

A Feast of Life-Giving Joy The Necessity of Expository Preaching

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One of the distinctives of the GRN is an emphasis on expository preaching. Expository preaching has long been dear to me because I found it to be so lacking during my teenage years in my broader PC(USA) experience.

By the grace of God, despite the lack of consistent teaching or church membership in any given theological tradition during my upbringing, I have always been theologically conservative and evangelically minded. I was converted around age 11, and was in a PC(USA) context by age 13. As you might imagine—as is the case with most young men who are recently converted—my enthusiasm for Christianity and the things of God was palpable. I loved reading my Bible—even if that habit came in fits and spurts—and I wanted to know more of it. Every time there was a worship service, I wanted to be there. Every time there was a youth group meeting, there I was. In the summers, there were special services at 8:00 AM down at the beach, and then the regular worship service back at the church sanctuary at 10:45 AM. You can bet I was there at both—even if I heard the exact same sermon twice.

A Gnawing Hunger

I was hungry for the Word of God. I sat in various church services, the Bible was opened up and read out loud. I heard these fascinating, confusing, interesting, complicated readings from Galatians and Romans and Ephesians (readings that I couldn't quite make sense of, but I knew that they spoke of life and love and joy and grace and forgiveness and hope and redemption and Christ). And then, sadly, we would proceed from these fascinating-yet-confusing Scripture verses into a 15 minute talk that bore no obvious relationship at all to the text that had just been read. You can imagine my disappointment. My appetite was continually whetted but never satisfied.

Here I was: eager for the word of God to be taught, only to endure some vague diatribe on environmentalism or economics or Oprah and her latest inspiration to "make life count." Ephesians 2 had just been read, and I knew it had good news and I was sitting in the pew silently shouting in the inner monologue of my mind, "EXPLAIN THIS BIBLE PASSAGE TO ME"...and no one would. I was sitting in these church services as a 13-year-old, without any frame of reference for the theological trajectory of the mainline church, and thinking, "I thought the church was full of people who loved Jesus and were really excited about Jesus and wanted to learn more about him and tell others of him. Yet, I don't think of I've heard Jesus' name this entire service...."

Soul-Satisfying Fullness

Fast forward to my college years. Now I was sitting in a PCA congregation, in a humble auditorium in the middle of a cornfield in Western Pennsylvania, and I was sitting under the ministry of a guest preacher who had opened up a passage from Romans, had read it aloud, asked God's help and blessing, and then proceeded to go through **verse by verse** and explain what it meant and why it mattered and how it applied to the lives of Christians today.

I was ecstatic. Where had this practice been all my Christian life? Did other churches do this? Did other people know about it? I went up to the preacher (who was a ruling elder and licensiate in our presbytery, as the congregation was between pastors at the moment) and asked him, "What was it that you did during the sermon today? It was wonderful!"

Initially befuddled by my question, the ruling elder then very kindly explained to me that what I had just witnessed was not a novel practice at all; it was, in fact, an ancient practice that had a long-standing place in the Reformed tradition. It was what we called **expository preaching**.

What a wonderful gem I had discovered: a style of simply going through Bible passages and explaining what they mean—verse by verse, sometimes word by word if necessary—to the congregation and then striving to show how they apply and impact our lives as Christians

today. Expository preaching was simply allowing the text to set the agenda: what the passage spoke about is what the sermon should speak about. Expository preaching did not allow for reading a passage about Jesus' summons to be born again, and then proceed to talk about one's political self-discovery.

Let the People Feast

Expository preaching was food for my soul, as it has always been food for the souls of God's people. God's people are hungry for God's Word, and that is precisely (and simply) what they need. Jesus famously quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 when he says, "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Matthew 4:4).

Moreover, Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

In addition, Jesus claims in John 10:27 "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."

Christ Jesus has the words of life; his people know his voice and his voice is to be found in his Word; his people crave his Word for it is life-giving, and it is nourishment to soul.

Friends, there are many hungry and confused sheep in the fold of God like my college-age self: let us give them precisely what they need and what our Lord has determined they deserve. Let us not be **unduly** creative, inventive, or innovative in our preaching. Let us be steadfastly committed to the discipline and soul-nourishing practice of expository preaching. Let us faithfully exposit and herald and proclaim the wonderful words of life, to the everlasting good of the souls of God's people and to the glory of Christ.



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