**

Before the preacher can prepare the sermon, God must first prepare the preacher. If his heart is not right, then his sermon can never be right. As a result, he must always be passionate in his pursuit of God. First, *study to prepare your heart*. Never study a passage simply to prepare a message. The expositor must always study to prepare his own heart first and foremost. As a result, he must always be passionate in his pursuit of God. Second, *submit your life to God*. The study and delivery of an expository sermon occurs within the context of the preacher’s own personal relationship with God. He must, first and foremost, be a man of God. In order to rightly study and preach the Word of God, the expositor must be living in humble submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

### **SELECT THE BOOK**

I would argue, first and foremost, for sequential expository preaching. That is, I personally urge that a man of God be given to verse-by-verse preaching through entire books in the Bible. Why should one preach consecutively through entire books in the Bible? Several reasons are compelling: (1) That is how God wrote the Bible. (2) It ensures a healthy balanced diet. (3) It ensures that the full counsel of God is preached. (4) It maximizes the study time of the preacher. (5) It demonstrates Bible study methods for the congregation. (6) It deepens the preacher and congregation in the truths of God. (7) It promotes a long pastorate.

How does an expositor select a book in the Bible through which to preach? The following are considerations for any preacher: (1) Consider what you have recently preached. (2) Consider the needs of the congregation. (3) Consider the maturity of the congregation. (4) Consider what are your abilities and experience. (5) Consider what is strong in your heart. (6) Consider the counsel and insight of others.

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<sup>1</sup> John R.W. Stott, *The Preacher’s Portrait* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), 30-31.

### **STOCK THE LIBRARY**

Every expositor must be a reader, one who is being taught by other gifted men, whose writings are critically important to his sermon preparation. The right books are vitally important to his study of the selected book in the Bible, as well as his proper understanding of each individual passage. While many books that he needs he will already possess, other books will be needed to purchase. Among the necessary tools that he will need are: (1) English Bible, (2) Study Bible, (3) Hebrew, Greek Bibles, (4) Bible Commentaries, (5) Systematic Theologies, (6) English Dictionary, (7) English Thesaurus, (8) Hebrew, Greek Dictionaries, (9) Theological Dictionaries, (10) Bible Dictionaries, (11) OT Introductions, (12) NT Introductions, and (13) Expository Commentaries. Further there are other books that he will want to be reading for his own devotional life and to inspire him in preaching. Among those are: (14) Christian biographies, (15) Church history, (16) Expository Sermons, and (17) Preaching books.

### **STEP #2: ORIENTATION**

Second, the expositor must begin the initial study of that book in the Bible by orienting himself to the message of the book as a whole. This necessitates becoming intimately familiar with the specific contents of that book, as well as the unique issues surrounding it.

### **SURVEY THE BOOK**

The expositor must conduct an initial overview of the chosen book in the Bible to be preached. He must read that particular book multiple times. He may choose to Xerox that book and mark it up with a pen. He must survey the historical background and building argument of the book. The biblical expositor must give careful attention to: (1) biblical author, (2) original recipients, (3) historical background, (4) key theme, (5) book outline, (6) theological themes, and (7) interpretive challenges.

### **SEPARATE THE UNITS**

The expositor, then, must separate the main literary units of the book. Each genre of literature yields different ways in which the units are divided. One sermon—or more probably, multiple sermons—will emerge from one literary unit. These literary units are: (1) the story in narrative, (2) the preamble and law in legal, (3) the stanza in poetry, (4) the maxim or cluster of maxims in wisdom, proverbs, (5) the stanza in song, (6) the vision or oracle in prophecy, (7) the story or sermon in a gospel, and (8) the paragraph in an epistle. In so doing, he should observe how each unit fits into the overall flow of the book. Which units are pivotal? How are they tied together?

### STEP #3: OBSERVATION

Third, the expositor should begin to isolate the specific passage to be preached. This involves determining how many verses should be addressed in each individual message. Most probably, this will be a week-by-week decision.

#### SCOPE THE CONTEXT

The expositor must understand where this passage fits into the overall canon of Scripture. It has been well said: A text without a context is a pretext. Context is critical. Ask yourself: What is the strategic placement of this book in the entire Bible? What is its unique message and specific contribution to the overall book of the Bible in which it is found? The expositor must give careful study to: (1) Where the book fits in the entire Bible, (2) where the unit fits in the individual book, (3) what immediately precedes, and (4) what immediately follows.

#### SEARCH THE TEXT

The expositor must become keenly aware of the passage, reading the text over and over, searching for details with an observant eye. This initial observation of the text requires searching for: (1) *Who* is speaking? (2) *Who* is being addressed? (3) *What* is being said? (4) *What* is the issue? (5) *When* is this occurring? (6) *Where* is the speaker? (7) *Where* are the recipients? (8) *Why* is this being written? (9) *Key* words.

The expositor will want to further consider: (10) *Repeating* words, (11) *Theological* words, (12) *Emphatic* words, (13) *Contrasting* words, (14) *Transitional* words, (15) *Superlative* words, and (16) *Descriptive* words, (17) *Key* verbs, (18) *Primary* thoughts, (19) *Subordinate* thoughts, (20) *Parallel* thoughts, (21) *climatic* thoughts, and (22) *cause and effect*.

Finally he will want to ask: (23) Is there a *doctrine* to be learned? (24) Is there a *sin* to be avoided? (25) Is there a *promise* to be realized? (26) Is there an *attribute of God* to be worshipped? (27) Is there a *truth about Christ* to be followed? (28) Is there an *exhortation* to be heeded? (29) Is there a *principle* to be pursued?

#### STUDY THE GRAMMAR

Next, the expositor will want to write a block diagram of the passage. This is a visual aid that allows the preacher to see the basic relationships of the words, clauses, and phrases of the text itself. A block diagram starts the sentence flush left and shows the main subject, verb, and object. Indented underneath it are the supported words, clauses, and phrases that modify the subject and verb. The purpose of this procedure is to help visualize the structure of the passage, revealing what is primary and what is supportive. Careful consideration needs to be given to: (1) nouns, (2) pronouns, (3) verbs, (4) adjectives, (5) adverbs, (6) participles, (7) prepositions, (8) clauses, (9) phrases, (10) conjunctions, and (11) sentences.

## **STEP #4: INTERPRETATION**

Fourth, having discovered what the text *says*, it is now time to determine what it *means*. The expositor must next interpret the passage using the literal, historical, and grammatical approach of interpretation. The meaning of the text *is* the text. Until we have the true, God-intended meaning of the passage, we cannot proceed to preach it. The following steps should be taken into consideration in the interpretation process:

### **SECURE THE MEANING**

The expositor must be familiar with the basic laws of hermeneutics. That is, he must know the laws of interpretation. He must follow these basic laws that will guide him into the discovery of what the passage means. The Bible is written in human language and as such, these words and sentences must be interpreted before the Word can be rightly preached. The basic rules of interpretation include: (1) literal meaning, (2) single meaning, (3) authorial intent, (4) grammatical meaning, (5) historical background, (6) geographical position, (7) scriptural analogy, (8) progressive revelation, (9) figurative language, and (10) literary genre. Further, the expositor must allow the clearer verses to interpret those that are more difficult to grasp in their meaning. He should begin to write out his initial findings in a form that can be later merged into the preaching manuscript.

### **SCAN THE RESOURCES**

In studying the passage, the expositor will want to use various tools to get at the meaning of the passage. The preacher's library is critically important in coming to the meaning of the text. These have already been mentioned. Among the tools especially needed are: (1) English Bible, (2) Study Bibles, (3) Hebrew, Greek Bibles, (4) Bible Commentaries, (5) Systematic Theologies, (6) English Dictionary, (7) English Thesaurus, (8) Hebrew, Greek Dictionaries, (9) Theological Dictionaries, (10) Bible Dictionaries, (11) OT Introductions, and (12) NT Introductions.

### **SYNTHESIZE THE IDEA**

Having wrestled with the meaning of the passage, even writing out his findings, he needs to establish the central idea of this passage. This should be stated in one short, pithy sentence. This main proposition becomes the driving force of the sermon. Everything in the sermon must be in alignment with this single premise. At this point, the expositor should: (1) *state* the central idea and (2) *streamline* it into as few of words as possible.

## **STEP #5: ASSIMILATION**

Fifth, the expositor must begin to organize his initial observations, interpretive findings, and individual discoveries into a written manuscript. The constructing of the manuscript is critically important. This will be the document that the expositor will carry into the pulpit. Whatever is put into the manuscript will guide the sermon itself.

### **SET THE HEADINGS**

Most expositors will choose to use a homiletical outline, though it is not necessary. However, an outline does direct the thinking of the preacher and the organizing of the sermon. Further, an outline reveals solid preparation to the listener and encourages note taking. The shaping of the sermon outline is, most probably, an ongoing process, something that will occur throughout the entire manuscripting of the sermon. A good outline is like the skeleton of the human body—that which gives form to the whole, that upon which the flesh and meat of the sermon are hung. The major headings should be: (1) relatively few, (2) obviously clear, (3) logically coherent, (4) tightly worded, and (5) symmetrically balanced.

#### **STATE THE THRUST**

The expositor should now begin to incorporate his exegetical findings in a systematic fashion into its appropriate place in the outline. At this point, the idea is to restate the meaning of the verse in your own words. Explain the passage as you would hear yourself preaching the sermon: (1) rewrite the *exegetical* findings, (2) rewrite the *historical* background, and (3) rewrite with *succinct* statements.

#### **SUPPORT WITH SCRIPTURE**

After a clear explanation of that particular passage has been written into the manuscript, the expositor will then want to substantiate this with other passages of Scripture. This is called cross-referencing. Here the entire Bible is being brought to bear on this biblical text. Start with those supporting passages that are closest to the passage being preached and then move out to the parameters. Start with: (1) cross reference within the *same book*, (2) cross reference with the *same author*, and (3) cross reference with the *entire bible*.

#### **SEGUE THE PARTS**

As the expositor is now writing the manuscript, he must record transitional statements that weave together the various parts. Smooth transitions serve as golden threads that pull the manuscript together into one tapestry of truth. Such transitions serve as bridges in communication that usher the listener forward from one major thought to the next. The preacher may pull his listeners along with transitional words and phrases like: “At the same time,” “Furthermore,” “But let us consider,” “It is time now to say,” “In addition,” “On the contrary,” “From this example it can be seen,” “From this we should infer,” “Now we come to,” “In the meantime, let us note,” “That, I say, is how proud men are,” “In truth,” “Having said that.” Transitional phrases like these add much polish to expository messages.

#### **SELECT THE SYNONYMS**

In writing the message, it is important to use synonyms, alternating the words that are used. It is helpful in effective communication to not repeat oneself. A good thesaurus is an invaluable aid to the expositor who is scripting his message. Varying one’s vocabulary is an effective form of descript and memorable communication. Some words can relate to those who are well-trained in Scripture and even well-read in literature. At the same time, other words can be more accessible to the average listener. The point is, laying out one’s words can be a powerful force in communicating the truth.

### **SUMMARIZE THE INTENT**

The expositor will want to periodically summarize what he has been saying at selected points in his message. This may most often occur at the end of a major heading. A critical part of this summary is synthesizing what has been said, showing the relationship between the various parts of the truth previously explained. It is important that the expositor remind the listener what has been said to this point; such summaries should be in brief statements before moving on to the next main heading. Scripting these summaries in the manuscript will prove to be strategic.

### **STEP #6: APPLICATION**

Sixth, the preacher should give thought to the application of his passage to his listeners. This is where the expositor shows the practical relevance of the true meaning of the passage. This is where he seeks to connect the biblical text to the lives of people. He must always ask himself, how does this passage relate to the lives of the listeners? What does God require of them based upon these truths? How will this text support and sustain them? This involves the following:

#### **SEE THE PRINCIPLES**

These are the timeless truths and practical principles that come from every text of Scripture. “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). These principles are the timeless truths that transcend time and apply to every listener: (1) what is the timeless truth? (2) what is the practical relevance?

#### **SIZE UP THE AUDIENCE**

In order to effectively apply the Scripture, the preacher will want to have some working knowledge of his listeners: (1) *Who* Are they? (2) *Where* Are They? (3) *What* Are Their Needs? All these factors come into consideration when showing the relevance of a passage of Scripture.

#### **SCRIPT THE APPLICATION**

Rather than ‘wing’ this part of the sermon, the preacher will want to manuscript even this portion of the sermon. Careful thought needs to be given to the application: (1) demonstrate its general relevance, and (2) distribute it throughout the sermon. The application should be specifically pointed to the heart and life of the believer. Here the sermon speaks in terms of “we” and “you.”

### **STEP #7: ILLUSTRATIONS**

Seventh, sermon illustrations may prove to be helpful to the expository message. On the whole, I would say, illustrations need to be fewer, not more; shorter, not longer; and appropriate, not forced. But the right illustration in the right place can be powerful. The

following are types and sources of illustrations: (1) biblical illustrations which carry an authority with them, (2) church history which provides a *gravitas*, or weightiness, (3) current events, which show a relevancy and even urgency, (4) personal experience, which adds transparency, (5) striking quotations, which can be authoritative and (6) metaphor/analogy, which are vivid and interesting.

## **STEP #8: INTRODUCTION**

Eighth, now that the main body of the message has been written, an introduction is needed. Think of the introduction as the porch of the house. Proportionately, a porch is smaller than the house itself, yet it serves to provide easy access for all guests to enter the main structure. How strange a house would look if the front porch were too large, or worse, if it were larger than the house itself. Rather, it should compliment the beauty of the house and help lead people into the house.

### **STIMULATE THE INTEREST**

The introduction should help secure the listener's attention, enlisting eager, alert listeners. This may be done in various ways by using: (1) current events, which begins in the world of the listener, (2) historical story, which begins with a larger perspective, (3) striking quote, which arouses interest, (4) asking questions, which engages the attention of the listener, (5) story telling, which can also be attention-grabbing, and (6) common problem, which creates a crisis for the sermon to solve.

### **SHOW THE IMPORTANCE**

In the introduction the preacher should show the practical relevance of the passage to be expounded. He should underscore the importance of the subject matter to be considered in this text: (1) make the text *personally* felt, (2) make the text *corporately* felt.

### **STATE THE DIRECTION**

Moreover, the expositor should reveal the central direction of this particular sermon. He should state where this message is headed. This includes: (1) state the *big idea*, and (2) state the *main points*.

## **STEP #9: CONCLUSION**

Last words are lasting words. The conclusion serves as a final "fork-in-the road," calling the listener to pursue one of two directions. Either the hearer will follow the biblical path just laid out or he will reject it. The conclusion should answer the question, "As a result of this message, what does God want the listener to do?" An effective conclusion should either, summarize the main truths, specify application, motivate, confront, challenge the will, encourage or comfort.

### **SPEAK TO BELIEVERS**

Like a lawyer calls for a verdict after presenting his case to the jury, so the effective preacher summons his listeners to decide favorably toward God, based upon the truth submitted. The expositor wants believers to: (1) *know* something, reminding the listener what has been said in the sermon, (2) *feel* something, ending with elements of inspiration and motivation, and (3.) *do* something, appealing to the listener to follow a specific course of action.

### **SUMMON THE UNBELIEVERS**

The expositor must “do the work of an evangelist.” As a minister of the gospel, he should call those who are without Christ to repent and believe. Christ and the gospel may not be every passage, but every passage leads to Christ and His saving message. The expositor must call unbelievers to: (1) repent, and (2) believe in Jesus Christ.

## **STEP #10: INTERNALIZATION**

At this point, the manuscript should be complete. The introduction, main body and conclusion have been written. We now want to review our sermon notes to evaluate the general flow of the message as a whole. The expositor must evaluate its quality and internalize his notes. The preacher’s entire being—mind, emotion and will—must be engaged with the sermon. With his *mind*, he must become intimately acquainted with the manuscript, refreshing his memory with the substance of its truth. With his *emotions*, he must feel deeply the truth to be preached. And with his *will*, he must personally obey the message before he can ask others to act upon it.

### **SCRUTINIZE THE NOTES**

At this point, the manuscript should be evaluated. Ask yourself: Is the sermon material under each homiletic point equally distributed? Is the introduction too long or too short? Are there enough illustrations? Is application well distributed? Will the opening lines “hook” the listener? Is there balance and symmetry before the main points? Is a section top heavy and need to be redistributed? Do I have too many points? Do the transitions flow? This requires: (1) review the *length*, (2) review the *balance*, and (3) review the *quality*.

### **SATURATE THE HEART**

After the sermon manuscript is finalized, it must also be indelibly written upon the preacher’s mind and heart. Of course, this internalization has occurred throughout the entire process of developing the sermon. What he has studied and written must be fully rooted and grounded into his own life. The preacher must become one with his sermon—married if you will. Regarding the truth of the message, he must *know* it, *feel* it and *live* it if he is to deliver it effectively. He must: (1) *know* the message, (2) *feel* the message, and (3) *live* the message.

### **SEEK THE LORD**

Having reviewed his notes, saturating his mind with its truths, the expositor must have the entire act of preaching before the Lord in prayer. He must lay his entire life before the Lord, confessing all sin and seeking the Lord's help. Except the Holy Spirit fill him with power he simply cannot preach in a way that will yield eternal fruit. He must pray through the essential truths of the message, pleading with God to make the sermon effective. Further, he must pray for the listeners, asking that God intervene and bless them. He knows that God *must* cause His Word to triumph in the hearts of his hearers. This fact necessitates that he intercede on behalf of the congregation. Only God can open blind eyes and open closed hearts.

### **PREACH THE WORD**

The anticipated moment of delivering the sermon has now come as the expositor stands before the congregation in the presence of God. Every preacher will develop his own method of delivery whether he reads his notes, recites them word-for-word from memory, uses them as a launching pad in a more "free form" communication, or preaches without notes after thoroughly reviewing them. Personally, I believe the last two methods are the best options. I bring my notes into the pulpit and use them in an extemporaneous fashion, trusting that God will enable me to "go beyond" my notes during the sermon. This allows the Holy Spirit to use all my preparation to the maximum, yet with freedom and liberty as He guides me spontaneously through the sermon and its outline.

The expositor must preach with a total dependence upon God. As the Spirit of God fills and controls him, his facial expressions, hand gestures, eye contact and voice inflection will communicate naturally—actually, supernaturally. These external aspects of sermon delivery should be the dynamic result of God working through my own personality and temperament, not something theatrically rehearsed nor intentionally imitated from another preacher. The expositor must speak with deep conviction and inner certainty. An inner confidence should grip the heart of the preacher, causing him to speak with great boldness. He should be deeply persuaded of the absolute truthfulness of this passage, as well as the dire need of his listeners to hear it. He *must* speak this truth.

Biblical preaching is a weighty and serious matter. It is a *sacred* task that calls for the preacher to be "blood earnest." While moments of humor may be appropriate, he must be controlled by extreme sincerity, even zeal. He should speak with *gravitas*. In so doing, the expositor should maintain a proper balance in wielding the two-edged sword. His tone should vary, from strong to soft, from prophetic to pastoral. His pace should vary, from slow to fast, from rapid to deliberate. Only God can work this out through the man.

As we have discovered, the discipline of expository preaching requires a total commitment of all that a man is. Nothing less will make an expositor. May this be said of each one of us. May we be men who 'bleed the Book.'