

A Book Review: Preparing Expository Sermons

I. SUMMARY

Preparing Expository Sermons, Ramesh Richard's revised and expanded book (previously published as Scripture Sculpture), is a refreshing, beginner's guide to the formation and method of biblical preaching. Dr. Richard stresses the absolute necessity of sermons that stem from the text of Scripture, and only from the Scripture. It is easy to follow, simple, very readable, and explained in a way that could benefit both the pastor and homiletic student.

The articulate author gives the three part outline of the book (p. 11), which includes the introduction regarding expository preaching, the main "Scripture Sculpture" process (the seven main chapters set up using the analogy of a human body), and then the appendices which cover a wide variety of relevant preaching issues. Specifically, the seven steps are: study the text, structure the text, the central proposition, the purpose bridge, the central proposition of the sermon, structure the sermon, and then the actual delivery of the sermon.

I loved the author's definition of expository preaching. He said, "Expository preaching is the contemporization of the central proposition of a biblical text that is derived from proper methods of interpretation and declared through effective means of communication to inform minds, instruct hearts, and influence behavior toward godliness" (p. 19). The entire book is an amplification of this central truth. The author teaches the preacher to develop the central theme and he even "practices what he preaches" as he writes a this book around a central theme.

Expository preaching that glorifies the Lord is very difficult, but this is a welcome addition to the homiletical category because it breaks the monumental task of sermon preparation

down into something that can be grasped and managed. This book will propel itself into the top handful of books that every expositor will read, and re-read.

II. CRITIQUE

A. Purpose. The intention of the book is not necessarily found explicitly in the book, although in two places it can be obtained implicitly. The first is found in the actual book title and subtitle. The subtitle reads, “A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching”, and I take this to be the first clue in finding the book’s aim. Secondly, the author mentions almost the exact same thing on page 11 in the “Preface”. I believe Richard hits the bull’s-eye as he successfully explains and demonstrates his proven technique, and to a lesser degree, what he considers the art of preaching verse by verse.

B. Credibility. I have always appreciated professors who have had pastoral ministry in their background and his years of experience shine in and through this work. This book originates from one who knows the monumental task of weekly expository preaching, teaching students to preach, and the eternal importance of the task at hand. For instance, Richard says, “Nervousness is okay. It is a reminder of your frailty and the need for dependence on the Holy Spirit. If the nervousness relates to how well you are going to perform, then it is an unholy nervousness. Your identity cannot be defined by how well you preach from the pulpit. If preaching provides the grid for your self-identity, I guarantee you are destined for depression. Direct your nervousness toward trust and openness to God, the Holy Spirit” (p. 139). When any pastor reads those words, I guarantee you that he immediately identifies with the author. Every student appreciates the mentor who has a working familiarity with the subject.

C. Scholarship. The author is well known for his erudition and sophistication in the pulpit and the classroom. His books are known to a lesser degree, but this book does not suffer any lack of competency in the scholastic department. There are plenty notes (nine pages) and also a bevy of key quotes from other notable men who also train others to preach. One of the most memorable citations is from Charles Simeon, who says, "... Screw the word into the minds of your hearers. A screw is the strongest of all mechanical powers ... when it has turned a few times, scarcely any power can pull it out" (p. 66). Richard is obviously well read and has had a lot of training, both overseas and at Dallas Theological Seminary.

D. Writing Style. Overall, the book is very well written. I keep thinking that I am reading a sermon on "how to prepare a sermon", complete with transitions, repetition, plural noun propositions, and exhortation. At many times, I felt like I was actually in the author's class on preaching. This indicates a freshness and a vividness to the fashion Dr. Richard employs when he writes.

It is easy to follow and the author always tells his reader where he is going and, most importantly, why he is doing what he is doing. The reader can easily discern that an actual expositor wrote this book.

E. Main Strengths. The preeminent strength of this book is its ease of use and format for the actual work that goes into preaching an expositional sermon. "Your Notes" section is a great illustration of this very asset.

Another strong point was the preparation work that the author suggests the student accomplish as he reads individual Bible books. The steps to put a message together are helpful to the busy pastor. In this, the author tries to help clergy ahead of time. He also has a burning desire to assist their own devotional lives. For this he is to be applauded. He asks all sermon

preparation to include, “how should this truth affect our attitudes, knowledge of God, behavior, relationships, motives, values and priorities, and character” (p. 117).

Richard let’s no truth escape this small book as indicated by, “All the details of a text are important, because we believe in the full inspiration of Scripture” (p. 34). This is true but worthwhile to include. The same goes for the way he gives well, thought out summaries, for instance, “An easy way to remember the kinds of questions that the preacher needs to ask of a text is to divide them into four categories: 1. Background questions; 2. Fact questions; 3. Meaning questions; 4. Application questions” (p. 45).

It is nice to see how the author actually does what he teaches. This is seen with his examples of both Ezra and Ephesians. Closely related to this are the “Action Step’s” that are pleasant touches to this work.

Lastly, the thorough defensive of expository preaching was important to include and a real bonus that should bolster the confidence of every expositor in a day and age where topical sermons rule the day and the pew.

F. Main Weaknesses. Without prayer and the “art” of homiletics, I am sure that this book could be pushed to the corner as too “cookbook” in its approach. I would recommend all seminary students to devour the book, but then I would have them re-visit it after they had preached about one hundred expository messages. The potential for “canned” messages will drastically decrease as the pastor develops his own style of being the mouthpiece for our Lord.

Maybe it is the direction of Dallas Theological Seminary to have women in homiletic classes, but I am still against the political correctness that comes across when he says, “Since the majority of pastors are men, I use the masculine pronoun for easier reading. The ideas in this book are for both men and women, and the use of masculine pronouns in no way is meant to

demean women's ministries." (p. 12). I find this comment not disturbing, in and of itself, but it is unfortunate. It only shows what is indicative of the position of the school where Dr. Richard teaches.

It would have been better to have a larger focus placed on the exegetical side of preaching. Homiletics should not drive the exegesis, so a future revision should include more insight on exegesis and the process of moving from exegetical digests to delivering the message with passion.

Lastly, I am uncomfortable with the terminology Richard's uses when he says, "Step 4 is critical to making expository preaching relevant to the audience" (p. 28). I believe that expository preaching is relevant by its very nature and comments like this should be minimized by further clarification.

G. Value for Preaching. I would give this book high marks being useful for the pastor of any church and of any experience level. It has not only clarified my thinking, but I will assign it to be read in my layman's preaching class. My goal is to read this book every year just to check myself. It would also serve a pastor well to give a copy of this to each elder in hopes to help them occasionally preach and understand what true exposition is and entails.

This book was well worth reading, even if you distill many excellent truths down to one "take away" to instantly utilize or gladly have reinforced. The one that stuck with me is, "Application may be content oriented, relating to what the hearers should believe or value, or it may be conduct oriented, relating to what they should do or obey" (p. 48).

I know of no better book to read when you are trying to teach men to preach expositionally. I wish I would have read this book in seminary and tried to apply the steps.

Every pastor needs to work on training up laymen to preach and teach. This book will be the introductory message on the nuts and bolts of preparing an expositional message.