

The Primacy of Preaching in a Healthy Church

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[Editor's Note: The following article is an excerpt from [*What is a Healthy Church?*](#) (Crossway, 2007).]

Plants won't grow if they're not fed, and neither will a church. But what should a church eat to grow?

God's Word is the source of all life and health. It's what feeds, develops, and preserves a church's understanding of the gospel itself.

What It Is

Fundamentally, this means that both pastors and congregations must be committed to expositional preaching. Expositional preaching is the kind of preaching that, quite simply, exposes God's Word. It takes a particular passage of Scripture, explains that passage, and then applies the meaning of the passage to the life of the congregation. It's the kind of preaching most geared to get at what God says to his people, as well as to those who are not his people. A commitment to expositional preaching is a commitment to hear God's Word.

Because of this, a commitment to expositional preaching is an essential mark of a healthy church. In fact, expositional preaching is the starting point for all the other marks of a healthy church. Why? Because only through expositional preaching will a congregation hear God's word clearly taught every week. And a congregation will only begin to image God--whether in its evangelism, discipleship, leadership, or anything else--as it listens to God's word.

There are many other types of preaching. Topical preaching, for example, gathers up one or more Scriptures on a particular topic, such as the topic of prayer or the topic of giving. Biographical preaching takes the life of someone in the Bible and portrays the individual's life as a display of God's grace and as an example of hope and faithfulness. And these other types may be employed helpfully on occasion. But the regular diet of the church should consist of the explanation and application of particular portions of God's Word.

The practice of expositional preaching presumes a belief that what God says is

authoritative for his people. It presumes that his people should hear it and need to hear it, lest our congregations be deprived of what God intends to use for shaping us after his image. It presumes that God intends the church to learn from both Testaments, as well as from every genre of Scripture—law, history, wisdom, prophecy, gospels, and epistles. An expositional preacher who moves straight through books of the Bible and who regularly rotates between the different Testaments and genres of Scripture, I believe, is like a mother who serves her children food from every food group, not just their two or three favorite meals.

An expositional preacher's authority begins and ends with Scripture. Even as Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles were given not just a commission to go and speak, but to speak a particular message, so Christian preachers today have authority to speak from God so long as they speak his words.

What It Isn't

Someone may happily profess that God's Word is authoritative and that the Bible is inerrant. Yet if that person in practice (intentionally or not) does not preach expositionally, he denies his own claim.

Sometimes people confuse expositional preaching with the style of a particular expositional preacher whom they have observed. But expositional preaching is not fundamentally a matter of style. As others have observed, expositional preaching is not so much about how a preacher says what he says, but about how a preacher decides what to say. Is Scripture determining our content or is something else? Expositional preaching is not marked by a particular form or style. Styles will vary. Instead it's marked by a biblical content.

Sometimes people confuse expositional preaching with reading a verse and then preaching on a topic loosely related to that verse. Yet when a preacher exhorts a congregation on a topic of his choosing, using biblical texts only to back up his point, he will never preach more than what he already knows. And the congregation will only learn what the preacher already knows. Expositional preaching requires more than that. It requires careful attention to the context of a passage, because it aims to make the point of the biblical text the point of the sermon. When a preacher exhorts a congregation by preaching a passage of Scripture in context—where the point of the passage is the point of his sermon—both he and the congregation will end up hearing things from God that the preacher did not intend to say when he first sat down to study and prepare for the sermon (“Next week, we’ll look at Luke 1,

and whatever God has for us in Luke 1. The following week, we'll look at Luke 2, and whatever God has for us in Luke 2. The week after that ...").

This should make sense as we think about every step of our Christian lives, from our initial call to repentance all the way to the Spirit's most recent work of conviction. Has not every step of growth in grace occurred when we heard from God in ways we hadn't heard from him before?

A preacher's ministry must be characterized by this very practical form of submission to the Word of God. Yet make no mistake: it is finally the congregation's responsibility to ensure that this is true of its preachers. Jesus assumes that congregations have the final responsibility for what happens in a church in Matthew 18, as does Paul in Galatians 1. A church, therefore, must never give a person spiritual oversight over the body who does not show a practical commitment to hearing and teaching God's Word. When it does, it hampers its growth, ensuring that it won't mature beyond the level of the pastor. The church will slowly be conformed to the image of the pastor, rather than to the image of God.

The Way God Has Always Worked

God's people have always been created by God's Word. From creation in Genesis 1 to the call of Abram in Genesis 12, from the vision of the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 to the coming of the living Word, Jesus Christ—God has always created his people by his Word. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). Or, as he wrote to the Corinthians, "Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21).

Sound, expositional preaching is often the fountainhead of true growth in a church. Martin Luther found that carefully attending to God's Word began a reformation. We, too, must commit to seeing that our churches are always being reformed by the Word of God.

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