

Postmodern Popular Philosophy and the Caricature of Expository Preaching:

A Response to Wade

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In the April 29, 2012 edition of *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, William Wade presents the hypothesis that the time has come for expository preaching to die. The rationale behind his argument is that the advent of postmodernism makes obsolete the practice of expository preaching. In this article, I present two responses to Wade, and offer an alternative approach to the task of preaching to postmodern audiences. Specifically, I contend that Wade has presented a straw man argument, using an obscure and unnecessarily limiting caricature of expository preaching which is not representative of expository preaching as understood by contemporary authors; and second, that he has overstated both the prevalence of postmodern philosophy, and the incompatibility of expository preaching with postmodern thought.

First, Wade is to be commended for his clear concern for the effective, relevant communication of biblical truth. Evangelicals can agree that God's hope for this world is found in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ is presented to both the world and the church through preaching. Romans 10 makes it clear that preaching is a prerequisite for the expression of faith on the part of those who hear the gospel: "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!'" (Romans 10:14-15 NASB). In Wade's article, his passion for the preaching and the reception of the gospel is

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evident, and is commendable. However, is his “plea for the death of the expository sermon” justified?

WADE’S CARICATURE OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING

In order to frame his argument that expository preaching has been rendered irrelevant by the prevalence of postmodern thought, Wade provides his readers with a definition of expository preaching:

G. Batson summarises (sic) the generic expository sermon outline as including an introduction, transitional sentence leading to the main body, which contains three to four possible alliterated main points (each containing three or four sub-points), another transitional sentence leading to the conclusion and a powerful last sentence. There will of course be variations on this generic model, but Batson captures the basic outline of what has become the expository sermon.

The real question to be answered though is this – is this form of communication biblical, let alone relevant? The answer is arguably a resounding ‘No!’ In the New Testament, it is impossible to fit any sermon, speech or address into even the most vague outline which may be considered akin to the outline of the expository sermon.²

I contend that this definition of expository preaching is unnecessarily narrow and limiting, and does not express the concept of expository preaching embraced broadly by evangelicals. This definition places undue emphasis on the form or structure of an expository sermon: an outline with points and subpoints. He references the practice of alliteration of the main points, and the use of numerous subpoints. He then makes the case that such a rigid delineation of scripture is a forced and unnatural manipulation of the text. His case is difficult to argue against. Anyone with a basic understanding of various genres of biblical text will recognize immediately that the structure he describes is foreign, even to the intricately ordered thought process of Paul in his epistle to the Romans, much less to the genres of poetry, history or prophecy.

²Wade, 3

Wade's thesis is that in light of the prevalence of postmodern thought, expository preaching has been rendered obsolete:

However, by interweaving the power of testimony, the possibility of post-preaching dialogue and discussion and allowing for the presentation of image (possibly via power-point, media, drama or vivid, imaginative story-telling), the apostolic preaching found in the first century can be revived to a contemporary postmodern audience.³

Wade's premise is simple: postmodern audiences reject meta-narratives and statements of "truth", religious or otherwise. The form of expository preaching he has presented is one which postmodern thinkers will reject at face value, and one which does not conform to the preaching of the prophets or the apostles. Therefore, it is time to move past expository preaching, to a new era of apostolic preaching which will be relevant and compelling to postmodern audiences.

But has Wade provided us with an accurate and universal description of expository preaching? I contend that he has not. For Wade, it appears that an expository sermon is a sermon which is introduced, outlined, and concluded. The structure, for Batson, and for Wade, defines the sermon. Is this how expository preaching is conceived broadly? Batson's text, the basis of Wade's caricature, is an obscure book published by Global University in Springfield, Missouri, which has never become an influential preaching resource. I contend that expository preaching, as broadly understood by evangelical authors, provides plenty of opportunity for the preacher to reach a postmodern audience. Expository preaching can fulfill Wade's stated goal quite well- rather than call for its death, Wade would be better served to call for its proper use and application to the audience.

³ Wade, 4

If one searches through standard texts on expository preaching for definitions and descriptions of the term, one finds very little that validates the notion that Wade has presented a comprehensive, accurate description of this approach to homiletics.

Haddon Robinson, whose book *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* has been in print since 1980, and is a standard seminary text, defines expository preaching as “the communication of a biblical concept, derived 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 the preacher, applies to the hearers.”⁴ Robinson defines expository preaching in terms of studying the text and context of a biblical passage, understanding it, and communicating and applying the biblical text to the audience. Robinson’s text sets forth several approaches to constructing an expository sermon, including the writing of an outline to express the concepts of the text. He also includes under the rubric of expository preaching the concept of narrative preaching- preaching which tells a story to communicate biblical truth. He writes:

Narrative preaching however does not merely repeat a story as one would recount a pointless, worn-out joke. Through the story you communicate ideas.... Whether the points are stated or only implied depends on your skill as a preacher, the purpose of the sermon, and the awareness of your audience. In any case the story should unfold so that listeners identify with the thoughts, motives, reactions, and rationalizations of the biblical characters, and in the process acquire insight into themselves as well.⁵

Thus, Robinson’s concept of expository preaching dictates how the preacher approaches the text, but not the specific approach the preacher must take to the sermon’s delivery. An expository sermon may well be a narrative sermon, which Wade believes will appeal to postmodern audiences. Thus, Wade may find that taking a broader view of expository preaching

⁴ Robinson, 21

⁵ Robinson, 130-131

will reveal that it can be a useful method to accomplish his goal of stimulating the moral imagination of his postmodern audience.

John R. W. Stott's definition of expository preaching is similarly useful in the present discussion. He writes: "In expository preaching the biblical text is neither a conventional introduction to a sermon on a largely different theme, nor a convenient peg on which to hang a ragbag of miscellaneous thoughts, but a master which dictates and controls what is said."⁶ The expository approach places an obligation on the preacher- he or she must communicate the truth of the biblical text faithfully- but not on the form or delivery of the sermon. There is nothing in Stott's definition which precludes the delivery of an expository sermon in a manner consistent with what Wade describes as necessary for reaching the postmodern audience.

Richard Mayhue, in the widely-read text *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, states that expository preaching "explains the scripture by laying open the text to public view in order to set forth its meaning, explain what is difficult to understand, and make appropriate application."⁷ Again, nothing in this understanding of expository preaching is dependent on alliterated outlines, or on the formal structure of the sermon at all, but rather on the goal- which is to make the meaning of the text plain to the audience, and to apply the moral and spiritual emphasis of the text to the personal lives of those who hear the sermon. It's not clear what, in this definition of expository preaching, Wade would find with which to disagree in his quest to reach a postmodern audience. The emphasis is the communication of God's word to the audience, rather than conformity to a pre-established format.

⁶ Stott, 125-126

⁷ Mayhue, 11

Wade concludes that what is required is “taking the ruthless, yet necessary, step of disregarding expository sermon ‘outlines’ and redeveloping the spiritual discipline of actually being led by the Holy Spirit, both in preparation and in practice, concerning the delivery of God’s Word.”⁸ I’m sure Wade does not mean for this statement to be as moralistic and condescending as it comes across, and that he realizes that the spiritual disciplines of prayer, study, introspection, and reflection are practiced by many preachers who take a different approach to sermon construction and delivery than he espouses. Likewise, he does not attempt to make a case that the Holy Spirit does not provide leadership to preachers who outline their sermons, so we may look past this hyperbole and get to Wade’s real point, which is that in order to address the spiritual needs of a postmodern audience, one must not be rigidly locked into patterns of sermon construction and delivery which were developed for a modern (in the philosophical sense) audience. The truth of this sentiment should be obvious, but, as demonstrated above, this does not preclude the utility of expository preaching as a means to proclaim the Word of God to the postmodern audience.

In conclusion, I wish to present several propositions for Wade’s consideration. For the reader’s convenience, I have three points, alliterated.

- Review the preaching bibliography- Wade’s rejection of expository preaching seems to be based on a rather narrow view of it. A reading of primary expository preaching texts may reveal that many aspects of the expository approach are quite useful in reaching postmodern audiences. Wade seems to have thrown out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Rather than calling for the death of an approach to preaching which has

⁸ Wade, 4

served the church quite well for generations, why not call for its responsible, appropriate adaptation to the contemporary audience?

- Reconsider the postmodern generation. Postmodernism, as a philosophical approach to narrative structures and truth-claims, is becoming more prevalent, but this does not mean that every preacher is preaching to an audience of postmodern listeners who will shut down any attention at the first mention of a claim to the absolute truth of the Word of God. Quite the contrary- most Christians accept the truth-claims of scripture, and expect their preachers and pastors to declare them as such. These Christians find comfort, guidance, and edification from expository preaching- why call for its death, when it is working so well for this audience?
- Reject the postmodern generation. Preaching should adapt to the culture of its audience to gain a hearing, but shouldn't preaching also transform culture? The Bible makes specific truth-claims, and presents a meta-narrative concerning Jesus Christ which all people are called upon to believe to obtain salvation. Isn't it the preacher's job to proclaim this? Biblical theology does not become obsolete simply because a generation has been taught to reject the common sense that has guided humanity throughout our existence, namely, that some things are true, and their opposites are false. Preachers who sacrifice truth-claims for the sake of gaining an audience may find that, having gained that audience, they have nothing biblical to say to them concerning salvation or doctrine. A preacher with a story to tell, but nothing to say- this is a contradiction to be avoided at all costs.

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