

Jay Wegter and Vince Cuomo on, what is Expository Preaching?

I had a conversation recently with a fellow Master's Seminary grad, a gentleman who's been a pastor for some years. This is someone who has been a great friend. In fact, he's invited me up to his church south of San Francisco, to preach several times as well as lead some men's conferences and even a conference for Christians who go to Cal Berkeley. Our topic in discussion over the phone was "Why are the master seminary grads so drawn to overdue background information in their sermons?"

One of the proposed answers to this is: Doesn't John MacArthur do that? Doesn't he give a lot of background information? What put John MacArthur on the map is that few men have been able to nail each point in the biblical text as well as John MacArthur, no matter what passage he's preaching from. As I discussed these issues with my Christian friend from seminary, he said, "True preaching involves shepherding from the pulpit. That means telling people and getting people to do what they naturally don't desire to do." One of the themes of this talk is to say that members are complicit with this desire to merely audit the truth. When you give them all this background information, what it tends to do is get them off the hook. What we see among so many Master's Seminary graduates is that in facing the challenges of doing exposition, they're often just ransacking commentaries, and the result is not what we'd hope for. In actuality, true preaching is shepherding from the pulpit such that the message is the end result of the pastor or speaker's own meditation on scripture. It's how the Word of God has impacted his soul, how it's impacted his mind, his will, his affections. It's how the force of truth has captured his imagination. All of that will lead you to shepherd effectively in your preaching.

However, people settle for background information instead of demanding that their pastor give them God and give them God's impact upon their own life. The pastor's chief tool is his own heart and how God animates it by his almighty word. Sadly, in so many of these churches, pastored by grads of Master's and other schools, exposition or expository preaching becomes merely people settling for word studies, doctrinal accuracy, and background information. There is a codependency here. The pastor wants to be liked, and the congregation doesn't want to be rocked by a radical presentation of the burden of the text. So they've together chosen a comfort level which eschews persuasion, transformation, and the transformation mandate. They've chosen a comfort level that eschews the burden of the text being fully applied. Where does this come from? These gentlemen are graduates from one of the top seminaries in the world. It comes from the mistaken idea that Dr. MacArthur built his ministry of effectiveness on piecing together what he pulled from commentaries, atlases, historical dictionaries, and doctrinal accuracy. He stitched all that together but that's not what he

did. His sermons are very much text driven. He's able to nail each point so that the burden of the text is felt fully by the hearer.

Now contrast that to what passes for expository preaching today, which we'll call the academic approach. In many cases it falls short of the full weight and intent of the text. To deal with the hearer directly with the force of truth, and that would be as rehearsed in the pastoral epistles, pursuing doctrine that conforms to godliness as opposed to bare orthodoxy or precision. So the truth is intended as God has given us his truth. It's intended to reorient the heart. So that the word of God speaks to the affections and sensibilities of the new man. The new man is alive in Christ. As such, when he hears the word of God preached in a way that is true shepherding and true persuasion, it renews his affections. It renews his impact in every community in which he finds himself, beginning with his own family. This type of preaching renews the community of his own family, renews the community of his local church, and ultimately renews the community of his neighborhood and culture of which he is a part of. There's a micro and macro influence in terms of renewal that comes from solid preaching. Whereas if we only teach doctrine, history, background approach, background studies and so on, it can leave people unchanged and enables them to just audit the truth. As my friend brought out in our conversation, a lot of this preaching which passes for expository preaching, is what my friend refers to as a subtext which is governing the preacher's approach. A subtext which is governing even the listener's response, and so we call this the dog whistle. A dog whistle is a silent whistle which only the dog can hear. It's beyond our range of frequency.

This means that the personality of the preacher and his sermon become like a silent dog whistle where the people are expecting him to do a word study, doctrine, or historical background. This is instead of presenting before them life and death choices, an immense fork in the road where obedience will take you one way and disobedience the other. Thus, the personality of the preacher and the personality of the sermon may be too adapted to the personality of the congregation because they resist change. That's just part of human nature. They will prefer the familiar, and so they hear the dog whistle, their ears perk up. Oh, we praise the Lord! We hired an expositor! He is giving us what we expect: word studies, doctrine, and historical background. But this may not be as the Lord intended which is to transform our behavior, affections, and loyalties. The message may not drive us to repentance, mortification of sin, and loving God and his truth.