

Expository Sermons and How to Listen to One

Taught by Pastor Phil Layton for Sunday School class at GCBC on June 10, 2007

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Definition of Terms

Exegesis – drawing out through careful study and interpretation (hermeneutics principles) the original meaning of a passage by God through the original author to original audience

Exposit – expound, explicate, explain, or expose verbally the message of the passage

Preaching – goes beyond explaining to declaring the message and significance of the passage with a view to change and application

Amos 8:11-12 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “When I will send a famine on the land, Not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, But rather for hearing the words of the Lord.

12 “People will stagger from sea to sea And from the north even to the east; They will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, But they will not find it.

This text does not say people won't be able to find a church or a synagogue, but it does speak of those who are seeking the Word of the Lord and are hungry for it, but cannot find somewhere where they hear truly hear God's Word. Have you ever heard someone lamenting that they have searched high and low desperately just to find somewhere where they are really fed God's Word in a deep way?

There certainly are no shortages of churches in our country. One could argue that we are living in a time of feast not famine, a time when an endless buffet of church options and entrees are available to suit every appetite, from snacks to substance, depending on how you define preaching, that is. Sure, the church is not perfect, but it seems to be growing and therefore must be well-fed. To some, the modern American evangelical movement may seem more robust and healthier and bigger and better than ever.

- More mega-churches than ever (some over 20k attending)
- Media ministries bringing in many millions of dollars
- Televangelists and famous personalities packing stadiums and drawing massive crowds to events
- Huge pep rallies, enormous songfests, Christian bands hit the charts, Christian books hit the NY Times Bestseller list, there are books about having your best life now, a purpose-driven life, how to pray blessing into your life like Jabez, or rapture novels to keep us from being left behind
- Come election time, the clout of evangelicals is not something a politician of any party can avoid -> statistics continue to show a substantial portion of the US population considers themselves born again Christians

So how is it, that a prominent and astute theologian like Walter Kaiser can say that we are living in one of those days that Amos 8:11 talked about? He is one of many who has declared the type of famine Amos spoke about is not only now present here, it has been for some time: “The famine of the Word continues in massive proportions in most places in North America.”¹

Steve Lawson's excellent book *Famine in the Land* shows that despite some of the external and worldly measuring standards and superficial success of American churches on the surface, it stays on the surface and is not deep. The mainstream church is weaker and more shallow than ever on the inside because of a spiritual drought in our land as so many have substituted other things in place of the Living Water in recent decades.

People are malnourished and not getting the meat of the Word to grow, and sadly, many churchgoers don't even really want the meat of the Word. But even more tragically, many pastors don't want it either, and when they turn away from their mandate to teach the whole counsel of God from God's Word, they are depriving their people of the only soul-satisfying and all-sufficient source of truth, life and growth, the Bible.

Lawson says pastors need to focus on filling the pulpit rather than filling their building with more people by any means. Both pulpit and pew are to blame when the church satisfies itself with less than true and deep Biblical preaching, and I agree that there is a famine in the land as far as truly hearing the Word, preaching the Word, and people being grounded in biblical understanding and living according to the Word of God. This is a great challenge to all of us, and as I was moved and convicted and challenged afresh in my study this week of the primacy of preaching and the massive responsibility we have and what hangs in the balance depending on how we respond to this task, I want to share some of the things that move my heart in hope that they will move yours as well.

Steve Lawson opens his first chapter this way:

As the Church advances into the twenty-first century, the stress to produce booming ministries has never been greater. Influenced by corporate mergers, towering skyscrapers, and expanding economies, bigger is perceived as better, and nowhere is this "Wall Street" mentality more evident than in the church. Sad to say, pressure to produce bottomline results has led many ministries to sacrifice the centrality of biblical preaching on the altar of man-centered pragmatism.

A new way of "doing" church is emerging. In this radical paradigm shift, exposition is being replaced with entertainment, preaching with performances, doctrine with drama, and theology with theatrics. The pulpit, once the focal point of the church, is now being overshadowed by a variety of church-growth techniques, everything from trendy worship styles to glitzy presentations to vaudeville-like pageantries. In seeking to capture the upperhand in church growth, a new wave of pastors is reinventing church and repackaging the gospel into a product to be sold to "consumers."

Whatever reportedly works in one church is being franchised out to various "markets" abroad. As when gold was discovered in the foothills of California [here in Coloma in the 1840's], so ministers are beating a path to the doorsteps of exploding churches and super-hyped conferences where the latest "strike" has been reported. Unfortunately the newly panned gold often turns out to be "fool's gold." Not all that glitters is

actually gold.² ... God's work must be done God's way if it is to know God's blessing. He provides the power and He alone receives the glory only as His divinely prescribed plan for ministry is followed. When man-centered schemes are followed, often imitating the world's schemes, the flesh provides the energy and man receives the glory.

Throughout church history, preachers who have left a lasting impact on the church have known that, in the words of Michael Horton, "the regular proclamation of Christ through the close exposition of Scripture [is] more relevant in creating a worshipping and serving community than political causes, moral crusades, and entertaining services." In many evangelical churches, however, the centrality of biblical exposition is being demoted to second-class status. In a strange twist, the preaching of the cross is now foolishness, not only to the world but also to the contemporary church.³

John Stott has said, "The low level of Christian living is due more than anything else to the low level of Christian preaching."⁴

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of top 2 or 3 expository preachers of the 20th Century, said: "The most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and most urgent need in the Church, it is the greatest need of the world also."⁵

If these men are right, and I believe they are, what is true preaching?

Turn to 2 Timothy 3:15-4:5

This passage kind of puts together all 5 of the subjects we put together for the first few weeks of our doctrines class:

- Why study doctrine (4:3)
- Inspiration of scripture (3:16a)
- Authority / Power of scripture (3:15-16)
- Studying scripture / hermeneutics (3:16-17)
- Expository preaching (4:2)

How does v. 2 define true preaching? (Going phrase by phrase through this verse is a good place to start)

- **“Preach the Word”**
 - This is the most fundamental distinction – we are not just to preach a message that contains some of the Word in it, we are to preach the Word. In other words, Scripture is not just a part of our message, it *is* our message – we have nothing to say to improve upon it, we simply want to echo and explain and apply nothing more or less than God's Word

‘We must resist the urge to merely incorporate Bible verses into our messages to support our own opinions and agenda. To preach expositively is to actually *preach* Bible verses ... we are going *to the Bible* to find out what we will say. In the end the preacher does not use the Bible to preach his own message; *instead, it is the Bible that uses the preacher to preach its message* ... Those who try to preach from multiple texts in the same sermon often end up using the Scriptures to preach their own message. Most preachers will find it safer to make a regular practice of seeking to convey the message of God in one passage per sermon. While other passages may be mentioned to reinforce the meaning of the text at hand, one primary passage should drive each sermon.’⁶

- I try no matter what I’m speaking on to always have a primary passage – always have a text. Even if I’m giving my testimony, I usually try and structure it around the words of a life verse like Romans 11:36. In my series on God’s attributes, I did my best to do so expositively verse by verse through a passage for each truth. For my seminar yesterday on Spurgeon, I used Ephesians 4:11-16 as outline
- *Is it every appropriate to preach on multiple passages in one sermon?* When Paul speaks in Acts 20 about declaring “the whole counsel of God” there certainly is room for variety and you can be biblical in a thematic sermon where you give God’s whole counsel on a subject
 - unfortunately, too much of contemporary topical sermons don’t seem to be driven by what the Word says and the great danger in doing mostly topical is you determine what to teach and then find Scriptures about it, rather than letting the Scripture determine what you’ll teach by systematically going through a book in context
 - on the other hand, it *is* important that what we teach is consistent with all of scripture, so it can be helpful when done right if an initial passage is opened up and expanded to see how that truth is illustrated and explained throughout scripture.
 - Yes, there is a place for sermons treating topics and doctrines or themes or even studying the life of someone, or hearing special testimonies or reports from missionaries or special presentations or seminar sessions like we did yesterday at the men’s conference – but *I am convinced and committed that the regular diet of the local church service should be the verse-by-verse teaching through passages and books of the Bible.*
- When Paul says “preach the Word” it’s not what we want to say, we are to preach what God has said the way He said it without reshaping, twisting, distorting, or watering down God’s intent
- Paul says elsewhere we don’t preach ourselves – we are not to preach about us or man’s views and opinions or just tell stories or jokes or impress or flatter or entertain – the sacred task of God’s minister is to declare what God says and bring God’s truth to bear with humble boldness

As John Stott writes: ‘There is an urgent need for courageous preachers in the pulpits of the world today, like the apostles in the early Church who “were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31, cf. v. 13). Neither men-pleasers nor time-servers ever make good preachers. We are called to the sacred task of biblical exposition, and commissioned to proclaim what God has said, not what human beings want to hear. Many modern churchmen suffer from a malady called “itching ears,” which induces them to accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings (2 Timothy 4:3). But we have no liberty to scratch their itch or pander to their likings.’⁷

- What’s the difference between preaching the Word vs preaching *about* the Word or preaching that includes scripture?

Their use of the Bible is much like the singing of the national anthem before a ballgame—something merely heard at the beginning, but never referenced again, a necessary preliminary that almost becomes an awkward intrusion to the real event. In their attempt to be contemporary and relevant, many pastors talk *about* the Scriptures, but, sadly, they rarely speak *from* them. Instead they rush headlong to the next personal illustration, humorous anecdote, sociological quote, or cultural reference, rarely to return to the biblical text. How can pastors expect dying souls to become spiritually healthy if they never give them the prescriptive remedy? How can pastors expect sinners to be converted (1 Pet. 1:23–25) and Christians to be sanctified (John 17:17) if they fail to expound God’s Word?⁸

- **“Be ready”** (requires thorough study and preparation; see 4:13, 2 Tim. 2:15)
Ezra 7:10 *For Ezra had set his heart to ¹study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.*
- **“In season and out of season”** (all the time, we are never to cease or give it up, even though verse 3-4 say many will not want to listen and will turn away)
- **“Reprove, rebuke, exhort”**
 - true preaching calls for change – thinking, living, turning from sin
 - calling sin for what it is
 - true preaching of the Word contains encouraging or convicting or strengthening going on, not just an information dump
 - the implication is that the audience should not always be comfortable or just intellectually stimulated
 - this sounds different than the way some have described modern preaching as “a mild-mannered man speaking to mild-mannered people urging them to be more mild-mannered”

¹ Lit seek

- true preaching has an urgency, earnestness, seriousness (v. 1), as Richard Baxter said “I preached as never sure to preach again, as a dying man to dying men”
- Martyn Lloyd-Jones added: “Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire”
- One of my living preaching models Rick Holland urged us at Shepherd’s Conference to preach as if lives depended upon it – God is sovereign, but it is His Word that He has ordained as the means for salvation and sanctification
- **“with all patience”** – proper balance, speaking the truth in love not avoiding the truth, implies long-term ministry as God’s truth changes us over time

What are some other observations we can make about preaching in this passage?

- Some won’t want it (v. 3-4)
- It’s important Paul first remind Timothy of the inspiration, authority, and power of scripture at the end of chapter 3, not only that it saves, but that it is sufficient for all of life and the only way a man of God can be equipped / complete. It’s one thing to say you have a high view of scripture, but how you use it in your ministry demonstrates what you really believe
- 4:1 reminds us of the solemn and heavy responsibility and gravity and weight of this task, so preaching starts with fearing God and trembling at His Word

Isa. 66:2 “to this one I will look, one who is humble and contrite in spirit and who trembles at my Word”

Luther seemed to have no fear if the entire world was against him, yet he spoke of how the seriousness and sacredness of the task of preaching God’s truth accurately caused his knees to knock more than anything

John Knox, the great Scottish Reformer, once said, “I have never once feared the devil, but I tremble every time I enter the pulpit.”

Spurgeon spoke of our great need for reverencing God and His Word and said we dare not trifle with Scripture, but must tremble at it.

Clarification of terms:

Exegesis – drawing out through careful and prayerful study and interpretation the meaning of the passage

Exposit – expound, explain, expose verbally the message of the passage

Preaching – goes beyond explaining to declaring with a view to change and application

It’s possible to preach in a manner that doesn’t exposit any particular scripture, it happens all the time. It’s possible to try and exposit when you haven’t exegeted or studied deeply the passage, which sadly happens all the time as well

But Expository Preaching can be defined this way:

1. Clearly gets its content *from* the Bible passage (exegesis)
2. Accurately expounds or explains what God meant in that passage
3. Calls for the effect or change that God intended in His Word⁹

Biblical preaching finds its message originating solely in Scripture, extracted through careful exegesis and correct interpretation in which the original God-intended meaning of Scripture is explained and applied to people today. Along this line Unger writes:

No matter what the length of the portion explained may be, if it is handled in such a way that its real and essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular Biblical writer and in the light of the over-all context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers, it may properly be said to be expository preaching. It is emphatically not preaching about the Bible, but preaching the Bible. “What saith the Lord” is the alpha and the omega of expository preaching. It begins in the Bible and ends in the Bible and all that intervenes springs from the Bible. In other words, expository preaching is Bible-centered preaching. Whatever extra-Biblical material is employed—illustrations from human experience, history, archaeology, philosophy, art or science—must be purely subsidiary and strictly fitted into one single aim—to elucidate the portion of Scripture chosen, whatever its length, and enforce its claims upon the hearers.¹⁰

Mark Dever, in his excellent book “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church” (p. 39) writes:

The first mark of a healthy church is expositional preaching. It is not only the first mark; it is far and away the most important of them all, because if you get this one right, all of the others should follow. This is the crucial mark. If you want to read only one chapter of this book, you’ve picked the right one. This is the one you should read first, before all of the others. This will help you to understand what pastors are to give themselves to, and what congregations are to demand of them. My main role, and the main role of any pastor, is expositional preaching.

Someone may object that the apostles did not always preach expository sermons of a particular passage

Jay Adams responds:

We must recognize that the apostles were the recipients and the earthly source of special revelation; indeed, they themselves were writing Scripture! We are not. That makes quite a difference. Moreover, we have no record of an apostolic address given in a Christian assembly. But we do see Jesus, “as was his custom,” entering the synagogue and preaching from the biblical portion assigned for the day (Luke 4:16-32).¹¹

Nehemiah 8 is the classic OT expository pattern:

Read 8:1-8

8 They read from the book, from the law of God, ¹translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. (NASB)

⁸ So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading. (NKJV)

⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly,² and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (ESV)

⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear^a and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. (NIV)

HOW TO LISTEN TO A SERMON:

Like the people in Nehemiah 8

1. With desire for the pure Word – “bring the book” (v. 1)

<1 Peter 2 talks about longing for the pure milk of the Word to grow>

Background: God used Ezra to ignite a great revival when he returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 7–10). After Zerubbabel led a large contingent of Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild their ruined temple (538 B.C.), Ezra escorted a second group to the holy city to restore the Word of God to its rightful place (458 B.C.). As he led God’s people to humble themselves beneath His mighty right hand, the key to Ezra’s ministry was undoubtedly his resolute determination to learn, live, and proclaim the Scriptures. The verse that uniquely summarizes his life and ministry is Ezra 7:10, which states that he “set his heart to *study* the law of the Lord and to *practice* it, and to *teach* His statutes and ordinances in Israel” (italics added). Here is the threefold pattern of Ezra’s ministry. He was thoroughly committed to study, practice, and teach God’s Word ... learn it, live it, and let it out ... *knowing* (“study”), *being* (“practice”), and *doing* (“teach”).¹²

Notice in verse 1 that the people wanted the book, God’s book, and they wanted a man of the book to stand up and tell them what God had to say and nothing else

<Play clip from Lawson here>

2. With attentive hearts (v. 3)

One of the most encouraging things you can do for a speaker as a listener is to really be attentive – you can really bless a preacher by your attention and body language and facial expressions or you can really discourage him. This requires self-discipline

¹ Or *explaining*

² Or *with interpretation*, or *paragraph by paragraph*

^a Or *God*, *translating it*

We pay attention first and foremost because it is God's Word and deserves our full heart, but also we listen closely to make sure a sermon is consistent with the Word (Acts 17:11)

I intentionally used the word "hearts" for this point, because as Ryken says:

Listening to a sermon—really listening—takes more than our minds. It also requires hearts that are receptive to the influence of God's Spirit. Something important happens when we hear a good sermon: God speaks to us.

Through the inward ministry of his Holy Spirit, he uses his Word to calm our fear, comfort our sorrow, disturb our conscience, expose our sin, proclaim God's grace, and reassure us in the faith. But these are all affairs of the heart, not just matters of the mind, so listening to a sermon can never be merely an intellectual exercise. We need to receive biblical truth in our hearts, allowing what God says to influence what we love, what we desire, and what we praise.¹³

3. With reverence (vv. 4-5)

This is the Word of the Living God, and it deserves our solemn and serious and sustained honor in our actions and attitude while it is preached, before it is preached, and after. The flip side of honoring God and His Word, is the higher your view of our awesome God, the lower your view of yourself. James says "in humility receive the Word"

Church is not a perfect place (and you're not perfect either), so as someone has written 'Mortify any tendencies toward pride, condemning others, and critical nit-picking. Instead, seek to meet Jesus each time you come to the Scripture; gather from the Word fuel for all-of-life worship.'

4. With worship (v. 6)

Pray before, after, and during the sermon.

"O Lord, give me a heart for you. Give me a good and honest heart. Give me a soft and receptive heart. Give me a humble and meek heart. Give me a fruitful heart. Give me a heart for you."

If you are a dad driving your family to church, what a great practice to pray with them before you enter church and maybe pray as you go home for God to help you apply it. Pray for others during the week, and even with others 'that God would keep the congregation from becoming "dull of hearing," that He would bless the congregation with an increasingly strong desire for the "solid food" of His word.'

Pray for the preacher during the week. At the end of Ephesians 6, Paul asks them to pray for him to have boldness and be able to preach gospel mysteries clearly. If someone as great as the Apostle Paul needed prayer, how much more do we amateurs need your prayers – prayers for focused study during the week, internalizing the truth, for passion and compassion, and prayer for supernatural strength and enabling as I speak.

Spurgeon 'had his people pray as he preached. One biographer describes the pastor's prayer meeting that was held by Spurgeon on Thursday evening. "This was an extra gathering, specially convened for the purpose of pleading for a blessing upon the Word he was about to preach; and most refreshing and helpful it always proved both to himself and to the people.'"¹⁴

5. With the whole person engaged (vv. 9-12 – here the right response was rejoicing)

If you were bored during a sermon or disengaged, it may not be the preacher's fault. God's truth is never boring, so if the message was true to God's Word, you have to ask yourself was I praying, was I seeking a truth to respond appropriately to, was my whole person engaged? Jonathan Edwards wrote a book called "Religious Affections" and he had a great concern with emotion-less Christianity and wanted to stir people's affections as highly as possible as long as they were driven only by the truth

6. With preparation and hunger to learn (v. 13)

Do you come hungry to church? My commitment is to do my best to give you a meal, but you have a part and responsibility to, and that is to come hungry.

****Sunday morning begins Saturday night****

John Piper in discussing James 1:21 asks 'How do you receive the implanted word? By putting aside all filthiness and wickedness. This is what makes the word "unreceivable." It astonishes me how many Christians watch the same banal, empty, silly, trivial, titillating, suggestive, immodest TV shows that most unbelievers watch - and then wonder why their spiritual lives are weak and their worship experience is shallow with no intensity. If you really want to hear the Word of God the way he means to be heard in truth and joy and power, turn off the television on Saturday night and read something true and great and beautiful and pure and honorable and excellent and worthy of praise (see Philippians 4:8) ... I especially exhort parents to teach teenagers that Saturday is not the night to think of staying out late with friends. If there is a special late night, make it Friday, not Saturday. It is a terrible thing to teach children that worship is so optional that it doesn't matter if you are exhausted when you come. What happens here is more important than a college entrance SAT, and we do work hard to get our kids to sleep well before an important test.'¹⁵

7. With eager and immediate application and obedience (vv. 14-17)

When Jesus shared with his disciples that one would betray him, they each asked "Is it I?"

Calvin frequently instructed his congregation on how to listen to a sermon. He told them what to look for in preaching, in what spirit they should listen, and how they should listen. His goal was to help people participate as much as they could in the sermon so that it would feed their souls. The attitude of someone who comes to a sermon, Calvin said, should include "willingness to obey God completely and with no reserve." "We have not come to the preaching merely to hear what we do not know," Calvin added, "but to be incited to do our duty."¹⁶

8. With daily continuing in the Word (v. 18)

If you fill your mind with worldly things 6 days a week and only try to fill your mind with God's Word in an hour or so 1 day a week, you'll be a spiritual anorexic, if you can even be called spiritual at all.

One great way to continue is to talk about the sermon on the way home, or if you come by yourself, meditate on it or talk to God about it, pray about something He spoke to you through His Word. Rather than talking with your friends right after the service about every non-spiritual thing in your life, talk about the message and what convicted or challenged you. Take advantage of our website, I put up extensive notes of everything I teach and more and we have audio of all our messages for further refreshment.

9. With repentance and confession of sins the Word reveals (9:1-4)

For further study – articles on “How to Listen to a Sermon”

Tim Challies <http://www.challies.com/archives/000613.php> &
<http://www.challies.com/archives/001004.php>

George Whitefield <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/howtolisten.html>

Philip G. Ryken <http://www.tenth.org/wowdir/wow2002-09-22.htm>

Sermon from John Piper “Take Care How You Listen”

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1998/1031_Take_Care_How_You_Listen_Part_2/

Article from 9Marks Ministries on “Expositional Listening”

http://sites.silaspartners.com/partner/Article_Display_Page/0..PTID314526%7CCCHID598014%7CCCHID2190814.00.html

¹ Walter Kaiser, *Revive Us Again* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 166.

² Lawson cites the following for further study: See Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1963); David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do about It* (Grand Rapids: Hourglass, 1994); Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995); and David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

³ Steve Lawson, “The Priority of Biblical Preaching,” *BibSac* (2001) Vol. 158/2: p. 198-99.

⁴ Stott, “Christian Preaching in the Contemporary World,” 365.

⁵ *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 9.

⁶ Mike Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 16.

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 299.

⁸ *Famine in the Land*, 82.

⁹ Above adapted from Michael Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 14.

¹⁰ Merrill F. Unger, “Expository Preaching,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 111 (October-December 1954): 333-34.

¹¹ As cited by Fabarez, 17.

¹² *Famine in the Land*, 83-84.

¹³ <http://www.tenth.org/wowdir/wow2002-09-22.htm>

¹⁴ Alex Montoya, *Preaching with Passion*, 37.

¹⁵ “Take Care How You Listen, Part 2” (available at www.desiringgod.org)

¹⁶ *Reformation and Revival* Volume 10/4: p. 114.