

THE EXPOSITIONAL EULOGY: TEACHING PASTORAL PREACHING
FOR FUNERAL SERMONS

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Abstract

Pastoral preaching extends the pastor's ministry through preaching, such as the ministry of the Word through funeral sermons. Yet, funeral sermons may often be eulogies without scriptural exposition or only topical expositions of biblical texts. However, the expositional eulogy is one way to teach students to make careful use of a deceased person's life and words in an expository exposition of a funeral text.

Introduction

In *The Minister's Manual for Funerals*, Al Cadenhead Jr. wrote that "Scripture, appropriately selected, provides comfort to a grieving heart and should be central in any [funeral] service" (Cadenhead 1988, 28). Yet, the use of Scripture in Protestant funeral services and sermons varies, and sometimes Scripture is not central, especially when funeral sermons are eulogies without biblical exposition or are only topical expositions of biblical texts. In such cases, the opportunity to minister through a timely expository proclamation of the Word is missed or, at least, diminished.

Since "preaching is an efficient and effective performance of ministry" (Holland 1980, 117), what can be done to teach students how to minister at funerals through expository preaching? The purpose of this paper is to describe how students may learn to do pastoral preaching in funeral services through composing and

delivering an expositional eulogy. In learning to preach an expositional eulogy, students must first gain a basic understanding of Protestant funeral services, sermons, and eulogies.

Funeral Services, Sermons, and Eulogies

Protestant funeral services are usually shaped by local customs and typically include some combination of prayers, hymns, readings, and discourses. While minister's manuals and recognized pastoral ministry texts tend to agree that the services should be worship services which comfort the bereaved, present the Christian hope, and are relatively brief (i.e., thirty to forty-five minutes), they do not agree about the nature and number of discourses to be in the services.

For example, Andrew W. Blackwood did "not recommend. . .the practice of preaching at a funeral" but only the giving of "a brief message" (Blackwood 1942, 134). He also stated that "there should be no attempt at appraisal of the departed, and no suggestion of a eulogy" (Ibid., 125). J.R. Hobbs believed that "nothing but the gospel or some feature thereof ought to be the subject of a funeral address or sermon" and that "the address or sermon should never be eulogistic" (Hobbs 1934, 12). Robert W. Bailey declared that "the funeral is not a time for a long oration or a wearisome eulogy." Instead, Bailey preferred to give "a three- to five-minute interpretative meditation" (Bailey 1976, 46, 48). Likewise, Franklin M. Segler stated that "a brief funeral mediation is usually appropriate," with its purpose being "to interpret, to affirm truth, to support and comfort the bereaved, and to provide a challenge for future living" (Segler 1968, 43).

However, Segler added that "a personal eulogy, when appropriate, may be used" but "is not absolutely essential" (Ibid., 44). Concerning the eulogy, John R. Bisagno noted:

On occasion, there will be a eulogy or testimony by a family member or friend about the deceased. It is important that these be few and brief. A ten-minute eulogy is seven or eight minutes too long. If eulogies are given at all, there should be no more than two, one by a family member and one by a friend (Bisagno 2001, 100).

In defense of the eulogy, Al Cadenhead Jr. pointed out that "the

eulogy is frequently offered separately from and before the sermon and has a valid, traditional role in many [funeral] services" (Cadenhead 1988, 29). According to Cadenhead, the eulogy is "a time-honored funeral practice" that, being a celebration of the deceased person's life, "once stood as important as the sermon in traditional funeral services" (Ibid., 45). Like Cadenhead, this person has observed more than one type of funeral eulogies: i.e., the biographical review (usually of the obituary), the personal tribute (to the deceased person's character, career, attributes, achievements, honors, and interpersonal impact), and the testimony to the deceased person's Christian faith and service.

Yet, unlike Cadenhead, this preacher and former pastor believes that the funeral service should not only "facilitate the grief process" (Ibid., 38), but also facilitate the healing process. Since "healthy preaching provides a superb environment for pastoral care" (Huffman 1992, 423), is there any way for a Christian preacher to facilitate both processes through a brief funeral sermon or eulogy? Here is where students need to learn about the expositional eulogy.

The Expositional Eulogy

Because a preacher may be asked to do the eulogy or a short sermon in a funeral service, the expositional eulogy is an effective discourse for "giving the Bible a contemporary voice" (one personal definition of preaching given to students by this writer). But what is an expositional eulogy?

An expositional eulogy is not a thematic use of Scripture to set forth an outstanding quality of a deceased person's life, as in this manner: "Paul was faithful to the end, according to 2 Timothy 4:6-8. So was our sister Sylvia. She was faithful to her friends, faithful to her family, and faithful to her faith." Even though a biblical passage would be read (i.e., 2 Tim. 4:6-8) to introduce the eulogy and the theme of faithfulness, the homiletical development of the passage in the preceding example is topical and not expository exposition.

An expositional eulogy is not actually the method W.A. Criswell described in his practice of funeral preaching. He depicted his preferred practice as follows:

In delivering a message at a funeral service, I usually divide it into two parts. The first concerns the one who has died. I earnestly try to make every service deeply personal. . . . I speak of the loved one who is gone, his life, his work, his influence. The second part of the message concerns the word and promise of God. This is delivered from the Bible and is spoken with all the conviction of my soul" (Criswell 1980, 301-302).

While Criswell's method involved biblical pastoral preaching, the expositional eulogy is not a two-part homiletical discourse, with the first part being a type of eulogy which praises the deceased person and with the second part being a pastoral exposition of a biblical text.

Like any expository sermon based on an appropriate biblical text, an expositional eulogy is an expository homiletical discourse, but one characterized in content and method by this intentional difference: the life of the deceased person is used as "light" throughout the development of the funeral exposition. In essence, an expositional eulogy is an expository homiletical discourse which can present both tribute and testimony in celebrating the deceased person's life and, more importantly for deceased Christians, give a comforting and compelling witness in lifting up Christ and applicable biblical truths (as is done in one student's expositional eulogy in the Appendix). While traditional eulogies may be "generally considered out of order in Christian worship. . . because they do not bring glory to God" (Nelson 1967, 301), expositional eulogies certainly can, in fulfillment of Matt. 5:14, 16. Also, an expositional eulogy can be used in place of either a traditional eulogy or as the funeral sermon.

Preparing and Preaching an Expositional Eulogy

The principles which pertain to preparing and preaching effective expository sermons should guide also the preparation and delivery of meaningful expositional eulogies. What John MacArthur Jr. stated concerning expository preaching should direct students in understanding how to develop and deliver expositional eulogies:

The expositor's task is to preach the mind of God as he finds it in the inerrant Word of God. He understands it through the disciplines of hermeneutics and exegesis. He then declares it expositively as the

message that God spoke and commissioned him to deliver (MacArthur 2002, 154).

Furthermore, students should remember that, "although preaching is done by means of human language, under the address of scripture it becomes God's own address" (Oden 1987, 57). Therefore, students should turn prayerfully to Scripture in beginning to prepare an expositional eulogy, instead of trying to "shoehorn" into various texts a rhetorically developed outline of the deceased person's life. Also, just as "pastoral preaching takes place when the proclamation of the Bible and the shepherding of the congregation intersect" (Rummage 2002, 165), so "the minister does his best eulogy when there was a strong and knowledgeable relationship between himself and the deceased" (Cadenhead 1988, 46). And, under the prayer-sought guidance of the Holy Spirit, that relationship should lead the preacher to an appropriate biblical text.

Other suggestions and cautions for students about preparing and preaching expositional eulogies include these:

1. Be scriptural in exposition, personal in illustration, and sensitive in proclamation, especially regarding the use of what the deceased said and did, what the family and friends said about the deceased, and how the deceased lived and died.
2. Be accurate and truthful in handling the life information and in handling the text.
3. Be evangelistic and comforting -i.e., tell the Gospel and also convey the Lord's love, presence, and promises.

Interestingly, students can learn to develop expositional eulogies even when they do not know the deceased. In such cases, students should seek to obtain a copy of the funeral home's news release about the deceased, in addition to the typical minister's obituary card. Often, the funeral director, older church members, and friends can provide helpful insights and memories of the deceased. Sometimes, a church history is helpful, especially for a deceased church leader. Even limited interactions with family members of the deceased during any pastoral ministry opportunities and telephone calls prior to the funeral service can provide useful information, as can visiting in the home of the deceased or examining his or her Bible, if it is available.

However, whatever the case may be regarding the minister's knowledge of the deceased, the preacher should never forget that

the comfort of the bereaved and the effective communication of the Gospel depend upon the presence of God, the sufficiency of His Word, and the work of the Holy Spirit. The expositional eulogy is no substitute for such.

Conclusion

Pastoral preaching essentially is shepherding through sermons. Yet, Wesley W. Nelson noted that "a state of grief makes it difficult [for the bereaved] to concentrate on abstract themes" and "logical arguments" in funeral service discourses (Nelson 1978, 301). One advantage of an expositional eulogy is its human-interest appeal. In this person's experience of having preached hundreds of funeral sermons, people listen to and remember expositional eulogies. Another advantage is the expository proclamation of Scripture, even in a relatively brief discourse, which places the Word of God as central within the context of ministry through the funeral service.

Joe Cothen, a former pastor and pastoral ministry professor, wrote: "Let the pastor remember that many things he does may be forgotten by his people, but they will always love him for being with them in the shadows of grief" (Cothen 2002, 166). The same will be true when God's servant of the Word ministers prayerfully and carefully the comfort and hope of the Word of Life.

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APPENDIX

“Mr. Cain Goes Home”

2 Timothy 4:6-8

Arnold Hendrix

(Used by permission)

Just a couple of weeks ago I visited with Mr. Carl Cain. He did most of the talking. I did most of the listening. He talked about family-he talked about life in general-talked a little about fishing-and . . . , he spoke of death. In the Bible, there is a wonderful passage of Scripture where the Apostle Paul contemplates his own death. My conversation with Mr. Cain-which was the last time I spoke with him, reminded me of these last words spoken by the Apostle Paul. Listen as Paul contemplates his own death, as he writes Timothy:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6-8, NIV).

I. Paul understood the nature of death, vs. 6.

The apostle Paul understood the nature of death. So did Mr. Cain. Paul told Timothy, *“The time has come for my departure.”* The original word that is translated *“departure”* is a word that literally means *“pulling up stakes.”* In another letter, Paul used the same metaphor. Speaking of death, he said, *“Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Corinthians 5:1, NIV).* You see, Paul saw these bodies of ours as just *“temporary dwelling places”*—the real *“us”* lives inside. And to Paul, death for the Christian was nothing more than the real *“us”* pulling up stakes—taking down the tent, and moving to an eternal house in heaven.” Paul knew that death was not the end. Death is a transition—it is the passageway that takes us from the temporariness of this world—into the permanence of eternity. Mr. Cain knew that, too.

I don’t know if Mr. Cain knew that death was near when I last spoke with him. Usually, particularly when I visit someone infirmed or elderly or home-bound or very sick, I will ask them about their relationship with God. I didn’t get to that question with Mr. Cain. I don’t remember exactly what he was talking about, when he said, “Arnold, I want you to know that I’m ready to die. I have my spiritual house in order. I’m ready.” He knew about death. He knew what death is. Those are comforting words to a preacher. I told him, “Mr. Cain, I’m very happy that you are ready—but I know a lot of people who want you to be around a while longer.” He said, “Now I didn’t say I was trying to hurry up the process. That’s God’s call. I’m just saying I’m ready.” In a sense, all Christians are ready to die. But Mr. Cain’s readiness went beyond his soul security. He understood about death. He knew it was not the end.

II. Paul had been faithful to his Lord, vs. 7.

The apostle Paul knew about death. He knew that death would come soon. But as Paul looked over his life—as he gave careful, honest examination of his life—He saw himself faithful to His Lord. He said, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7, NIV).* Paul wasn’t bragging. He was just being honest. Many faithful Christians would be uncomfortable pronouncing such a good judgment on themselves. I never heard Mr. Cain brag about any of his own accomplishments—but, then, I was never with him after a fishing trip, either! And as I sat and listened to Mr. Cain—not once did he speak of how good of a Christian he was or how faithful he had been to the Lord or how valuable he was to the church or what a good, moral, decent, giving person he was. He didn’t say it. He might not even have thought it. But . . . he was all those things. I know.

My family came to this church in 1959. I was 7 years old. Delores was 8. I’ve known Mr. Cain that long. I’ve watched Mr. Cain serve the Lord through this church—and he loved his church. Mr. Cain was in that original bunch of folks that around 1955 began meeting in a home, and then in the old Jet Theater—they eventually constituted as a church, bought this property—and the men of the church—including Mr. Cain—every day after work—and every weekend—constructed its first buildings. Mr. Cain wrote out a little history about himself that Delores shared with me. He told about First Baptist Church of Valparaiso—and this, “I am very proud that the Lord gave me the privilege to be part of a church from the very beginning” He saw being on the ground floor of a new church as a privilege God had given him. And Mr. Cain has a record of faithfulness here.

My last visit to Mr. Cain was prompted by his inability to attend church. He was having a hard time getting

dressedB-a hard time getting around-and he didn't like to rely on people to pick him up for church, so at 81 years old, he made a decisionB-a very hard decision-that he could no longer attend church services on a regular basis at the church he loved. He couldn't attend, but he wanted to make sure he stayed connected to his church. While I sat there, he made a list of demands. "Ok, I want to continue to get the church newsletter. And I want the worship bulletins each week, and the weekly prayer guide. I want the tapes from the services. I want to know about special events-like dinner on the ground, and fish fries, etc. When the new Sunday School books come out each quarter, I want one. And make sure someone brings me a box of offering envelopes each year, so I can mail in my tithe." Do you know what? That list of demands thrilled my soul-because they were the demands of a man who has been faithful to his Lord. In fact, those demands were the evidence that he was indeed faithful.

Monday morning I'm in my office and I hear the mailman come in and drop our mail on the desk in the office. I rarely do this, but I got up, found the mail and began going through it. One envelope jumped out at me. In very bad handwriting, it was addressed to First Baptist ChurchB-it was postmarked Saturday, January 12. And the return address was Carl Cain, 160 Cain Dr., Valparaiso. In it were two offering envelopes with two checks. Folks, that's faithful unto death.

Mr. Cain was ready, because he had been faithful. William Shakespeare once observed, "Oh, what a sign it is of evil life, when death's approach is seen so terrible." To Mr. Cain, death's approach was not terrible. He was faithful to his Lord.

III. Paul had anticipated his heavenly reward, vs. 8a.

The apostle Paul had been faithful to His Lord. Carl Cain, too. And because Paul had been faithful, he anticipated His heavenly reward. So did Mr. Cain. Paul said, "*Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness. . . (2 Timothy 4:8, NIV).*"

Mr. Cain said not one word about his own faithfulness-but he did speak of faithfulness-Christ's faithfulness. I had called Mr. Cain for a time to drop by, and when I got there it was in the afternoon-but he still had on his pajamas-he was comfortable, and he was sitting at the kitchen table having a cup of coffee-and it had been so long since I saw anyone do this-but he poured the coffee out of his cup, and onto the saucer, and then slurped the coffee from the saucer. After one of those slurps, he said (and these are his exact words the best I can remember), AMY Lord has been with me-ever since I accepted Him into my heart at a little church in Gaskin, Florida-He's always been thereB-through good times and bad-and He has never once left me-He has never once let me down." I remember that it felt so good to hear him say, not "Athe Lord," but "AMY Lord." I could sense the intimacy that Mr. Cain had with Christ-I could tell that he and the Lord knew each other real well. He had a "personal" relationship with Jesus Christ.

Mr. Cain could say he was "Aready," because he knew that "His Lord," who had been faithful to Him on this earthB-would continue to be faithful past this life. John records Jesus speaking of heaven-and Jesus promises believers that He, the Master Carpenter will Himself "prepare for us a place" in heaven. And then Jesus adds, "*And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am*" (John 14:3, NIV).

Jesus has made that trip-He has taken Mr. Cain to Awhere He is." Heaven might be reward enough-but Paul saw even more for the faithful Christian-he saw a Acrown of righteousness." I suspect Mr. Cain has his on as we speak.

IV. Paul looked forward to seeing Jesus, vs. 8b.

Paul anticipated his heavenly reward. So did Mr. Cain, because he testified of his Lord's faithfulness. Mr. Cain now has a place-a permanent place-and he has a crown. But the best thing about heaven is not the deluxe accommodations-it's not even the crown-no, it's the presence of the Savior. Paul looked forward to seeing Jesus. Mr. Cain, too. Paul says that this crown of righteousness will be placed on his head by "*the Lord, the righteous Judge.*" You see, it's not the crown on your head-it's Who is placing the crown on your head. The little song says, "Heaven is a wonderful place. It's filled with glory and grace. I want to see my Savior's face!" That's the best thing about heaven-coming face to face with the One who gave His life-so we could get there! We come to the one who deserved no punishment, but suffered and died-taking on our punishment-so that we could enter into a relationshipB-an eternal relationship with a totally righteous God.

I have no doubt from the way Mr. Cain spoke of "his" personal Savior-that he looked forward to seeing His Jesus face to face. We spoke of death being a transition. When Paul wrote the Corinthians he spoke of the "Aspeed" of this transition. He said that the split second we are "absent from the body"-we are "Apresent with the Lord." If that's the case, and it is, then Mr. Cain has already met his Savior face to face-he already heard those words from his Lord, "Well done!"

V. Paul knew that heaven was available to all believers, vs. 8c.

There is one other thing that Paul knew about death. He knew that heaven-the reward-the crown, eternity with Christ, is available to all people. He says, *“Not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”*

In Mr. Cain’s obituary there are words of kindness from his grandchildren. “Take care, Grandpa, and know that there is an empty spot for us down here right now. But one day we’ll all be together again.”

Folks, that is the great hope. But. . .it is not just any hope. It’s not a hope for just anybody. It is the great *Christian* hope. It is a hope that Paul says “will not fail.” But it is a hope that only comes through Jesus Christ. I can stand before you today and tell you confidently, that I have no doubt as to where Carl Cain is right now-I know Whose presence he is in. I personally heard the sincere testimony. I witnessed a long, faithful life that backed it up. But like the old spiritual says, *“Everybody that’s talkin’ ‘bout heaven-ain’t going there.”* Mr. Cain is enjoying eternity now with His Lord, because he made a decision in his life to come into relationship with God, by placing faith in His Son Jesus Christ. I think Mr. Cain would want me to tell each of you-He wants to see each of you again-but that can only happen when we as individuals trust in-place our faith in this same Jesus who was Mr. Cain’s personal Lord and Savior. Jesus said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6, NIV).*

There is so much we could say about this wonderful man-He was father, brother, uncle, grandfather, great-grandfather, friend. He was worker, church member, and patriot. And he valued all those relationships, and we can learn so much from his example. But the greatest lesson we need to take from his life is this: He was ready. And all of us who are ready will one day see him again. That’s a promise of God.

And then there is this final thought. We are sad because we have lost a good man-a wonderful man. But, Mr. Cain has left for his family and his friends, wonderful memories-memories that will become in the very near future-sources of strength. One poet said it this way: *God calls our love ones, but we lose not wholly what he has given; They live on earth in thought and deed as truly in His heaven.*

Mr. Cain lives on in our memories here on earth. But most importantly, he lives on with his Savior in heaven. Someone said, “This world is the land of the dying; the next is the land of the living.” Mr. Cain is living today-like he has never lived before. God bless the memory of Carl Cain.