

# IN RESPONSE – TELLING THE STORY, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

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Years ago, preaching through Peter's first epistle, I was struck by the philosophy of preaching the apostle gives at the end of the first chapter.

You have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "ALL FLESH IS LIKE GRASS, AND ALL ITS GLORY LIKE THE FLOWER OF GRASS. THE GRASS WITHERS, AND THE FLOWER FALLS OFF, BUT THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURES FOREVER." And this is the word which was preached to you (1 Peter 1:23-25).

Peter is emphatic; God uses means. He grants the new birth through the instrumentality of His Word (verse 23). It is only "the word implanted, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). Peter gives a proof text. It is Isaiah 40:6-8). God's word is that which endures. It is eternal. This word brings life. God promises, "So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding *in the matter* for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

Peter's proof text is not only a proof text from Scripture. It is an example of the word to be preached. The words about which Isaiah speaks are Scripture. The words of Isaiah are themselves Scripture. And Peter says, "And this is the word which was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:25). It was the word of Scripture that those who were born again heard and through which God caused them to be born again. We therefore assert without hesitation, that preaching must be a setting forth of the word of God, a setting forth of Scripture.

So far so good. But the question immediately arises, How do we preach the word? In what manner do we preach the word? What is our method? This is no idle query.

The aim of preaching is communication. In 1 Peter 1:23 there is an effectual communication of the word of God. "You have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God." Peter does not simply refer to the

content of Scripture related to listeners as in a classroom lecture. God communicates new life through the word. It is therefore essential that the word be presented in a fashion acceptable to God in a manner suited to His purposes.

The Westminster Divines realized this. Look at Question and Answer 86 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Question: What is faith in Jesus Christ? Answer: Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, *as he is offered to us in the gospel* (italics added). How we present Christ is quite important. How we preach the gospel is significant. The faith of individuals is tied up in the manner of the presentation.

After making recommendations for preaching, the Westminster Divines say, "This *method* is not prescribed as necessary for every man, or upon every text; but only recommended, as being found by experience to be very much blessed of God, and very helpful for the peoples understandings and memories."<sup>1</sup>

We sometimes talk about three types of sermon. The topical sermon builds a message around a topic or subject. The textual sermon begins with a particular text, deriving a theme from it, discussing and applying this theme. The expository sermon not only uses a text of Scripture but also derives the particulars of the sermon from the text itself. John Broadus brings out the distinction.

If we simply take the topic and the heads which the passage affords and proceed to discuss them in our own way, that is not an expository sermon but a text sermon. The exposition of some passages, particularly in the hands of some men, will constantly tend towards this form, and often with advantage. But what we are to be aiming at is a strictly expository sermon, in which not only the leading ideas of the passage are brought out but its details are suitably explained and made to furnish the chief material

<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985), 381, italics mine.

of the discourse. In order to manage this, we need to study the details thoroughly to master them, instead of being oppressed by them. We thus, too, enter more fully into the spirit of the passage, as the musician must who makes variations on a theme.<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, those desirous of sincerely preaching the word, as a general practice, choose the method of expository sermons. These sermons more closely align themselves with not only the theme and outline coming from the text but also the details that flesh out the theme.

Two dangers loom large after the details of the text are absorbed. Broadus goes on to address one.

Then we must select and group. Here the inexperienced preacher often errs. Having minutely studied the details of the passage and become interested in them, he desires to remark on the greater number of points than the limits of his discourse will allow. Thus it becomes so crowded that the hearer follows with annoying difficulty, and none of the numerous points presented have time to impress themselves upon his mind.<sup>3</sup>

The other danger is similar. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asserts "that a sermon should always be expository."<sup>4</sup> He quickly adds, "But, immediately, that leads me to say something which I regard as very important in this whole matter. A sermon is not a running commentary on, or a mere exposition of, the meaning of a verse or a passage or a paragraph."<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Jones insists that preaching is *expository* but not *mere exposition*. Next we examine this distinction and more positively define expository preaching.

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<sup>2</sup> John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1944), 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 72.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

## IN RESPONSE – TELLING THE STORY, PART TWO

by Dennis Prutow

We've taken the position that expository preaching generally brings us closer to the word to be preached as urged by 1 Peter 1:22-23. Through this preaching God is pleased to communicate His grace. However, the expository sermon is not merely exposition. Using the terms in a slightly different way, Gene Edward Veith compares narrative and expository writing. "Fiction employs 'narrative' writing. Whereas 'expository' writing seeks to explain a fact or an idea, narrative seeks to recreate a sequence of events."<sup>1</sup> Exposition gives facts. "For example, a newspaper article is usually expository [an *exposition*].<sup>2</sup> Exposition is a "setting forth of facts, ideas, etc." It is "detailed explanation." It is "writing or speaking that sets forth or explains: distinguished from *description, narration, argumentation*."<sup>3</sup>

Because pastors tend to be interested in the facts of a text, they become preoccupied with presenting these facts. They want exposition. So they talk about sentence structure. They show how the adjectives describe the subject of the text. They examine the prepositional phrases. They spend time on the action indicated by the prepositions. They quote parallel passages, discuss variant readings of the original text, and review how commentators approach the text. Sermons become commentaries cluttered with facts. They are *expositions* but not *expository*.

I call such expositions *exegetical* preaching. Pastors present the exegesis of the passage done in the study to their congregations from the pulpit. Sometimes they explain the text and leave the application to the congregation. This is not expository preaching. Lloyd-Jones says regarding exposition, "I would suggest that far from preaching a sermon, such preachers have only preached the introduction to a sermon!"<sup>4</sup> These introductions become the whole sermon.

The Westminster Divines agree. "In analyzing and dividing his text, he [the pastor] is to regard more the order of the matter than of words; and neither to burden the memory of the of the hearers in the beginning with too many members of division, nor to trouble their minds with obscure terms of art."<sup>5</sup>

Too often, in an exegetical sermon, the pastor displays his capacity for study and his breadth of knowledge. However, the object of the sermon is not to communicate the pastor's abilities. These abilities should recede to the background as the message from the text emerges and God communicates new life to the hearts to His people.

Haddon Robinson gives this definition. "Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, delivered from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers."<sup>6</sup> In other words, God communicates His message to the pastor through the text and the pastor then presents the text with the hope, prayer, and objective that God will also communicate His message and His life to His people.

And what is the message? In the broadest sense, the message is the gospel. Christianity is historical. It is the good news of Jesus Christ and what He has done. In the broadest sense, it is therefore the history of Jesus Christ, the story of His person and work. Christianity is not simply a set of moral values. If it were, preaching would be reduced to the exposition of this morality and exhortations to follow it. The mood of preaching would primarily be imperative. But such is not the case. The gospel is in the first instance history, a story; it is narrative.

For "gospel" means "good news," tidings, information about something that has happened. A gospel independent of history is a contradiction

in terms. The Christian gospel means, not a presentation of what always has been true, but a report of something new—something that imparts a totally different aspect to the situation of mankind. The situation of mankind was desperate because of sin; but God has changed the situation by the atoning death of Christ—that is no mere reflection upon the old, but an account of something new. We are shut up in this world as in a beleaguered camp. To maintain our courage, the liberal preacher offers us exhortation. Make the best of the situation, he says, look on the bright side of life. But unfortunately, such exhortation cannot change the facts. In particular it cannot remove the dreadful fact of sin. Very different is the message of the Christian evangelist. He offers not reflection on the old but tidings of something new, not exhortation but a gospel.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, we too often approach preaching as mere exposition. We give a clinical account. We are newspaper reporters. We lay out the unembellished bare facts. We do not come to the preaching task as the work of telling a story, The story.

In the summer of 1992 I had the privilege of teaching a weeklong seminary seminar. One of my duties was to preach at a midweek chapel service. Seven years later, in 1999, I met a former student while teaching another seminar. This student said, "I still remember your sermon." The text was Romans 7:9. "I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died." I told the story of Paul's encounter with Christ, his ensuing struggle, amplifying on the nature of this struggle, and connected Paul's subsequent conversion. The sermon, it seems, was memorable for this young man, not because of the exposition, but because of the story coming out of the exposition.

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<sup>1</sup> Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 62.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, College Edition* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1957), 513.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd-Jones, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 379.

<sup>6</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 20.

<sup>7</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 121.

## IN RESPONSE – TELLING THE STORY, PART THREE

by Dennis Prutow

Everyone loves a good story. What happens, in the middle of a sermon, when the pastor says, “Let me tell you a story”? All of a sudden, he has everyone’s attention. The mere thought of a good story brings people out of their wondering thoughts. The essence of the gospel, the good news, is the story of Christ. Presenting the gospel is presenting this good news, this story. May expository sermons, messages that recount this story, describe its significance, and relate its present application, therefore have the *characteristics* of a story? In asking this question, I do not mean to suggest expository sermons should themselves be stories, although this may certainly often be the case. What I suggest is that to move from mere exposition, the mere relating of facts, to the truly expository and engaging, a sermon ought to have the components of a good story.

After all, we do remember, do we not, that the primary purpose of the sermon is communication. We are to communicate the good news. We are to communicate of the story of Christ. As we communicate the story and the ramifications of the story, God is pleased to communicate new life to those captivated by the story (1 Peter 1:22-25).

A story “requires plot, character, setting, and theme.”<sup>1</sup> Expository sermons must have these characteristics. We briefly look at these points and see how they relate to expository preaching.

A story, of course, needs a plot; something has to happen. A plot is not just random action. First of all, a plot will almost always involve some sort of conflict. Every story will hinge upon a struggle, a problem, or a battle of contending forces or ideas. I used to put off my children’s requests for a bedtime story by saying, “Once upon a time, there was a little boy and a little girl who lived in a castle in the deep woods. And they lived happily ever after.” My children, astute literary critics at an early age, rightly complained, “That’s not a story! Tell us a story.”<sup>2</sup>

Scripture relates the story of human sin and God’s redemption. We hear the story of how Jesus Christ overcame sin, death, and the devil. We see how we too overcome sin, death, and the devil through Christ. This is a saga of infinite proportions and eternal significance.

Every expository sermon will deal, in some fashion, with this redemption from the conflict we experience with sin. The main plot therefore has to do with overcoming sin. There are many sub plots, many instances of intrigue, many and various battles, struggles, and problems. Sarah laughs at the idea of bearing a son in her old age. Is God able to fulfill His promise? David commits adultery and is challenged by Nathan the prophet. Does God’s forgiveness cover every willful sin? An exposition presenting a series of facts about the text can be like a bedtime story without a plot. Children innately recognize there is no story. Parishioners yawn. The absence of any sense of struggle, conflict, or problem, the absence of plot, turns a sermon into a lecture, an mere exposition.

Veith goes on to say, “In addition to conflict, a plot must have structure. That is, it must lead somewhere.”<sup>3</sup> Sermons must also *go somewhere*. They must have an end, a purpose. Before pursuing this, Veith adds other points about plot. “The beginning of the story must introduce the reader to the characters and to the conflict. This is called the ‘exposition.’”<sup>4</sup> Getting out the facts is the exposition. It is not the story. The same is true for sermons. Getting out the facts is exposition but not the whole sermon.

But in a story, the plot thickens, the action rises, there is a turning point. “The story is not over yet. The movement from the exposition to the turning point, or climax, is only the ‘rising action.’ Now we see what happens when the conflict is supposedly resolved. The next phase of the plot, the ‘falling action,’ shows the consequences.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul happily lives in sin. He kills Christians thinking he does God a favor.

Christ meets the future apostle on the Damascus road. He plunges Paul into an abyss of physical and spiritual darkness.

Paul exclaims regarding his situation. “I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died” (Romans 7:9). The plot thickens. Crushed by the realization he is not heading for heaven but for eternal death in hell, Paul enters a time of excruciating conflict. After three days of soul searching mortal combat, Ananias appears. “Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name” (Acts 22:16). The rising action leads to resolution of the conflict. Paul calls upon Christ as Lord.

We too are in mortal conflict with sin. We too ought to be plunged into darkness in order to see our lost condition. We too need to hear the blessed words of the gospel and call upon Christ. Out of darkness comes light.

Next, stories have striking characters. Most people think of the plot as the most important facet of a story. In my opinion, character is usually the key to its success or failure. This holds true even for popular commercial writing, or even for a TV show. I have found that I can predict the commercial failure or success of a new TV series simply by evaluating the effectiveness of the characters. People become involved in soap operas not because of their plots...but because they become intrigued with the characters. The successful TV shows—think of “I Love Lucy,” “M.A.S.H.,” “Star Trek,” “The Cosby Show”—manage to portray characters who seem unique, likeable, and engaging. We want to see what they will do and what will happen to them.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible has the greatest characters, God Himself, Jesus Christ, His Son, and the most memorable, Moses, Rahab, Jannah, Ruth, David, Peter, Paul ....

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<sup>1</sup> Gene Edward Veith, 64.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 67

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 67.

## IN RESPONSE – TELLING THE STORY, PART FOUR

by Dennis Prutow

All expository sermons involve particular characters. The main characters in Scripture are the three persons of the Trinity. We then see how God interacts with men and women. The letters of Paul and Peter are no exception. Paul tells the people at Rome about his experience in coming to Christ. “I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died” (Romans 7:9).

Paul succinctly tells people at Rome how God dealt with him. As a Pharisee, he knew the commandment well. Then, with the power of the Holy Spirit, the commandment came to him with new force of conviction. Sin arose from the dark grave of his sinful heart. As a beast from the deep it reared its ugly hulking frame. Paul knew he was a dead man.

This story is about God and Paul. It embraces the people at Rome. As the pastor studies the details of the text and confronts God, the pastor may empathize with Paul and learn from him. The pastor relates the lesson from the text to the congregation. Through it God teaches His people. He gives them new insight and new life. The characters in the sermon are God, Paul, the Christians at Rome, the pastor and the congregation. Both pastor and congregation must be brought into the orbit of the story if there is to be proper application in the sermon.

The next element of the story “after plot and character, is setting.”<sup>1</sup> Veith goes on to say, “A story must take place somewhere in a particular location in a particular moment. Setting is often thought of as part of the background—the stage upon which the characters perform. Actually, setting can provide one of the great delights of [the story]..., enabling the reader to imaginatively enter into another place and time.”<sup>2</sup>

The text of an expository sermon also has a setting in place and time. The Bible was written over a period of fifteen hundred years. The geographic locations are numerous. Paul’s letters go to various cities, Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi. The prophets speak of and live in various

countries, Abraham in Chaldea, Egypt, and Palestine, Moses in Egypt and Palestine, Daniel in Babylon.

There are differing languages used by these men, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. They use narrative, poetry, parable, and proverb to relate the truth of God. Entering into the setting of the various writers involves time, place, literature, and language.

The expository sermon itself has a particular setting. The message, involving a particular conflict or problem, involving biblical characters, the pastor, and the congregation is also set in the contemporary scene, including the place, time, language, sub-culture, and idiosyncrasies of both pastor and congregation.

The lessons of God we learn in and through Scripture transcend culture, time, place, and language. Although this is the case, the lessons emerge in the ancient biblical setting and we apply them in contemporary setting. There is dramatic shift in setting.

Scripture is our example. New Testament writers take texts from particular settings in the Old Testament and apply them in the New Testament. They apply them to Christ, to Christ’s enemies, and to the church. We can learn a great deal by observing this application of Old Testament Scripture by Christ and the Apostles. We do much the same thing in preaching.

Finally, every story has a theme. “A story will generally have some sort of point; that is, it will be written for some purpose, to convey certain ideas and provoke in the reader certain thoughts.”<sup>3</sup> In preaching, we articulate this theme in a proposition. The Westminster Divines call this theme the doctrine set forth in the sermon. “The doctrine is to be expressed in plain terms....”<sup>4</sup> The theme or doctrine derived from the text also ought “to be the truth of God,” it ought to be plainly “grounded on that text,” and it ought to be set forth “for the edification of the hearers.”<sup>5</sup> Jay Adams is adamant about the necessity of this theme or purpose.

“Unless a preacher knows the theme of his sermon, all is lost. He himself is lost, the congregation will soon get lost, and the sermon would be better if it were lost.”<sup>6</sup> The purpose, of course, ought to be the purpose of the Holy Spirit. Adams declares, “The importance of discerning and preaching according to the Holy Spirit’s purpose has not been emphasized in exegesis or in homiletics courses. Yet, *nothing* is more fundamental to solid biblical preaching.”<sup>7</sup> If we articulate the purpose of the Holy Spirit in a text, we preach the word of that text.

What is the theme or doctrine of Romans 7:9? “I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died.” When God converts men and women, He often takes them into darkness, to show them their peril, before he brings them into the light by the gospel. This is sterile. God plunges men and women into spiritual darkness to awaken them, to show them their proper end and their need for Christ. Still too sterile. What is the point? What is the lesson? Who are the characters?

The scene shifts from that of the text to that of the congregation. There is therefore a shift from the third person [him, them] to the second person [you], and the first person [me]. When your neighbor fears hell because he knows he is dead in sin, God is at work preparing him for the gospel. Too abstract. *When you fear death and hell because you know your sins, God is preparing you to hear the gospel.* After formulating the general theme, we can refine this theme or proposition to make it pointed and applicable in the present context.

Expository sermons are not mere expositions. Expository sermons do closely hew to the theme, outline, and details of the text. But expository sermons are also engaging because they have the characteristics of a story. They have plot, characters, setting, and theme.

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<sup>1</sup> Veith, 69.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>4</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 379

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Essays on Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.