

# Five Completely Effective Ways to Avoid Boredom in Expository Preaching

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I wrote recently on *Fourteen Incontrovertible Arguments in Favour of Expository Preaching*. Those who *oppose* Expository Preaching often do so because they think **it** must breed boredom. And those who *practise* Expository Preaching sometimes intentionally or unintentionally impose boredom on their hearers, perhaps as a kind of spiritual discipline! In my chapter in the book *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis* [ed. by Melvin Tinker, Christian Focus Publications, 1995], I appealed for '*passionately applied expository Biblical Preaching*', and in this article I want to show five ways to avoid boredom in Expository Preaching.

We can be Expository in theological method without being rigidly and predictably expository in style.

## 1. **Be grabbed by the excitement, wonderful privilege, and awesome duty of speaking God's words to his people and his world!**

God has spoken, and our task is to summon people to hear the very words of God. In teaching through the Bible, we can follow God's syllabus for the education of the human race. As we explain what the Bible says, we explain what God has said. As we bring the message of the Bible in the words of the Bible with the purpose of the Bible, God's voice is heard, God rules his people, and God calls humans to faith and obedience.

It is a sign of Liberal Theology to set aside what God has said in order to set the agenda and content of the sermon by the issues that we humans want to raise.

It is a sign of Roman Catholic theology to give too much room to human traditions.

I am amazed when so many follow these theological methods in practice in their preaching, when they set aside as too difficult or irrelevant what God is saying in his words of Scripture, or preach about our current traditions of the Christian life or church practice.

It seems bizarre to assert the authority, relevance, and sufficiency of Scripture, and then not put it into practice in their preaching.

We must be aware of contemporary social analysis, community needs, human issues, and what seekers after God are looking for, but while this forms the *context* of our preaching, and shapes our application, it must not create the *agenda*. It is God's right to address us, and we must listen to his words.

Kevin Vanhoozer in his book *Is there a meaning in this text?* [Apollos 1998] has argued for the moral imperative in allowing the human author of a book to say what he or she wants to say, without being ignored by those who intend to be readers. The same moral imperative applies to our treatment of God, the author of scripture (as it also applies to our treatment of the human authors of Scripture). We preachers must practise and model to our people the priority of letting God speak in the method and way that he has chosen, in the words of Scripture. Preaching through the books of the Bible, verse by verse, chapter by chapter, respects and reflects God's authorship. God did not give us a book of quotable quotes, nor a dictionary of useful texts, nor an anthology of inspiring ideas. When God caused the Scriptures to be written the medium that he used was that of books of the Bible. If that was good enough for the author it should be good enough for the preacher.

## 2. **Release the eloquence of the text! Let the text speak: let God speak!**

It is one of the weaknesses of our tradition of Expository Preaching that it is so formed by the distancing and analytical style of commentaries.

It helps to ask the question 'What is this text trying to *do*?' or perhaps even better 'What is *God doing* in this text?' not just 'What does this text *mean*?'

It also helps to think of words as speech-acts, and of the Bible as 'God's mighty speech-acts' [see Kevin Vanhoozer in P. Satterthwaite and D. Wright eds. *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, Eerdmans, 1994]. We can then ask the question 'What is the *intended result* of these speech-acts?'

Let me give an example from my current sermon series, where I am preaching through Romans 12-16, having already preached through Romans 1-11.

One commentary gives the following analysis of Romans 12:

1-2 Our relationship to God

3-8 Our relationship to ourselves

9-16 Our relationship to one another

17-21 Our relationship to our enemies.

This helps us to understand what the text is *about*, but not what the text is *doing*, or the response that Paul wanted in his readers and hearers.

Here are my sermon titles:

1-2 Present your bodies!

1-2 Renew your minds!

3-8 Join the body!

3-8 Do your ministry!

9-21 Let love be genuine!

The sermon should move beyond information and education to *edification*.

It must be act of ministry, discipling the body of Christ as intentionally as we disciple individuals within the body of Christ.

We must not muffle the text by remote analysis. Clear analysis is a necessary part of the *preparation*, but should not govern the *presentation*. We should use our analysis in our preparation, but now our presentation. We need to find and communicate the inherent shape of the passage of Scripture, but also avoid that familiar phrase 'And now we look at verse 10'!

The well prepared preacher will be able to speak two languages, the language of the Bible and the language of the people. Bringing these two together will help the people to hear the text speak.

**To release the eloquence of the text is to let the text speak, to let it do what it wants to do, to let God say what he wants to say through the text.**

### 3. Express the particularity of the text!

We must resist the temptation to take texts out of context, to make them timeless truths. The excitement of the Bible is found in its historical particularity, its gradual revelation, its Biblical Theology, its salvation history, its move from promise to fulfilment, from Christ promised to Christ revealed.

Its creative tension is found in the fact that it never sinks to the level of 'The Christian Life', or 'Five hints for happy families', or 'Six clues for a successful church.' It does not reduce Christianity to a formula. Formulas are useful for new Christians, but do not bring about mature Christians or mature churches, for formulas always reduce the Bible's message.

We must avoid our hobby-horses, and avoid what we always say when we see the word 'faith' or 'Lord' or 'church' or 'gift' or 'Spirit? We must search the text to find what it is saying in particular.

The key is what we leave out in order for this text to speak with clarity and particularity.

It is only Expository Preaching which will in the long term do justice to the text in its context, and so only this way of preaching will communicate the exciting particularity of the text. **Generality is boring: particularity is exciting!**

#### 4. **Employ as much variety as possible!**

Here is a table which can help us to employ as much variety as possible, while continuing to expound the Scriptures as God caused them to be written, that is, in books.

Address	enquirers	new christians	mature christians
Stories	personal	overseas	everyday people
Application	daily lives	society	our church
Approach	challenge	rebuke	encouragement
Exhortation	at the beginning	all through	at the end
Contemporary comments	at the beginning	all through	at the end
Context	the chapter	the Testament	the Bible
Model of interpretation	how to understand a verse	how to understand a chapter	the context of Biblical Theology
Model of interpretation	how to read a parable	how to use Biblical history	how to read narrative
Background information	literary, or archeological	historical	the author or the characters

Of course the choices we make will largely be determined by what the text is saying, but there is still plenty of scope for variety. The true artist is the one who can use a given form, but use it creatively.

We should also note that different genres of Biblical material call for different kinds of expository styles. The verse-by-verse approach which can work well in Paul's letters is not the best method for the book of Job or the book of Revelation! And for variety's sake we should sometimes do Paul's letters in big chunks, so the people can see the big argument, and not get lost in the detail. **Predictability is deadly: variety is fascinating.**

#### 5. **Release the passions of the text!**

We should release the passions of the text, as the Bible calls us to faith. Here are some relevant New Testament words about what we call preaching: 'call, denounce, warn, rebuke, command, encourage, appeal, urge, debate, contend, persuade, convince, insist, cry out, remind'

Calvin commented on the preacher's task in these words:

*If a man do no more than expound Holy Scripture it slips away, and we be not touched to the quick. Therefore if teaching be not helped with exhortations it is cold and pierces not our hearts.'* 'we add a vehemency to the end that the doctrine may touch their hearts to the quick, and that they not only know what is good but be moved to follow it. [from *Sermons on Timothy and Titus*, reprinted by Banner of Truth, 1983.]

**We should be passionate because God is passionate; Jesus is passionate; the Holy Spirit is passionate; and because Scripture is passionate.**

**We can subdue the passions of the text in these ways:**

- merely lecture, preach, or teach in an academic mode
- never apply
- never exhort
- never refer to yourself
- have so much to say that there is no time to make best use of it

- have too little to say, and so repeat it endlessly
- preach timeless truths
- use clues to passion which do not communicate to your congregation
- get tired doing other things so not have enough energy to prepare or preach with passion

**We can release the passions of the text in these ways:**

- discover and communicate the passion of the text
- project the motivations within the text
- know and communicate with clarity the message of the text
- increase the contrasts in the text
- make the most of the illustrative language of the text
- ask not only ‘what does the text mean?’ but also ‘what is the text trying to do?’ or ‘what is God trying to do through this text?’
- impersonations
- give a dramatic shape to the sermon
- use key words in the text to dramatic effect
- pauses and questions
- relevant application
- use the Bible as we are instructed, to ‘convince, rebuke, encourage’ (2 Timothy 4: 2)

God is not boring. His words are not boring. We must work hard so that we do not make his words boring! Good preaching!

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