

# Expository Sermon Preparation

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Renowned expository homiletician, Haddon Robinson, describes sermon preparation as a “dynamic process” that involves “insight, imagination, and spiritual sensitivity—none of which comes from merely following directions.” Nevertheless, “an awareness of how others approach the task produces confidence and contributes to a more efficient use of time and energy.”<sup>1</sup> With this homiletical wisdom in mind, I propose the following seventeen-stage approach for preparing expository sermons. While seasoned expositors may merge and mix some of the stages, each one is a vital ingredient to the process. The first ten stages focus on exegetical analysis, the last seven focus on homiletical synthesis. The entire process should take between 12 to 20 hours a week, depending on the expositor’s experience.

## I. Exegetical Analysis

Three important questions should be asked during exegetical analysis from start to finish: (1) What is the biblical author saying? The answer to this question is the main idea of the text. This is a concise past tense statement interpreting what the text meant in its original context. This central or exegetical idea is often found at a single point in the text, sometimes sandwiched between two related ideas, or sometimes found in recurring ideas. (2) Why is the biblical author saying this? The answer to this question reveals the biblical author’s purpose. Just as each passage in Scripture has a main idea, so it also has a purpose. Thus, ask these questions throughout your study: Why did the author write this? What effect did he expect to have on his readers? The answer to these questions should be stated in another concise sentence indicating what the biblical author is trying to do. The purpose of a text is often found in the larger literary context of the passage. (3) How is the biblical author saying it? The answer to this question is the particular literary genre of the passage, that is, the literary structure the biblical author used to communicate his idea and purpose. Here the focus is on determining the rhetorical structure of the passage which issues in the exegetical outline.

With these three questions in mind, the expositor should engage the ten stages of exegetical analysis:

*Stage 1: Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.* It is important to emphasize at the outset of sermon preparation that the expositor seeks the presence and aid of God’s Spirit.

*Stage 2: Determine the textual unit.* Define the textual parameters according to the literary context of the passage. If the text is part of a systematic expository series, then the parameters already set from a previous study can be used.

*Stage 3: Get an overview of the passage.* Read it prayerfully and meditatively numerous times. Get a sense of its flow. Make tentative notes of ideas that come or issues that need to be explored.

*Stage 4: Determine the genre or literature type of the passage.* Possible options are: narrative, poetry, wisdom, law, prophecy, gospels, parable, epistle, and apocalyptic. Apply the special rules of the particular genre to the passage during stage seven below.

*Stage 5: Analyze the literary context of the passage.* This stage involves reading and studying the larger book context, the section context (chapter or chapters), and the immediate context (surrounding paragraphs/verses) of the passage.

*Stage 6: Analyze the historical/cultural context of the passage.* Use the following research tools: Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, specialized studies on the historical/cultural context of the Bible, and commentaries.<sup>2</sup> Notes should be taken in the following areas appropriate to the text: author, recipients, date, situation, culture, politics, and geography.

*Stage 7: Analyze the passage in detail.* The grammar and syntax of the passage, including its significant words and genre, should be analyzed with the following research tools appropriate to the expositor: Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic texts, lexicons, concordances, grammars, and word-study books. At this point, a diagram of the passage is very helpful. The end result of this stage is an articulation of the exegetical idea, exegetical purpose, and exegetical outline of the passage.

*Stage 8: Analyze the theological context of the passage.* This stage involves studying the passage in its larger canonical context—the whole Bible. Is it applied in later passages of Scripture? What are its antecedent passages? At this point, it is important to look at how the passage relates to Christ. What does it say about Him?

*Stage 9: Consult the commentaries on the passage.* Make notes of any relevant insights that apply or make any needed changes in your conclusions thus far. Generally, it is best to study the commentaries after completing your own exegetical work.

*Stage 10: Summarize your findings.* Write out the exegetical idea, exegetical purpose, and exegetical outline or structural outline of the passage. These three elements of exegetical analysis will be very relevant as you move through the process of homiletical synthesis. The exegetical idea will become the homiletical idea, the exegetical purpose will become the homiletical purpose, and the exegetical outline or structural diagram of the text will become the homiletical outline which will connect the text with the congregation.

## II. Homiletical Synthesis

Homiletical synthesis translates exegetical analysis into the popular and contemporary language of the listeners. As such, it transforms exegetical data into an organized pattern with unity and focus, rhythm and symmetry, movement and climax. Just as the Spirit of God brooded over the earth at creation (Gen 1:2), so the expositor desires the same Spirit to brood over the exegetical notes during the creative process of homiletical synthesis (John 14:26).

Having completed the foundational work of exegetical analysis in stages 1 through 10, stages 11 through 17 complete the process of expository sermon preparation.

*Stage 11: Translate the exegetical idea of the text into the homiletical idea of the sermon.* During this stage, the expositor transforms the wording of the exegetical idea into “the most exact, memorable sentence possible.”<sup>3</sup> This sentence is a statement of the timeless, universal truth of the passage in terms relevant to your particular audience. The entire sermon is built around this homiletical idea. It answers the question, “What am I saying in this sermon?”

*Stage 12: Translate the exegetical purpose into the homiletical purpose statement.* The issue here is to write the sermon’s purpose in the framework of your written exegetical purpose. Thus, simply answer the question: In light of this exegetical purpose, what does God desire to accomplish through this sermon in the hearers today? Your answer to this question is what you want the listeners to do as a result of hearing your sermon. This specific, moral, action statement influences the form of the sermon and provides guidance in application and the conclusion. It answers the larger question, “Why am I preaching this sermon?”

*Stage 13: Decide on what form the sermon will take based on the exegetical outline and generate a homiletical outline.* The form or shape of the sermon depends upon two factors: (1) the literary genre reflected in the exegetical outline and (2) the homiletical purpose statement. Based upon these two factors, the expositor decides which sermon form fits the text and the purpose best. The deductive form introduces the homiletical idea at the beginning of the sermon and divides it into two or more parts (movement from the whole to the parts). The inductive form begins with the specific parts and carefully works its way through them to the conclusion—the homiletical idea (movement from parts to the whole). The inductive-

deductive form starts with the parts and works its way towards the homiletical idea in the middle and then divides it into specific parts for the rest of the sermon (movement from parts to whole and whole to parts). Under the umbrella of inductive sermon forms is the popular narrative form, which essentially tells the biblical story in a relevant and meaningful way (often follows inductive or inductive-deductive movement). There are many types of sermon forms available to the expositor that will captivate the attention of audiences and accurately reflect the content of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> The sermon form answers the question, “How am I going to preach this sermon?”

*Stage 14: Expand the sermon outline with supporting material.* Homileticians have likened the sermon outline to a skeleton of thought. As a person’s bones are covered with skin and flesh, so a sermon’s bones should be covered with the skin and flesh of supporting material. Supporting material fleshes out each major division of the sermon (this applies to any form—deductive, inductive, narrative, etc.). It provides support by amplifying or expanding each thought in its relationship to the main idea. Without supporting material actively integrated into the expository sermon, it can become tedious, boring, and even lifeless. But when properly blended into the expository sermon, supporting material will add understanding, insight, interest, excitement, relevancy, and humor. While there are numerous types of supporting material for expository sermons, the basic four are explanation, illustration, application, and narration.

*Stage 15: Prepare the introduction and conclusion.* Once the sermon body is complete, it is time to finalize on how to introduce and conclude the sermon. Both of these components are extremely important to the expository sermon and should receive great attention.

*Stage 16: Produce a sermon manuscript.* Most homileticians recommend that preachers, especially novices, type their sermons in full. The advantage of this is the clarity of thought it brings to the sermon. A manuscript allows the expositor to see the sermon as a whole and thus discover any disconnected thoughts or misplaced parts. At the very least, a detailed outline should be typed or written. It is better to find out in the study that the sermon is unclear or uninteresting than to make the discovery in the pulpit.

*Stage 17: Rehearse the sermon in order to internalize it.* Read through the sermon manuscript prayerfully and carefully; then preach through it out loud, staying alert to any potential problems, and make the necessary corrections. Then convert the manuscript into notes you will preach from. These notes should contain only enough material to stimulate memory during delivery. Then rehearse the sermon for familiarity so that it can be delivered with as much freedom as possible. Today’s audiences do not tolerate very well a preacher tied to his or her notes. Connecting with the listeners is imperative.

If there was ever a time for Seventh-day Adventist preachers to engage in expository preaching, it is now. Commenting on Paul’s charge to “preach the word” (2 Tim 4:1-2), Ellen White wrote: “In these direct and forcible words is made plain the duty of the minister of Christ. He is to ‘preach the word,’ not the opinions and traditions of men, not pleasing fables or sensational stories, to move the fancy and excite the emotions. He is not to exalt himself, but as in the presence of God he is to stand before a dying world and preach the word. There is to be no levity, no trifling, no fanciful interpretation; the minister must speak in sincerity and deep earnestness as a voice from God expounding the Sacred Scriptures” (GW 147). May all of us who preach strive to follow this counsel!

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<sup>1</sup>Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 53.

<sup>2</sup>See Tim Crosby, “eTreasures: Seven Ways to Enhance Your Ministry through the Internet,” *Ministry* (June 2004): 5-6, 27; Lee J. Gugliotto, *Handbook for Bible Study* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Robinson, 103.

<sup>4</sup>See Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching: The Art of Preaching Through a Book of the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 339-372; and Donald L. Hamilton, *Homiletical Handbook* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 32-116.

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