

Were the Apostles Expository Preachers?

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Abstract

Of the many criticisms of contemporary expository preaching, the one that cuts deepest is that it is not biblical—at least not in the sense that it is warranted by apostolic example. The present paper surveys Luke’s summaries of the ministry of the word in Acts with a view to facing this charge and, as necessary, adjusting homiletical standards of success to conform more nearly to this part of the biblical mandate to preach.

Introduction

To answer the important question raised in the title we will explore in turn 1) how the Apostles preached Christ from the Old Testament according to the witness of Acts, 2) whether what they did qualifies as expository preaching, and 3) to what extent and in what ways their examples should shape our practice. This order is deliberate and intentional. The aim is not to see how well the apostles fit our understanding of biblical exposition, but rather to assess and adjust our thinking and practice to reflect valid and applicable insights from this part of the biblical record.

How the Apostles preached Christ from the Old Testament

As recorded in Luke 24, our Lord Jesus Himself, opened the minds of his first followers to understand their Scriptures (our Old Testament), explained how statements about himself from every part of it had to be fulfilled and then told them *what* should be preached, *where* it should be preached and *in whose Name* it should be preached. These assertions, according to Luke 24: 44 were not new to his post-resurrection hearers.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44-47)

We may wish we had been present to hear which passages Jesus expounded for the Eleven and those with them. We might prefer that his christotelic¹ interpretive strategy had been fleshed out a bit more. Nevertheless, because we believe in the sufficiency of Scripture, we must be content with what we have. What we *do* have includes Luke’s inspired record of the preaching of Peter

and Paul and their co-workers, along with descriptions of how they responded when persecuted for their preaching. In the *Acts of the Apostles* Luke provides: 1) his summaries of some key speeches, defenses, and conversations,² and 2) some editorial comments concerning how the word of God spread from Jerusalem. We know that Luke summarized the sermons he reported because he says, for instance, of Peter's Pentecost day sermon, "And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them . . ." (Acts 2:40). Additionally, to take another example, in this case from Acts 28:23-31, Luke only quotes a few words of what Paul actually said but reports that he preached "from morning to evening". The editorial comments are plentiful³ and convey much more than how the apostles preached. Nevertheless, taken together, these two streams of evidence give us a sufficiently clear picture of how the first Christian preachers preached. Our own preaching in each of our contemporary settings will certainly take other factors into consideration but their example, their status as apostles notwithstanding,⁴ is a good starting point. On the other hand, we will need to consider whether their apostolic role as eyewitnesses (1:22) and their location in salvation history make their ways of handling the biblical text unique.

So, let us turn to the sermons themselves, noticing their common features and their distinctives, along with nearby editorial comments which help us see how these sermons facilitated the *spread of the word of God*.⁶ Occasionally, when the epistles supply further commentary on the words and events recorded in Acts, we will highlight those additional contributions. Here are the texts with a brief description of the speaker and the setting along with a synopsis of how the sermon or defense used the biblical text. With the possible exception of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian official—servants were likely present—each proclamation had multiple listeners. Furthermore, each was occasional, i.e. the speech addressed the specific circumstances of the moment. Of course each speech would repay detailed study; our purpose here is merely to notice in very general terms how each speaker uses the biblical text.⁷ Luke's sermon summaries that quote the Old Testament more or less reflect the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use at the time. I have not given a dominant role to rhetorical criticism, though of course the commentators in varying degrees employ or refer to it.⁸ I have taken note of the insights of J. W. Bowker who uses later homiletical rules in the synagogues as a lens to explore the authenticity of the Speeches in Acts. In the process of doing so he notes that preachers were expected to choose texts that linked the Law and Prophetic readings of the day. Such texts bridged the two on the basis of linguistic similarities. Although the speeches Bowker examines do not meet the formal criteria of these homilies, he notes that "[c]ertain words to do with exposition or preaching of scripture occur exclusively or almost exclusively in contexts where synagogue activity is specifically mentioned. . . [This] suggests that those words may reflect the technical exegetical vocabulary which evolved in Pharisaic and rabbinic Judaism. The possibility is strengthened by the fact that the word for specifically Christian preaching, εὐαγγελίζω, is scarcely used in a synagogue context at all . . . But it *is* used of preaching outside that context . . ."⁹

Acts 2:14-39, Peter's Pentecost Day sermon

Peter cited Joel 2 in order to explain the events everyone saw and heard on Pentecost day. The emphasis is on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (17, 18), but Joel's mention of signs (19-20) and salvation (21) bridges to Peter's dominant thought. God himself attested Jesus' identity by mighty works (22), by his resurrection, (31-32) and by his exaltation, itself displayed by the

outpouring everyone witnessed (33). Peter cites Ps. 16 to argue that the Messiah whom David predicted could not stay dead but must take his rightful place at the right hand of God (cf. v. 33 as well as v. 34). He then quotes Ps. 110 to eliminate the possibility that David (in either Psalm) was speaking of himself instead of the Messiah.¹⁰ With each divine attestation, Peter affirms that his listeners already know the events surrounding Jesus. Of Jesus' miracles Peter says, "as you yourselves know" (22). Concerning the resurrection, he says "of that we are all witnesses" (32). He refers to undeniable evidence of exaltation, i.e., the events of Pentecost day, as "this that you are seeing and hearing" (13). Peter addresses his remarks to "men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem" (14), then to "men of Israel", then to "Brothers" (29). Peter's conclusion concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth is the logical extension of what God attested, what witnesses could not deny, and what Scripture explained. "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ . . ." (36) Having already mentioned Israel's role in the crucifixion (23) Peter now focuses the evangelistic aim of his sermon in the last phrase of verse 36 adding the words, ". . . this Jesus whom you crucified." God's triply attested assessment of Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Christ was diametrically opposed to that of our Lord's contemporaries. God raised and exalted him; they crucified and buried him.

When they heard God's unassailable decree concerning Jesus, Peter's hearers interrupted his sermon to beg for a way to resolve their guilt. Peter explains the way of salvation in words recorded here and others not preserved for us (40). He makes it plain that the offer is not merely for his listeners, but also for subsequent generations in their various locations (39). He urges his hearers to repent and exercise saving faith and thereby to receive the Holy Spirit. Those who received his word were baptized and added to the church (38-41).

Scripture is used in this sermon to make sense of what had undeniably happened. Its testimony, like the vital third leg of a three-legged stool (along with the historical events themselves and contemporary eye-witnesses) left Peter's listeners without argument or excuse. His message came to them as a word from God, not merely concerning Jesus' identity, but also concerning their guilt, and God's offer of pardon (38). Scripture was introduced to shed light on the saving acts of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Its predictions of the Messiah find their fulfillment in Jesus. Its words validate the events as God's attestation of Jesus' identity as Lord and Messiah.

Acts 3:11-26: Peter's address to the people in Solomon's Portico after the healing of the lame beggar.

The opening words of Peter's speech suggest that the crowds were in some way crediting the apostles with the lame man's healing. Peter is quick to point to the true source and purpose of the healing and to do so in terms that simultaneously identify God as the God of their fathers (13a) who glorified Jesus (13b), and Jesus as the very Jesus whom his listeners delivered to Pilate, denied and killed (13c-14), but whom God raised (15). The contrasts seem intentional. The hearers are killers; Jesus is the author of life. He is the holy and righteous one; they prefer to see a murderer pardoned. The one they put to death, God raised from the dead. The apostles bear witness to that resurrection, just as Peter's listeners are now witnesses of a remarkable healing (15-16). In verse 17, Peter's message takes a gracious turn, attributing the killing of the Author of life to ignorance on the part of his listeners and their rulers. With that conciliatory tone, Peter summarizes the prophetic message, which significantly he attributes to God Himself (18), not

unlike attributing Joel's message directly to God (2:17). What God foretold—that Christ would suffer—he has now fulfilled. When his people repent, not only will their sins be blotted out, but the way will be opened to the return of Christ, to times of refreshing and restoration (18-21). These times are also predicted by “all the prophets” (18) through whom God spoke (21). Peter quotes Deuteronomy 18:15-16 where Moses speaks not only *as* the prototypical prophet but also *of* the prophet from among his brothers whom God would raise up and whose every word is to be heeded. Peter “implicitly assumes”¹¹ that the ultimate fulfillment of this prediction is the Lord Jesus. Those who do not obey his word are to be utterly rooted out from the people. Peter follows this assertion by another general summary of the prophetic message—“all the prophets”—from Samuel and those who followed him also predicted these days. Peter now returns to a conciliatory note: you, my listeners, are sons of these very prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers. Peter ends with another specific citation, a paraphrase of Gen. 22:18. These words pick up the universalizing theme from Genesis 12:3, an idea that complements the prediction of times of restoration mentioned earlier in Peter's remarks. Verse 26 supplies a fitting conclusion. Although God's plan is universal, you, despite your role in the death of Jesus, have a first opportunity to receive God's promised blessing by turning from your sins. Your place in the covenant community not only opens the door to blessing now, but also guarantees your expulsion should you choose to reject the invitation. The position of Peter's hearers allows no middle ground.

Peter's spontaneous message begins with the indicatives—what God had done.¹² Imperatives—stated (19, 22) and implied (23)—build on these. Peter employs the Scriptures by summarizing the prophetic message without citation on the one hand and, on the other, by citing specific sayings of Moses to call for the obedience of faith and to extend the promise of blessing. All these summaries and texts invite Peter's fellow Jews to claim their heritage while warning them of the consequences of failure to do so. What is remarkable is the place in the ongoing plan of salvation that Peter invites his listeners to take. Peter combines forthright accusation with winsome and gracious invitation; testimony to the fact of Jesus' resurrection is complemented by the testimony of God himself from the Scriptures. He seems comfortable assuming that his listeners would agree with his summary statements and be moved by his specific citations. The use of generalizations, it should be noted, happens in the context of Jewish listeners who were observing the hour of prayer. That is, they were at a minimum, “observant” Jews, and possibly genuinely devout. The Christology of Peter's sermon is richly supported by echoes from the Scripture.¹³

The response, as always when the gospel is preached, was mixed (4:1-4). The Sadducees, annoyed because the resurrection was preached, arrested the preachers. On the other hand, many—indeed there must have been something like two thousand—heard the word and believed.

Acts 4:8b-12: Peter's bold, Spirit-filled answer to the Jewish leaders' question concerning his authority to heal.

Under arrest, Peter responded directly to his interrogators' question. He not only identified Jesus as the one in whose Name and by whose authority the beggar was healed, but added significant descriptions of Jesus that fleshed out the gospel. Addressing not only all his immediate listeners, but all Israel as well, he gives credit to “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead” (10). Citing Psalm 118:22, Peter identifies Jesus as not merely the

source of *healing*, but indeed as God's promised and only agent of *salvation*. By adjusting the wording of the LXX he accuses his listeners of rejecting Jesus as Messiah. In so doing, Peter incorporates application into the citation.¹⁴ Luke had already cited the Lord Jesus' use of this text (Luke 22:17). In verse 12, Peter universalizes what he has declared to the Jewish rulers. There simply is no other name under heaven by which humanity must be saved.

Peter's listeners, astonished at how such unlettered men could be so bold, had to conclude that they had been with Jesus, a subtle reminder that these rulers were not just of the class of those who sent Jesus to the cross, but were some who had dealt with him directly enough to recognize his influence on Peter and John. Not being able to deny the miracle, the rulers threatened the apostles and warned them not to speak any more in the name of Jesus. Peter's response is as courageous as it is logical. When it comes to deciding whom to obey, the choice is really no choice at all; we must obey God and can not do less than "speak of what we have seen and heard." (20) I infer from its prominent place in the narrative (8) that being filled with the Holy Spirit not only influenced what Peter said in fulfillment of the Lord's promise in Luke 12:11-12 and 21:14f¹⁵ (8-12), and what Scripture he cited (11), but also in whose Name he spoke (17), and the boldness with which he did so (13).

Release from custody brought a theologically rich, Scripture-saturated prayer (4:23ff). Imbedded in it was the request, "grant your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness" (29), a petition which was granted (31). Luke is comfortable describing the preaching of Christ as speaking the "word of God". The apostolic preaching was accurately described as powerfully and graciously "giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (33). Acts 6 contains pivotal editorial comments which imply functional equivalence between "preaching the word of God" (6:2) and "the ministry of the word" (6:4). Verse 7 reaffirms the theme of Acts, reporting that "the word of God continued to increase".

Acts 7:2-53: Stephen's defense which led to his martyrdom

Stephen had a reputation for being "full of grace and power [and] doing mighty works among the people." (6:8) The wisdom and Spirit by which he spoke overwhelmed his opponents (10) so they trumped up charges that he was undermining the Law of Moses and speaking against the temple. With shining countenance not unlike that of Moses,¹⁶ Stephen offers a long answer to a short question. Initially he identifies with his listeners, calling them brothers and fathers (2). He then proceeds to recite Jewish history beginning with Abraham and moving through the story, mentioning prominently Joseph, Moses, and David. He does so to underscore that the patriarchs betrayed Joseph, but God was with him (9-10). Moses, whom Stephen describes as "both ruler and redeemer" their fathers both rejected (35) and refused to obey (39)¹⁷. "This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers'" (37). This citation from Deuteronomy 18:15 not only places Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophetic tradition, but implicates the Israelites in yet another rejection of God's word. The alternative Israel chose then—idolatry aided by Aaron—was symptomatic of what happened again and again. Stephen cites Amos 5:25-27 which is not unlike what Jeremiah alludes to in 7:18; 8:2; 19:13 to reinforce this charge of idolatry and to remind them of the certainty of judgment. Stephen is placing his listeners squarely in this rebellious family tree, though at this point he is still referring to the God-rejecting idolaters as "*our* fathers" (39, 44, 45).

Stephen now turns from the tent of Moloch (43) to the tent of witness (44), and then to the temple since speaking against it was a major part of the accusations against him (6:13, 14). The tent of witness, built according to the specifications revealed to Moses sufficed until the days of David “who found favor in the sight of God” (45-46). It was Solomon who actually built “a house for [God]”, yet Stephen cites the words of Is. 66:1-2a which echo the words of Solomon’s prayer of dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:27) to make the point that no house can contain the Creator God whose throne is heaven. This citation only serves to reinforce the (so-far) implied charges of idolatry. Not only are his listeners the spiritual descendants of those who reject God’s messengers and opt for idolatry, their understanding of God is correspondingly inadequate; they are theologically deficient. It would probably be going too far to say that Stephen has in mind how Jesus himself is the place where God tabernacled (John 1:14) and where humanity truly meets and worships God (John 4:19-24). Nevertheless what he says here is consistent with those truths.

Dr. David Pao notes that the many references to God’s work outside the land of Israel (1 to 45a) counter the charge that Stephen was blaspheming “this place” (6:14) if we take that to refer to the land as well as the temple, and prepare the way for the spread of the gospel outside Judea as recorded in Acts 8. Judea was not holy in the sense that only there could God work. In verse 51 Stephen shifts from a third person perspective describing what our fathers did to a second-person frontal attack. Drawing on all the negative examples of rejecting God’s representative he has just chronicled, Stephen accuses his listeners of spiritual Philistinism. Instead of referring to “our fathers” he now says, “As *your* fathers did, so do you.” “Which of the prophets did not *your* fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” (52-53, emphasis added) Stephen’s listeners had resisted God’s word in the past and true to form they stopped their ears this time too. Having rejected the One who is at the heart of the message they killed Stephen his messenger, but not before he was granted a vision of the exalted Savior at the Father’s right hand.

Stephen’s message is especially instructive because it explicitly states his view of the nature and purpose of the Torah: “[Moses] received living oracles to give to us.” (38) Moreover, Stephen’s use of these and other living words demonstrates a recitation of the history of redemption that displays purposeful selectivity. Stephen skillfully mentions the ancestral heroes that he and his listeners have in common while he slowly builds a case against those who rejected God’s appointed rulers and redeemers. His inclusion of details, as Marshall reminds us, adds interest.¹⁸ Alongside and indeed within this recitation are textual allusions, paraphrases and echoes that would build credibility with Stephen’s listeners and specific citations attributed to prophets whom his listeners should have been eager to hear and obey, but whose message they in fact rejected, whose law they did not keep. Stephen conveys Christological content mainly by means of typology and titles such as “ruler and redeemer” (35), “prophet” (37), “Righteous One” (52), and “Lord (59-60).¹⁹ The charge of betraying him and murdering him is prominently reaffirmed (cf. 2:23; 36; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 7:52). In a nutshell, Stephen has turned the tables on his listeners. They accused him of speaking against the temple and the law; he demonstrates that it is they who have not obeyed the law and have idolized the temple. At the heart of their disobedience is the sin of rejecting God’s Ruler Redeemer.

Acts 8:26-33: Philip's conversation with the Ethiopian official

Philip was introduced in 6:5 as one of the seven Spirit-filled men who had the wisdom and good reputation to look after the Hellenistic widows who felt slighted in the distribution of food. In the first part of chapter eight, he is one of those persecution-scattered emissaries who went about “preaching the word” (8:4). Luke describes this ministry with two phrases which he uses almost interchangeably. He “proclaimed to them the Christ” (5); he “preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (12). His ministry of the word was accompanied by signs and his listeners were amazed (9, 11, 13) and believed (12, 13). Luke describes the report of this saving faith as Samaria having “received the word of God” (14). When Peter and John came to Samaria to pray that these believers would receive the Holy Spirit, Simon wanted to pay for that privilege and revealed the wickedness of his heart. Having dealt with him, they returned to Jerusalem. Luke sums up their ministry: “Now that they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.” (25) Testimony to the gospel facts, speaking God’s word, and evangelizing all describe the apostolic preaching.

Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian was a divinely arranged appointment (26) whose main features are easy to see. Philip obeyed God’s directive (26-27), listened to his listener before he spoke to him, and asked his listener if he understood the meaning of the biblical text he was reading (30). When the official protested that he could not do so without someone to guide him, Philip accepted his invitation, listened further to his specific question concerning the referent of Isaiah’s words, and “beginning with this Scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus.” (35) Most of the earlier sermons in Acts began with an *event* that needed some explanation and went from there to describe how Jesus fulfills the Messianic role predicted in the biblical text. Here Philip’s starting point was also something contemporary—a Jewish worshipper reading the prophet Isaiah. From that very text, Isaiah 53, Philip preached the gospel of Jesus. We are not told explicitly how he bridged from the text to the gospel, or for that matter anything that he said after beginning with Is. 53, but it seems likely that having taken the time to listen to his listener’s question, he had only to answer it. Isaiah was not speaking of himself; he was speaking of the Suffering Servant, the Messiah, whose identity Philip knew and proclaimed. The verses cited speak of humiliation, slaughter, and his life being “lifted up from the earth”. Whether Philip related this lifting up to the cross, the resurrection, or the ascension—or some combination of all three—we are not told. The message must have explained how these events spelled good news which invited and necessitated a response. The Ethiopian evidently knew he must be baptized. When he saw water it was he who asked if there were any reason he could not be baptized and Philip saw none and readily conducted the baptism.

This conversation comes close to expository preaching as many contemporary Christian preachers practice it. Sensitive to the listeners’ situation, the Spirit-filled preacher opens his mouth, begins with a biblical text, proclaims the gospel of Jesus, and invites a definite response of faith (35). Philip’s focused sermon was also true to the larger context of Isaiah where later on, in 56:3-4, outsiders such as eunuchs are included in God’s people. Likely, Luke included this episode in his account to underscore this as part of God’s plan, now unfolding in history. Philip’s practice underscores the importance of obeying God’s leading, listening to our listeners, starting where they are, letting the text speak, but also “guiding” (ὁδηγήσει) our listeners, and giving them enough information to take the next step of obedience required or implied by the text. God

not only gives his Holy Spirit and his word, he also gives teachers of that word who by the Holy Spirit guide people into its truth.

Acts 10:34b-43: Peter's sermon in Cornelius' house

Acts 10:1-33 sets the stage for Peter's sermon, the beginning of which is summarized in the section that follows. Cornelius was a generous, praying, devout God-fearer. Peter was a thoroughly Jewish apostle. Both saw visions that prepared them to speak and to hear. No preacher could want a better introduction than Cornelius offers Peter in Acts 10:33. The listeners were eagerly expectant, keen to hear all that God had commanded Peter to tell them. Peter launches into his message, confessing that he now understands God's impartiality. He then affirms the word that God sent to Israel—good news of peace through Jesus Christ—who is Lord of all. Peter then appeals to three witnesses: first, to his listeners who knew of the early events of Jesus' earthly career (37-38), secondly, to those (including himself) who were eye-witnesses of "all he did", and of the crucifixion and of his resurrection appearances (39-41), and thirdly, Peter appeals to "all the prophets [who] bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name"²⁰. This general reference to the Septuagint is significant in that it first proclaims Jesus as the fulfillment of the Messianic role of Judge and then against that backdrop underscores his foundational benefit—"forgiveness of sins through his name"—and says explicitly that this benefit is available to *all* who believe in him.²¹ We don't know what else Peter might have said afterward had not the Holy Spirit cut short his sermon, but what is significant is that Peter appeals to Scripture, even when speaking to Gentiles, albeit those God-fearers who have come into contact with the synagogue. What is also noteworthy is that there is no indictment of Peter's present listeners although of course responsibility for the crucifixion is once again laid squarely at the feet of "the Jews in Jerusalem".²² This matters because it sheds light on the earlier indictments in the previous sermon summaries. They are not to be taken as generalizations concerning the guilt of all humanity, but of the specific historical role of those who actually did the deed. Notice also that Peter, like Cornelius, sees his preaching as what is commanded by God (33, 42). His use of the Old Testament supports the universal scope of the gospel offer (43) and that emphasis reflects Peter's awareness of his listeners' situation.

Chapter 11 recounts the report of these events to the Jerusalem Jewish Christians and in doing so uses several phrases to summarize what happened. Among them are the phrases: "received the word of God" (1) and "declare . . . a message by which you will be saved" (14). Those who were scattered by the persecution went "speaking the word" (19) only to Jews in Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. Some from Cyprus and Cyrene, when they came to Antioch, "spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus." (20) Speaking the word of God and preaching Jesus were used almost interchangeably. Furthermore, when the prophets and teachers were sent out from Antioch, the work to which the Holy Spirit called them (13:2) was evidently proclaiming the word of the Lord (13:5).

Acts 13:16b—41: Paul's "word of exhortation" (v. 15) to those assembled in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch

The Law and the Prophets had already been read in the synagogue service. Since we do not know what texts were read, we can not say how or whether Paul's remarks related to them. Paul's mention of weekly Scripture readings (27) may be the closest tie with what has just proceeded. What is clear enough is that Paul addresses both Jews and God-fearers (16, 26, 43). Paul arose

to speak (16). He recites and identifies himself with Israel's history from "our fathers" to David emphasizing God's role choosing the fathers, multiplying the people in Egypt, putting up with their waywardness in the wilderness, giving the land, the judges and the kings including Saul and David. David, Paul notes, was a man after God's own heart—echoing 1 Sam. 13:14—willing to do God's will. It is of his seed that God brought Jesus to Israel according to his promise. He emphasizes the theology of the Scriptures without neglecting their anthropology. The failure of the Jews of Jerusalem to recognize him was rooted in their failure to understand the voice of the prophets (φωνὰς τῶν προφητῶν) even though they heard them read every Sabbath. Their actions in condemning and executing him fulfilled everything that was written of him. God who raised up David has now raised up Jesus—from the dead. That resurrection fulfills what was promised to the fathers so that not only their children, but all who fear God can receive the "message of salvation" (26), the good news (32). To support this claim, Paul cites words from the second Psalm (v. 7), Isaiah 55:3, and Psalm 16:10. Not unlike Peter, Paul offers evidence that in Ps. 16, "your Holy One" could not refer to David himself, since David *did* see corruption. Only through this man—Jesus—can forgiveness of sins be proclaimed to you. Only through this one can everyone who believes be freed from all those things we could not be justified from by the Law of Moses. Paul ends with a warning which he attributes to the prophets (τοις προφήταις), though it pretty closely reflects the words of a single prophet from Habakkuk 1:5. The warning is against unbelief that God would do a work in that day. After the service ended, Paul and Barnabas spoke to those from both groups who followed them, urging them to continue in the grace of God. Both the tone and the content of Paul's message seem calculated to put no unnecessary barriers in the way of his listeners. Paul uses Scripture in both general ways, reciting the history of redemption, and specific ways, employing multiple identifiable texts to argue that Jesus fulfills God's promise and that it is by his prophesied death and promised resurrection that he does so. All this builds toward a conclusion where Scriptural language once again bolsters the call for faith by reminding his listeners of the possibility of unbelief. When others joined the congregation the following Sabbath the text says they gathered to "hear the word of the Lord." (44). Paul describes himself as having spoken "the word of God" to the Jews, and gives Scriptural justification (from Is. 49:6) for then preaching to the Gentiles. Verses 48-49 reinforce the idea that through preaching the Word of the Lord is on the march begetting new life and "spreading through the whole region". What is striking in the following chapters by way of Luke's editorial comments is that Paul and his team routinely preached wherever they went (14:1, 3, 7, 9, 15, 21, 25, 15:35, 36; 16:10, 13, 32) and that the report of what happened in each place emphasized what God had done: "granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands" (14:3; cf., 15:12), opening "a door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27; cf., 15:4, 8), and "the Lord opened [Lydia's] heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul (16:14).

Acts 17:2-3: Paul and his companions' ministry of the word in Thessalonica

The setting is the synagogue in Thessalonica (1). The audience consisted of devout Greeks and Jews (4-5). Paul was accompanied by Silas. The example of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath reported here was not unique but is in keeping with Paul's usual practice (2). Paul's ministry of the word that spanned three consecutive [?] Sabbaths could be easily summarized. He reasoned with his listeners from the Scriptures (διελέξατο αὐτοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν γραφῶν). His subject was the Messiah. The style was dialogical.²³ Paul opened biblical texts (διανοίγων) and laid before them his case from those texts that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise

from the dead (καὶ παρατιθέμενος ὅτι τὸν χριστὸν ἔδει παθεῖν καὶ ἀναστῆναι ἐκ νεκρῶν). Having cited those unspecified Old Testament texts and argued from them about the Messiah, Paul now asserts directly that Jesus fills the predicted role: “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” (3) His aim is evidently persuasion (4) and in some people—including Jews, devout Greeks and leading women—the word succeeds. The Jews, as a group, however were jealous, incited the rabble to form a mob, and chased Paul and Silas out of town. That the success of the word was more than superficial is wonderfully chronicled in 1 Thessalonians 1-2 where 2:13 reveals Paul’s reflection on the whole process: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”²⁴

Notice that Paul had ample material from his Bible to make his case since his evangelistic series lasted three Sabbaths. Furthermore, it is significant that as Luke summarizes his messages, they begin where the listeners are and make a case from their Scriptures clarifying what, in hindsight, was there all along but “hidden” as it were in plain view²⁵, namely that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. Once Jesus perfectly fulfilled these prophecies, the identification of Jesus as the Messiah was a relatively easy case to make for those who had ears to hear it. The following account of Paul and Silas in Berea reaffirms Luke’s shorthand for preaching. The Bereans “received the word with all eagerness” (11). The Thessalonians heard that “the word of God was proclaimed by Paul” (12).

Acts 17:22-31: Paul's Areopagus speech

In Athens, Paul resumed his usual to-the-Jew-first strategy, dialoguing in the synagogue with Jews and God-fearers (17), but he did not speak only to them. His daily discussions in the marketplace targeted anyone who happened to be there. Paul proclaimed Jesus and the resurrection (18). Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers wanted to hear more of this new teaching and invited him to the Areopagus. Famously beginning with an altar inscription he had observed in their city, Paul offers a straightforward theological corrective. God is creator of all, Lord of heaven and earth and therefore does not live in temples or need the service of humans. To all he has created he gives life and indeed everything. Part of his creation is the human race which has a single father. This corrected theology entails a valid anthropology: the human race is one because God is one. God is sovereign over all the nations determining both the geographical and chronological extent of their dominions. This divine oversight of the nations is purposeful: God wants all people to seek and find him. This search is not impossible because all human life is in him for, as even their Greek poets admit, we are his offspring. This being the case, we should not think of God as being like an image made of precious metal, stone or like any artistic, human representation. Nor should we allow the truth of God’s transcendence to nullify the fact of his immanence. Up until this time, God has overlooked faulty, ignorant misunderstandings of himself. Now, he calls everyone in every place to repent, having fixed a day of judgment for all people, appointed a judge, and given assurance of this by raising him from the dead. Upon hearing this message, some mocked, some wanted to hear more and some believed.

Luke surely wants us to see that Paul’s address started where his listeners were and located their sin in their culpable ignorance of God. Their own writers and poets testify to what they should have known by virtue of general revelation had they not suppressed the truth in unrighteousness,

namely the truth that human beings are made in the image of God. God's mercy to them in their ignorance was not to be taken as permission to persist in it. Indeed when Paul does preach Jesus in this speech, he proclaims him as righteous judge whose universal jurisdiction is established not only by means of his appointment by the God who created the universe, but also by his resurrection from the dead. Paul's point is that the scope of judgment is as universal as the sphere of human accountability because the resurrection of Jesus is public truth.²⁶ To put it otherwise, Paul allows no listener off the hook. God is holding everyone accountable for idolatry. His appointed man—Jesus is not named at this point in the sermon—will judge all by righteous standards. Everyone may have faith that this will happen and that Jesus is qualified to judge by virtue of his humanity and his resurrection.

The key question for our purposes is the place of the Bible in this discourse. R. C. H. Lenski conjectures that

Paul is preaching natural theology as he had done in Lystra (14:15, etc.). The Scriptures also contain all of this theology; but in dealing with pagans an appeal to the Scriptures as Scriptures would be useless, hence Paul appeals to the mighty facts themselves as even pagans may see them and realize their direct import. . . . After these fundamentals in regard to God and to man have been stated, the apostle advances to the revelation which God made in Christ. He naturally passes over the revelation made in the old covenant (he is speaking to pagans) and shows his hearers what God now offers them.²⁷

This seems to me to put the case too strongly. True enough, Paul supports his contentions about God and humanity by means of lines from Greek poet(s).²⁸ He also argues that if we are God's offspring, God could not possibly be—or be adequately represented by—anything inanimate. Greg Livingstone reckons that Paul's approach here demonstrates what he wrote in 1 Cor. 9:21, "to those without the law, I became as one without the law".²⁹ Witherington is closer to the mark, in my judgment when he asserts that "Paul's argument, while drawing on some Greek ideas, has been thoroughly biblical from the start . . ."³⁰ Marshall documents numerous echoes and allusions to the Old Testament.³¹ In my judgment, it is not putting it too strongly to say that Paul preached the biblical message which reflects what was in Paul's Bible in light of God's work in Christ to that point in history. Like every effective sermon Paul included only those truths that focused the sermon's aim upon the hearers' underlying need. Paul preached the Bible's God and his plan to save the nations, a plan that finds its culmination in Jesus. Paul's thematic sermon then was biblical in both content and aim despite the fact that it had neither explicit nor general textual citations. In the absence of editorial comments from Luke labeling this sermon as less than biblical, it seems appropriate to take it as a positive example of apostolic preaching to those without exposure to the written word of God. It seems to be just one more example of Paul proclaiming the word of God. Paul's authority as a preacher rested in his speaking in the Name of Christ and showing how Jesus fulfilled all that was predicted of him in the Scriptures, even when he as a preacher did not find it expedient to cite those Scriptures.

Acts 20:18b-35: Paul's Miletus speech to the elders of the Ephesus church

The first part of chapter 20 does not tell us much about Paul's teaching ministry to the church in Troas except that he was eager to make the most of his last opportunity to speak to them. In the context of a Sabbath gathering of believers where there was the breaking of bread, Paul

dialogued with them, prolonging the word (παρέτεινέν τε τὸν λόγον) until midnight. Even after the distraction created by Eutychus, Paul kept going until daybreak! (The word used to describe this conversation is the one from which we get our word *homiletics*.) Paul left by ship stopping some days later at Miletus. From there he sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. Luke who was present on this occasion recorded what he said to them. His remarks are significant not only because they are an extended address targeting mature Christians, but also because they are Paul's own description of his ministry in their midst, a ministry to which they could bear witness (20:18b). Paul emphasizes the inclusiveness of his message and strategy. He declared whatever was helpful (20) which he also describes as “the whole counsel of God” (27) and proclaiming the kingdom (25). He proclaimed and taught.³² He taught in homes and public places, addressing Jews and Greeks, in humility yet with boldness. He admonished everyone, unceasingly, night and day (31). This breadth is not to be taken as finding a least-common-denominator message acceptable to all. Paul only preached what he had received, namely the gospel of the grace of God (24). He called for “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (21). He was convinced that the word itself had the power to build up and keep those believers he committed to God (32). Paul clearly believed that leaders must watch themselves as well as the flock (28) if they are to guard it. He unashamedly sets himself forth as an example of courage, comprehensive teaching, and sacrificial willingness to pay any price. He finished his remarks by citing a saying of Jesus (35). With that he prayed and took a tearful leave of them.

Paul's strategy for ministering the word places a premium on faithfulness to all God has spoken and to his mandate to get that whole message to the entire audience for whom God intends it. One gets the unmistakable impression that Paul believes he would have the blood of his listeners on his hands had he failed to do so (26-27). Paul's recollection of his practice fits nicely with Luke's earlier report of how he ordered his life when support from teammates made it possible. “When Silas and Timothy arrived [in Corinth] from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word (συνείχετο τῷ λόγῳ) testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (18:5). His absorption with Scripture—both displaying and proclaiming its message—was the most prominent feature of his ministry.

Acts 22:1-21: Paul's address to the people after his arrest in Jerusalem

Paul asked for permission to speak to the crowd who had been stirred up and were accusing him of “teaching everyone everywhere against the people and *the law* and this place.” (21:28, emphasis added) So we might expect Paul to use the law in his popular defense of his message. He does use their language. He does affirm his Jewishness. He does speak of his roots in Jerusalem and his academic pedigree, having been educated at the feet of Gamaliel. He lets them know that he is as zealous for God as they and cites his persecution of “this Way” (22:4) as evidence of this and calls the high priest and entire council as his witnesses. But instead of citing the law, he appeals directly to the words of Jesus, whom he refers to as Lord (8, 10, 10, 19), who met him on the Damascus road, identified himself by name and directed him to go to Damascus and wait for further instructions. There, Ananias, “a devout man according to the law” called Saul “brother” and told him, “The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard” (15). Once Paul was baptized he returned to Jerusalem and makes a point of telling his listeners that he was praying *in the temple* (17). In the trance and

vision that ensued, the Lord makes it plain that Paul's testimony about Jesus will not be accepted there. As he recounts his verbal response, Paul indirectly adds to the evidence of his loyalty to things Jewish: he imprisoned and beat Christian believers and approved and supported those who stoned Jesus' witness Stephen. Paul's listeners could no longer remain silent but drowned out his speech with imprecations and shouting, animated by throwing dust in the air and tearing of their own cloaks. The tribune would have had him flogged to determine his crime, but Paul used his Roman citizenship to delay the interrogation. The next day, he exploited sectarian differences between Sadducees and Pharisees to stall for time.

The striking thing about this speech is how Paul appeals to the living Word instead of the written word. Jesus, the Lord and the Righteous One, is set forth by Paul as one who both appears and speaks. Paul's lack of biblical citations—either specific or general—when speaking to a devout Jewish audience is remarkable and, I would argue, it is purposeful. He is not just saying that a religious experience changed his course but that God, who values his Name, his City and his Law has himself transcended that law becoming both visible and audible and he has identified himself by the name Jesus. No wonder Paul's listeners reckoned any Jew who spoke this way should be banished from the earth!

Acts 26:1-23: Paul's defense before Agrippa

Before this account there were other summaries of Paul's defenses before the authorities. For our purposes, Acts 24:14 and 24:24-25 deserve passing mention. In 24:14 Paul affirms that he worships the God of our fathers "believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets." In 24:24-25 not only is Paul said to speak to Felix and his wife about faith in Christ Jesus but he also dialogued about righteousness, self control and coming judgment, all topics relevant to one who was keeping Paul in custody in the hopes of receiving a bribe. When Felix is succeeded by Festus, Paul pleads his innocence of the charges against him and finds it expedient to appeal to Caesar. Before he can be transported to Rome another gospel opportunity arises and Paul rises to the occasion. Speaking before Agrippa and Bernice and a great many other prominent people, Paul grounds his defense squarely in the message, indeed in the theology of the Bible. Placing himself in the strictest sect of Judaism, Paul affirms that his legal troubles have no other basis than that he believes the Bible's theology of hope, i.e., he trusts the promises God made to our fathers. To believe that Jesus fulfills the Jewish hope is not outlandish if Jesus has risen from the dead.³³ But it *is* a stretch if one's theology is stunted and sub-biblical, if one does not believe that God *can* raise the dead. By challenging the inadequate theology usually associated with the Sadducees, Paul not- so- subtly affirms that he has not abandoned the hermeneutical conservatism of his Pharisaic upbringing. More than that, he puts his hearers on the defensive. It is not Paul whose orthodoxy is on trial here; it is the theology of his listeners! Then he recounts the Damascus Road encounter with the risen Jesus and professes his obedience to the one he saw and heard. The message he began to preach was consistent: everyone—Jews and Gentiles—should repent. Of greatest importance is Paul's claim, "I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles" (22-23). Paul's gospel does not supplement the Scriptures of the Old Testament; it simply fulfills them and for that reason is well within the bounds of what they declare. But Paul is making an additional claim that must not be missed. The risen Jesus preaches to all humanity. This seems to advance the idea of Ephesians 2:17 that Jesus preached

peace to those far off and those nearby. However Jesus' preaching to the Gentiles is not conspicuous in the days of his flesh. Yet Paul makes him the subject of the verb "proclaim". His ministry therefore is not merely to suffer and rise, but also to proclaim light to Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus' post-resurrection preaching ministry continues, by the Holy Spirit, through those who speak in his name (Luke 24:47). Hearing this, Festus did not hesitate to pronounce the apostle "out of his mind". Paul counters that his message is both true and rational since the events upon which his gospel rests are public truth (25-26). In a final appeal, Paul turns from addressing Festus to speak to Agrippa, a more thoughtful and knowledgeable listener. What he says reveals what Paul considers to be his true authority. He asks, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?" Paul sees himself as a biblical preacher saying neither more, nor less, nor other than the Scriptures said would happen and had happened—or at least had *begun* to happen—in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Those who believe the prophets should have no trouble believing his gospel. He does not hesitate to use logic to put Agrippa in a corner. Anyone who believes the prophets should accept that Jesus is the Messiah.³⁴

Acts 28:25b-28: Paul's day-long exposition in Rome

Once again, Paul's audience is Jewish, this time consisting of local leaders in Rome. Paul initiated this meeting (28:17, 20). Large numbers gathered at his lodgings. All day long he "expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets" (23). They listened patiently to him until he quoted Isaiah 6:9-10. The introductory phrase that Luke records in verse 25 is significant ("The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet. . ."). Paul believed that the Holy Spirit spoke through the words of the prophets. Moreover the Spirit diagnosed the problem well. By referring to "*your* fathers" instead of "*our* fathers" (as he did in 13:17; 22:3; 24:14; 26:6), Paul linked his listeners with the spiritually hard of hearing in Isaiah's day. Like their forbearers, Paul says his listeners have dull hearts, ears that barely hear, and eyes that are closed. Hearing this, the audience was divided between those who were persuaded and those who disbelieved (24). At least some of Paul's listeners must have been convicted that his assessment of them was accurate. Then Paul boldly asserts not only that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, but that *they* will listen! (28)

Notice that Paul (with a whole day to do so) looked to an unspecified number of texts from two great sections of the Old Testament, viz., the law and the prophets as in Acts 13:15. Or this expression may be shorthand for the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures as in such places as Luke 16:16. His preaching was evidently synthetic. He testified about the kingdom of God and did so by persuading them concerning Jesus. That is, his exposition dealt not now with Jesus under the rubric of "Messiah", but with Jesus as he relates to the kingdom of God. His message was as bold as it was biblical. Paul courageously applied at least one of the texts cited (Is. 6:9-10) to his contemporary audience. For the next two years, Paul's rented home in Rome had an open door to all. Unhindered, he boldly preached the kingdom and taught concerning Jesus.

Was this *expository* preaching?

To adequately answer this question, let us summarize what we have discovered concerning how the apostles and their co-workers preached their Bible. The most dominant fact is that they preached Jesus as the Christ. The texts cited, whether individual passages or recitations of

salvation history, were employed to confirm, explain, or summarize who Jesus is and how he plays the anticipated and pivotal role in that history. It is also clear that these preachers were selective in the texts they cited and in their use of them. They purposefully marshaled God's words to explain or confirm God's deeds and to buttress their own testimony to those events. Ever sensitive to the situations of their listeners, they felt some freedom to use recognized biblical words and phrases to attest to gospel events despite the fact that the original authors of those texts might be forgiven for not perceiving those words as claiming what the apostles employ them to affirm. Moreover they sometimes spoke to both Gentile and Jewish audiences *without* citing Scripture, but never without proclaiming the needed part of the biblical message that served to convict their listeners of rebellion and/or to invite them to repent. Their unashamed eye-witness testimony to the risen Christ and their unflinching claims that God had gone on record in Scripture as planning and then accomplishing these saving events, echo the Christocentric hermeneutic of Jesus himself. Their strategies betray no concern whatsoever that their listeners might mount any valid objection to their scriptural citations. Having had their eyes opened by the Holy Spirit to see what was there in the Bible, they fully expected their hearers to see it too. Indeed they expected God himself to speak through their words from his word as they spoke in the power of the Holy Spirit. Is this *expository preaching*? It all depends on how you define that term!

A brief sampler of usage of the term *expository*

Perhaps the best short survey of the use of the term is in Harold T. Bryson's *Expository Preaching*, significantly subtitled, *The Art of Preaching Through a Book of the Bible*. He devotes his entire first chapter to defining the term, classifying proposed definitions as etymological, morphological and substantive. As late as 1995 he could write "There is still no generally accepted definition of expository preaching. Many definitions have been constructed, but confusion still reigns." In the end he opts for an eclectic definition to avoid the pitfalls he identifies and to give maximum freedom. "*Expository preaching is the art of preaching a series of sermons, either consecutive or selective, from a Bible book.*"³⁵

The following definitional markers seem significant for our purposes. John Calvin is in many ways the father of expository preaching as we know it. T. H. L. Parker in *Calvin's Preaching* says,

Expository preaching consists in the explanation and application of a passage of Scripture. Without explanation it is not expository; without application, it is not preaching³⁶. . . The form of this preaching is determined by the movement of the text.

The preacher does not so much move forward from point to point as be borne onwards by the movements of his author's thought.³⁷

John Broadus set the tone of much contemporary homiletical writing. In the revised edition of *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (1944) he faced the challenge of people using the term in different ways.

An expository discourse may be defined as one which is occupied mainly, or at any rate very largely, with the exposition of Scripture. It by no means excludes argument and exhortation as to the doctrines or lessons which this exposition develops. It may be devoted to a long passage, or to a very short one, even a part of a sentence. It may be one of a series, or stand by itself. We at once perceive that there is no broad line of division between expository preaching and the common methods, but that one may pass by almost insensible gradations from textual to expository sermons. We see, too, that men often

preach expository sermons which they would not call by that name. Moreover, it is common to apply the term only to discourses upon the doctrinal, perceptive, and devotional portions of the Bible and not to those which treat of narrative portions.³⁸

David L. Larsen, in his 1989 *Anatomy of Preaching* uses the generic term “Biblical Preaching” and then goes on to distinguish “several classical kinds of sermons” that may or may not be biblical. One of these is the expository sermon which draws “both main points and the subpoints from the natural thought unit of the text. This is biblicality at its very best and models for the congregation the way the Word of God is to be handled and studied as does no other kind of preaching.”³⁹ Walter Liefeld makes the case that “expository preaching is explanation applied.” He goes on to argue that truly expository messages deal with one basic passage of Scripture, have hermeneutical integrity, cohesion, movement and direction, and have application that does not “violate the purpose, meaning, or function of the text in its original setting.”⁴⁰ Donald Sunukjian, though he does not use the words exposition or expository in this context, echoes this dual priority. The preacher’s twofold task is “to present the true and exact meaning of the biblical text . . . in a manner that is relevant to the contemporary listener.” By that he means that the original author should be able to say when he hears a biblical preacher, “Yes, that’s what I was saying, and that’s how it fits this crowd.”⁴¹

Haddon Robinson underscores the basics in his classic definition, repeated in his second edition of 2001, adjusting from the first edition only the wording that might cause gender offense.

Expository preaching is 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 to the hearers.⁴²

Bryan Chapell’s definition in the second edition of *Christ-Centered Preaching* is slightly softer and poses fewer though still genuine problems for the apostolic example, emphasizing as it does the Spirit’s intention for the text.

An expository sermon may be defined as a message whose structure and thought are derived from a biblical text, that covers the scope of the text, and that explains the features and context of the text in order to disclose the enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended by the Spirit, who inspired the text.⁴³

Sixteen pastors, hosted by the Charles Simeon Trust, met in Chicago in September 2006 to strategize about preaching workshops. They defined expository preaching as follows:

Expository preaching is the public and passionate teaching, proclamation and application of a biblical text in its context in the power of the Holy Spirit and, inasmuch as the preacher’s message is faithful to the original meaning, it is authoritative and binding—the very word of God. Such preaching exalts Christ Jesus as He is revealed in all the Scripture, and calls its hearers to exalt Him in their lives.⁴⁴

This definition while giving prominence to the exaltation of Christ as he is revealed in *all* of Scripture nevertheless calls for the faithfulness of the preacher to the original meaning of *a biblical text in its context*.

The challenge in all these definitions seems to be that if we insist on less than this, the results are often less than faithful to Scripture and therefore lack God’s authority, blessing, and power. On the other hand requiring exposition to rise to this standard would, at least on the surface, appear to exclude what the Apostles practiced. One way around this dilemma is to downplay the expository terminology in favor of the expression *biblical preaching*.⁴⁵ Another approach is to

clarify what one means by exposition as Philip Graham Ryken has by using the word “mind-set” to distinguish it from a methodology.

Expository preaching means making God=s Word plain. In an expository sermon the preacher simply tries to explain what the Bible teaches. The main points of his sermon are the main points made by a particular text in the Bible. The minister not only begins with Scripture, but also allows the Scripture to establish the context and content for his entire sermon. The way he decides what to say is by studying what the Bible has to say, so that the Scripture itself sets the agenda for his interpretation and application. This kind of preaching is most helpfully done when a minister follows the logic of the Scriptures, systematically preaching chapter by chapter and verse by verse through entire books of the Bible. This helps ensure that a congregation hears what God wants them to hear, and not simply what their minister thinks they ought to hear. But expository preaching is not so much a method as it is a mind-set. A minister who sees himself as an expositor knows that he is not the master of the Word, but its servant. He has no other ambition than to preach what the Scriptures actually teach. His aim is to be faithful to God=s Word so that his people can hear God=s voice. He himself is only God=s mouthpiece, speaking God=s message into the ears of God=s people, and thus into their minds and hearts. To that end he carefully works his way through the Scriptures, reading, explaining, and applying them to his congregation. On occasion he may find it necessary to address some pastoral concerns in a topical fashion, but even then his sermons come from his exposition of particular passages of Scripture. Rather than focusing on his own spiritual experience, or on current events, or on what he perceives as his congregation=s needs and interests, the minister gives his fullest attention to teaching what the Bible actually says.⁴⁶

So, were the Apostles expository preachers? If by that question we are asking whether they always selected a discernable thought unit from the Old Testament and drove home to their first century listeners what the text’s human author evidently intended to say to his initial hearers, the answer is “No.” If, however we are asking if they, led by the Spirit and sensitive to the needs of their listeners, saw in a phrase, in biblical expressions, or in larger texts of Scripture some confirming testimony to the truth as it is in Jesus—truth of which they were eyewitnesses—and preached that, then the answer is a confident “Yes!” They proclaimed what was really there but to which their eyes had to be opened. When their eyes were opened to recognize Jesus (Luke 24:31) who opened the Scriptures to them (v. 32), and their minds were opened to understand the Scriptures (v. 45), they, having waited for the promised Holy Spirit as directed (v. 49), preached the good news of Jesus in language and rhetorical categories that were persuasive to their listeners. The result, of which they had no doubt, was that the word of God was being proclaimed and heard.

To what extent and in what ways and should this data influence our preaching?

To answer this double-barreled question, we must try to discover if there are valid and necessary distinctions between the Apostles and ourselves and between our listeners and theirs. Having done that, we can discern to what extent their examples are normative or at least exemplary. The Eleven were eyewitnesses of the incarnate and risen Christ (Acts 1:21-22; 13:31). Their preaching was fundamentally a matter of bearing witness to what they had seen and heard (Acts 1:8; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41). Paul, though “untimely born,” was also commissioned as a witness (22:15; 26:16). Stephen too is described as [Christ’s] witness (22:20). Yet, at the same

time, to the ears of their first listeners, apostolic preaching was *teaching* (4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 28, 42; 21:21) Witness, proclamation, and instruction were inextricably linked (15:35; 28:31). *Their* starting point was the events of which they were eyewitnesses. The Holy Spirit enabled them to understand—and then to teach—these events in light of Scripture and from the Scriptures. Their listeners were observant Jews, God-fearers, other religionists, or relatively secular rulers. As such, they were not only the apostles’ contemporaries, they were near contemporaries of Jesus, and lived within the same Roman Empire as he did. This matters because speakers and listeners would have shared at least some worldview, interpretive, and rhetorical assumptions, despite the range of cultural distinctions reflected in Acts. The listeners were well placed to understand the preachers, yet it was not their cultural proximity to the preachers that determined their receptivity—or lack of it—to the gospel. Paul knew that he was commissioned to open the eyes of the Gentiles by proclaiming a scriptural message (26:16-23). Yet, as in Lydia’s case, each hearer’s heart had to be opened in order to heed the message (16:11-14). That spiritual truth did not keep the apostles from listening to their listeners before speaking to them. The sermons in Acts all bear witness to the risen Jesus as the Christ, but they do so in a variety of ways that are clearly related to the respective listeners.

So, there are some differences: We who preach today are not eyewitnesses of the gospel events; we have *access* to eyewitness testimony, but only as it has been inscripturated. Our listeners may or may not share our linguistic and other cultural presuppositions, but they almost certainly do not share those of the apostolic era preachers, several of whom wrote the New Testament. And there are some similarities: Like the first preachers we—at least potentially—are filled with the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, we have the Bible. In fact, we have more Bible than did the first preachers.

Given the differences, our commission is slightly different. The apostles were commissioned to bear witness to Jesus (1:8) but saw themselves as preaching and teaching the word of the Lord (4:29-31; 8:25; 10:36; 13:5, 46, 49; 15:36; 18:11). They saw others as receiving and hearing it (8:14; 11:1; 13:44; 19:10). Our charge, like Timothy’s, is to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2). So, we do what they did, but with a different starting place. They began with the gospel events—things they saw with their own eyes—and preached Jesus as the Christ. They cited Scripture as God’s affirmation that Jesus perfectly fulfills the role of Messiah. We start with Scripture which testifies both to the events themselves and to their God-ordained significance. The apostles listened to their hearers and were sensitive to their situations. Our approach should be the same. They saw Christ in all of Scripture; so should we.

The challenge comes when we notice that the first preachers used Scripture in ways that carried weight with their listeners but might not always do so with ours. To be sure, they did not sacrifice the core message itself to suit their listeners, but their handling of some texts may strike us at first glance as faulty. For instance, their use of the biblical text sometimes seems to us to violate elementary rules of context and authorial intent. Are we at liberty to do this too as long as Jesus is preached and our listeners are not troubled by our methodology? Peter Enns, addressing the larger issue of how the Old Testament is cited in the New, urges us to look at their practice differently. “It is not that the Old Testament words are taken out of context and tossed into the air to fall where they may. Rather, the New Testament authors take the Old Testament out of *one* context, that of the original human author and place it into *another* context, the one that

represents the final goal to which Israel's story has been moving."⁴⁷ He goes on to liken the process to reading a novel a second time and seeing much more in the earlier chapters once the reader knows where the story is going. Enns pits this approach against grammatical-historical exegesis. G. K. Beale recasts the discussion helpfully: "In contrast to Enns, a good argument can be made that the interpretive method of the New Testament is rooted in the Old Testament's use of the Old Testament and that various early Jewish communities, including the early Jewish – Christian community, practiced an interpretive approach shaped by the Old Testament's exegetical method."⁴⁸ To put it otherwise, we need not be embarrassed by apostolic practice once we see it as a Holy Spirit-guided hermeneutic that does not impose ideas on the text but rather sees what was there all along. Using valid strategies of reading the Old Testament, strategies such as a biblical-theological reading and typology, we can remain faithful to the text, taken in its canonical context.⁴⁹

James D. G. Dunn makes a related assertion that must be considered. "When we talk of the New Testament's use of the Old Testament we are not talking of a straightforwardness of correspondence and fulfillment which gave the OT a wholly objective authority. . . . In short, *the first century Christians valued the OT not as an independent authority so much as an interpreted authority*. . . . "The Jewish Scriptures remained authoritative only to the extent they could be adequately reinterpreted by and in relation to the new revelation of Jesus."⁵⁰ It is this question of authority that makes most of us evangelicals nervous. The would-be biblical preacher who feels compelled to abandon the objective authority of the text seems to be left with only two options: (1) say what he or she reckons the Holy Spirit wants the text to say but do so without feeling constrained by the text itself⁵¹, or (2) say what the church has "always and everywhere" believed, thereby letting tradition trump what the text actually says. The first seems too subjective; the second potentially elevates the church above the word, making the church's interpretation normative. Church history supplies too many examples of the damage caused but these two alternatives. Is there a way through this dilemma that preserves the authority of Scripture and the integrity of the preacher? I think there is.

The apostolic example is normative *in this respect*: The first-century preachers saw the Scriptures as nothing less than God's authoritative testimony to various aspects of the gospel events which events were the fulcrum of salvation history. We who preach are to view Scripture as no less accurate and authoritative and therefore to use it as they did. Their handling of individual texts reflects their understanding of the purpose of Scripture as they received it. Our handling of each text is to reflect a similar understanding of the purpose of the whole Bible. What looks to us like a failure, on occasion, to respect the context, grammar, syntax or authorial intent of their texts does not give us license to be reckless with these but instead challenges us to reexamine our hermeneutic for deficiencies and preconceptions which are unnecessarily narrow. Following the apostolic example we should expect to see Christological hints, allusions, reminders, illustrations, and echoes where we might not have otherwise expected them. To fail to see these is to fail to do justice to the text of Scripture in its canonical context. Our methodology begins with careful contextual study of the preaching portion to discern its meaning and its application to its first hearers. From there we prayerfully and expectantly look for ways this truth might relate to Christ as the centerpiece of salvation history. As the apostles did, we let each text do what it was given to do: instruct, convict, rebuke, or exhort our listeners, but always we expect God to speak through it to create faith in Christ and gospel obedience.

Conclusions

Having reviewed Luke's summaries of how the apostles and their co-workers preached their Scriptures, we conclude that their practice, though not exposition as many define it, should nevertheless stretch our own thinking and thus make our preaching more biblical instead of less so. Without abandoning our commitment "not to go beyond what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6), we may let *what is written* speak to our listeners in the range of ways sanctioned by Scripture itself. Protected by the analogy of faith and the analogy of Scripture, we may be confident that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide us in such a way that God's voice is still heard when we speak in his Name (1 Peter 4:11).

¹ Peter Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving beyond a modernist impasse," *Westminster Journal of Theology* 65 (2003): 263-287. The value of the term does not imply an endorsement of all of his conclusions. See also his *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

² Although some might cite more or fewer orations, I include Acts 2:14-39, Acts 3:12-26, Acts 4:8b-12, Acts 7:2-53, Acts 8:26-33, Acts 10:34b-43, 47-48, Acts 13:16b-41, Acts 17:2-3, Acts 17:22-31, Acts 20:18b-35, Acts 22:1-21, Acts 28:25b-28.

³ See for instance, Acts 2:42; 4:18-20, 53; 5:20, 25, 28-30, 42; 6:2-4, 7; 8:4, 12, 14, 25, 40; 9:20, 22, 23, 27; 10:33; 11:1, 14, 19, 20, 23, 27; 14:1, 3, 7, 21; 15:15ff, 36; 16:10, 13, 17, 32; 17:2-3, 11, 13, 18; 18:4, 5, 8, 11, 24-28; 19:8, 10, 20; 20:7; 21:20-21; 24: 24-25; 26:1-23; 28:23-28, 30-31.

⁴ Joseph Fitzmyer, "Preaching in the Apostolic and Subapostolic Age," David G. Hunter, ed. *Preaching in the Patristic Age* (New York, 1989), 27-31 offers some helpful thoughts on the boundaries between apostolic and Subapostolic preaching.

⁶ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles : a socio-rhetorical commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1998), 46 citing D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 125. See also David Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Tübingen, 2000), pp 147-180. D. Pao puts it more strongly, speaking of the conquest of the Word of God.

⁷ G.K. Beale and D. A. Carson, ed. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) is especially helpful for this sort of survey. I. H. Marshall wrote the article on *Acts*.

⁸ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, 1999), 73-82. Professor O'Brien discusses the legitimacy of rhetorical analysis with regard to epistles and says in that context, "The evidence of Acts, particularly [Paul's] reported speeches in 14:15-17 and 17:22-31, does not provide any direct access to his rhetorical ability. Paul's own testimony suggests that his capability as an orator was not great. More significantly, he chose not to make use of ancient rhetoric in his preaching of the gospel." (76).

⁹ Bowker, J. W., "Speeches in Acts: A Study in Proem and Yelammedenu Form" *New Testament Studies* 14: 100, 109-110. The words relating to exposition he notes are *avna, gnwsin tou/ no, mou, paraklh, sewj, diale, gomai, parrhsia, zomai, evkti, qhmi, parati, qhmi*.

¹⁰ See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*, (Chicago, 1985), 26-41 for one way to make the case that Peter was not misusing Psalm 16.

¹¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, 1980), 95.

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- ¹² David Cook, *Teaching Acts: Unlocking the book of Acts for the Bible Teacher* (Fearn, Scotland, 2007), 93.
- ¹³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1980) and John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, (Leicester, UK: IVP) in their commentaries document this.
- ¹⁴ I. Howard Marshall, "Acts," G.K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 2007), 550-551.
- ¹⁵ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: an Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1980), 100.
- ¹⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, (Leicester, UK: IVP), 129.
- ¹⁷ See I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1980), 563 on Moses as an undeveloped type of Christ.
- ¹⁸ I. Howard Marshall, "Acts," G.K. Beale and D. A. Carson, ed. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 2007), 570.
- ¹⁹ I am indebted to Dr. David Pao for these insights conveyed in personal communication.
- ²⁰ This echoes Luke 24:25 "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe *all that the prophets have spoken!*"
- ²¹ This further echoes Luke 24:47.
- ²² Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches of Acts* (Louisville, 1994), 70.
- ²³ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1998), 504.
- ²⁴ See also 2 Thess. 3:1.
- ²⁵ I owe this phrase, I think, to Don Carson.
- ²⁶ See Paul's remarks to Agrippa recorded in Acts 26:25-26.
- ²⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, (Minneapolis, 1961), 725, 735.
- ²⁸ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, 1998), 530 says, "From a rhetorical point of view the function of the quotation or quotations here is to cite an authority recognized by one's audience to support one's point. It would have done Paul no good to simply quote the Scriptures, a book the audience did not know and one that had no authority in the minds of these hearers. Arguments are only persuasive if they work within the plausibility structure existing in the minds of the hearers."
- ²⁹ Greg Livingstone, *The Book of Acts*, (Secunderabad, India, 2005), p. 256.
- ³⁰ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: a socio-rhetorical commentary*, (Grand Rapids, 1998), 531.
- ³¹ *New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 594-595.
- ³² Ben Witherington, *Acts*, 617.
- ³³ In Romans 1:4 Paul affirms that the resurrection declared Jesus to be the Son of God.
- ³⁴ I. Howard Marshall, "Acts," G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, ed. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 399-400.
- ³⁵ Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching: The Art of Preaching Through a Book of the Bible* (Nashville, 1995), 12-39. Additional testimony to the fact that confusion still reigns might be found in John S. McClure's *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) where he faults expository preaching for "its tendency to narrow the preacher's engagement with culture or human experience. Since the text defines the arena of

experience to be addressed, many current issues that are not dealt with by biblical writers are excluded from the pulpit.” (31)

³⁶ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville, KY, 1992), 79.

³⁷ Parker, 132.

³⁸ John A. Broadus, *On Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York, 1944), 144.

³⁹ David L. Larsen, *The Anatomy of Preaching: Identifying the Issues in Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, 1989), 30-32.

⁴⁰ Walter L. Liefeld, *New Testament Exposition: From Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids, 1984), 6-7.

⁴¹ Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, 2007), 9-10.

⁴² Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, 2001), 21.

⁴³ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, 2005), 31.

⁴⁴ David Helm, “Few are Not Enough: Training a Generation of Preachers” in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository preaching in Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson, eds. (Wheaton, 2007), 250.

⁴⁵ Kenton C. Anderson has an appealing way of doing this in *Choosing to Preach* (Grand Rapids, 2006), 34-36.

⁴⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century* (Chicago, 2003), 48-49.

⁴⁷ Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, 2005), 153.

⁴⁸ G. K. Beale, “Did Jesus and the Apostles Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Text? Revisiting the Debate Seventeen Years Later in Light of Peter Enns’ Book, Inspiration and Incarnation” *Themelios*, 32/1 (2006).

⁴⁹ Beale, p 22.

⁵⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An inquiry into the character of earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge, 1990), 92-94, 101.

⁵¹ See Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, 2006) p 436 for a helpful discussion of how illumination does not replace exegesis.

For Further Reading

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