

Expository Preaching: Charles Simeon and Ourselves

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Two preliminary points:

First, we must make clear to ourselves what we mean when we speak of expository preaching. This is necessary because the word “expository” is often used nowadays in a restricted sense to denote simply a sermon preached from a long text. Thus, Andrew Blackwood writes: “An expository sermon here means one that grows out of a Bible passage longer than two or three verses . . . an expository sermon means a textual treatment of a fairly long passage.”¹ He goes on to suggest that young pastors should preach such sermons “perhaps once a month”,² and to give hints on the problems of technique which they involve.

Without suggesting that Blackwood’s usage is inadmissible for any purpose, I must dismiss it as too narrow for our present purpose—if only because it would exclude all but a handful of Charles Simeon’s 2,536 published discourses from the category of “expository” sermons (his texts, you see, are too short!). We shall find it better to define “expository” preaching in terms, not of the length of the text, but of the preacher’s approach to it, and to say something like this: Expository preaching is the preaching of the man who knows Holy Scripture to be the living word of the living God, and who desires only that it should be free to speak its own message to sinful men and women; who therefore preaches from a text, and in preaching labours, as the Puritans would say, to “open” it, or, in Simeon’s phrase, to “bring out of the text what is there”; whose whole aim in preaching is to show his hearers what the text is saying to them about God and about themselves, and to lead them into what Barth called “the strange new world within the Bible” in order that there they may be met by Him Who is Lord of that world. The practice of expository preaching thus presupposes the Biblical and Evangelical account of the relation of the written words of Scripture to the speaking God with whom we have to do. Defining the concept in this way, we may say that every sermon which Simeon printed (and, no doubt, every sermon he ever preached) was an expository sermon; and, surely, we may add that every sermon which we ourselves preach should be an expository sermon. What other sort of sermons, we may ask, is there room for in Christ’s Church?

Then, second, we must make clear to ourselves why we are so interested in expository preaching at the present time. Professor Blackwood had in view the American scene when he wrote: “Pastors everywhere are becoming concerned about expository preaching”;³ but it is no less true of ourselves. And we do well to stop and ask ourselves: why is this? What lies behind this concern? Why are we all thinking and writing and talking about expository preaching these days? I suspect that we are seeking something more than tips for handling long texts. It is at a deeper level that we want help. What troubles us, I think, is a sense that the old Evangelical tradition of powerful preaching—the tradition of Whitefield and Wesley and Berridge and Simeon and Haslam and Ryle—has petered out, and we do not know how to revive it. We feel that, for all our efforts, we as preachers are failing to speak adequately to men’s needs. In other words, what lies behind our modern interest in expository preaching is a deep dissatisfaction with our own ministry. There is a delightful seventeenth-century tract by John Gere entitled *The Character of an Old English Puritane*, in which we learn that such a man “esteemed that preaching best wherein was most of God, least of men.”⁴ Our own

constant suspicion, I think, is that our own preaching contains too much of man and not enough of God. We have an uneasy feeling that the hungry sheep who look up are not really being fed. It is not that we are not trying to break the bread of life to them; it is just that, despite ourselves, our sermons turn out dull and flat and trite and tedious and, in the event, not very nourishing. We are tempted (naturally) to soothe ourselves with the thought that the day of preaching is past, or that zealous visiting or organizing makes sufficient amends for ineffectiveness in the pulpit; but then we re-read 1 Cor. ii. 4— “my speech and my preaching was . . . in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”—and we are made uneasy again, and the conclusion is forced upon us once more that something is missing in our ministry. This, surely, is the real reason why we Evangelicals today are so fascinated by the subject of expository preaching: because we want to know how we can regain the lost authority and unction which made Evangelical preaching mighty in days past to humble sinners and built up the Church. When we ask: what is expository preaching? our question really means: how can we learn to preach God’s Word “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”? What is the secret of the preaching that achieves what our own sermons are failing to achieve?

Suppose we could put the clock back a century and a half, and set our problem before Charles Simeon at one of his famous conversation parties—what would he say to us? The records suggest a number of things of which he would wish to remind us.

Being a supremely practical man, he would begin at the beginning, and say: *expository sermons are sermons*, and must therefore obey the ordinary formal rules of sermon construction. Otherwise, however good their matter, they will fail of their purpose.

“Simeon”, wrote Canon Charles Smyth, “was almost the first man . . . to appreciate that it is perfectly possible to teach men how to preach, and to discover how to do so”.⁵ In his edition of Claude’s *Essay on the Composition of a sermon*, and in his weekly sermon parties, Simeon tirelessly hammered away at the basic lessons. A sermon is a single utterance; therefore it must have a single subject. Its divisions (which should be clearly marked, to help the listener follow and remember) should act like the joints of a telescope: “each successive division . . . should be as an additional lens to bring the subject of your text nearer, and make it more distinct”.⁶ In the interests of effective communication, all obscure and artificial forms of expression must be avoided. Of his own 2,536 skeletons, Simeon wrote: “The author has invariably proposed to himself three things as indispensably necessary in every discourse; UNITY in the design, PERSPICUITY in the arrangement, and SIMPLICITY in the diction.”⁷ Since a sermon is meant to instruct, it must not be above the congregation’s heads (“do not preach what *you* can tell, but what your people can receive”⁸). Nor must it be too long, or their concentration will go, and “where weariness or exhaustion comes upon people, there is very little chance of your doing them more good on that occasion”.⁹

A sermon, Simeon would further remind us, is as long as it seems, and an unnatural and monotonous way of talking in the pulpit can make it seem very long very quickly. Again, sermons are more than lectures, and have a further aim than the mere imparting of information. “The understanding must be informed, but in a manner . . . which *affects the heart*; either to comfort the hearers, or to excite them to acts of piety, repentance, or holiness.”¹⁰ Claude elsewhere lays it down that a sermon has a threefold aim—“to instruct, to please and to affect”:¹¹ the introduction being designed chiefly to please, to win the hearers’ interest and goodwill; the exposition to instruct, to win their minds and judgments; and the application to affect, to win, their hearts and wills. Don’t cheapen your message, if you can help it, Simeon adds, either by cracking jokes in the pulpit (“a very painful style and

manner”),¹² or by saying odd, fantastic things (“the pulpit is the seat of good, natural sense; and the good sense of good men”).¹³ “As to the mode of delivering your sermons, speak exactly as you would if you were conversing with an aged and pious superior. This will keep you from undue formality on the one hand, and from improper familiarity on the other.”¹⁴ And so on, down to the best method of voice-production.¹⁵

Neglect these rules, Simeon would say, and your sermons will deservedly fail, however good your heart and your material, for communication will not be achieved. Moreover, he would add, there is no excuse for such failure; for anyone can master the art of effective communication from the pulpit if he will only take the trouble. Daniel Wilson, in his memorial essay on Simeon, says the same. “Nor is anyone destitute of the means of engaging the attention of others, if he will but take pains early, and be persevering in his use of the natural means of acquiring the faculty of teaching with effect. Every man can be plain, and intelligible, and interesting when his own heart is engaged on other subjects, and why not in religion?”¹⁶ Of course, it takes time—Wilson notes in the same paragraph that “few (of Simeon’s sermons) cost him less than twelve hours of study—many twice that time”. But who are we as clergy to grudge such an outlay? Such would be Simeon’s first point to us.

Then he would go on to remind us that *expository sermons should be textual in character*. The preacher’s task, according to him, was not imposition, giving texts meanings they do not bear; nor was it juxtaposition, using texts merely as pegs on which to hang general reflections imported from elsewhere (“preachments of this kind are extremely disgusting”);¹⁷ It was, precisely, ex-position, bringing out of the texts what God had put in them. “I never preach,” said Simeon, “unless I feel satisfied that I have the mind of God as regards the sense of the passage.”¹⁸ The motive behind his almost obsessive outbursts against Calvinistic and Arminian “system-Christians”, as he called them, was his belief that, through reading Scripture in the light of their systems, both sides would be kept from doing justice to all the texts that were there. Whether or not we agree, we must at least endorse Simeon’s “invariable rule . . . to endeavour to give to every portion of the word of God its full and proper force”.¹⁹ Sermon-texts should be chosen with care, for the sermon should come out of the text whole and rounded, “like the kernel out of a hazel-nut; and not piecemeal . . . like the kernel out of a walnut”.²⁰ Therefore, do not take a text that is too long to manage properly, and, on the other hand, “never choose such texts as have not a complete sense: for only impertinent and foolish people will attempt to preach from one or two words, which signify nothing”.²¹ The text chosen should so shape the sermon “that no other text in the Bible will suit the discourse”,²² and nothing foreign to the text must be allowed to intrude. For the prime secret of freedom and authority in preaching, as Simeon was well aware, is the knowledge that what you are saying is *exactly what your text says*, so that your words have a proper claim to be received as the Word of God.

The next thing, I think, that Simeon would tell us is this: *expository sermons must have a doctrinal substructure*. Let me explain, lest this be misunderstood. I do not mean that expository sermons should take the form of doctrine lectures, nor that they should be weighed down with theological technical terms not used in the text itself—the less of that, we may say, the better. The point is rather this: Doctrines are to Scripture as the sciences are to Nature. And as the scientist is to Nature, so should the expositor be to Scripture. The scientist, just because he has studied the laws which natural phenomena illustrate and embody, is able to explain these phenomena individually to the non-scientist, who observes them without understanding them. Similarly, the expositor who knows his doctrine (the truths and principles exhibited in the acts of God) is able to see the significance and implications of

each particular text in a way that another man is not. And this is what he is called to do: to open up individual texts in the light of the *analogy of faith*, i.e., in terms of the broad framework of doctrinal truth which the Bible embodies.

Simeon did not have to stress this in his own lifetime, for it was everywhere taken for granted. As we saw, the characteristic error of Evangelicals then, both Calvinists and Arminians, was, to his mind, not neglect of the analogy of faith in their interpreting, but an over-rigid application of it. But he avowed the principle quite explicitly (in exposition “I have in mind the analogy of faith”, he wrote),²³ and I think he would emphasize it strongly could he speak to us now. For his own sermons are doctrinal through and through, abounding in clear and exact (though often unobtrusive) formulations of the great foundation-truths of Scripture—God, creation, sin, the Trinitarian plan of salvation, the atonement, the work of grace, the means of grace, the Church—and one suspects that by comparison he would find our would-be expository sermons distinctly foggy from a doctrinal standpoint.

One suspects too that, whereas he told the Evangelicals of his day that their handling of Scripture was cramped and lop-sided because of their undue preoccupation with doctrinal matters, he would tell us that ours was cramped and lop-sided because of our undue neglect of them; for, he would say, we have our few favourite subjects, which we can see in every text, but we leave great expanses of Biblical teaching untouched, as if we were unaware of their existence. The truth seems to be that part, at any rate, of the recipe for maintaining breadth and variety in one’s regular exposition of particular texts is a thorough acquaintance with the doctrinal contents of the Bible as a whole; and no better proof of this could be given than the remarkable variety of theme and freshness and fulness of matter maintained throughout Simeon’s own 2,536 printed sermons.

Next, Simeon would remind us that *expository sermons will have an evangelical content*. Always in some way they will set forth the gospel in its double aspect as a revelation and a remedy; always in some way they will throw light on the twin themes of sin and grace; for these are the things that the whole Bible is about. Always, therefore, their tendency will be threefold—“to humble the sinner; to exalt the Saviour; to promote holiness”²⁴—for that is the tendency of the Bible, and of every part of the Bible. Whatever part of the counsel of God they deal with, expository sermons will relate it to “Christ, and Him crucified”, for the Christ of Calvary is, so to speak, the hub around which the whole Biblical revelation revolves. It was in this sense that Simeon, following Paul, insisted that “Christ, and Him crucified” was the whole of his message. And the preacher is not handling his texts biblically, Simeon would say, unless he is seeing and setting them in their proper relation to Christ. If the expositor finds himself out of sight of Calvary, that shows that he has lost his way. Again, Simeon’s own sermons provide the best illustration of his principles here.²⁵

The fifth point he would wish to make to us would, I think, be that *expository sermons must have a theocentric perspective*. The key that unlocks the biblical outlook is the perception that the real subject of Holy Scripture is not man and his religion, but God and His glory; from which it follows that God is the real subject of every text, and must therefore be the real subject of every expository sermon, as He is of Simeon’s own sermons. This, again, is a point which Simeon could take for granted in his day, but on which he would need to expostulate with us; for we, to a greater extent, perhaps, than we realize, have inherited the later nineteenth century outlook which sets man at the centre of the stage, even in religion, and our thoughts and interests in the spiritual realm have become habitually and oppressively man-centred. What, really, do we preach about? *Man*—man and his religion, his needs, his

problems and his responsibilities; for all the world as if man was the most important being in the universe, and the Father and the Son existed simply for man's sake. This is an age of great thoughts of man and small, sentimental thoughts of God, within Evangelical Christendom hardly less than outside it. Simeon would tell us that we have things topsy-turvy; nor can we expect God to honour our preaching unless we honour Him by giving Him His rightful place in the centre of our message, and by reducing man to what he really is—a helpless, worthless rebel creature, saved only by a miracle of omnipotent holy love, and saved, not for his own sake, but for the praise of his Saviour. He would tell us that we can only expect great blessing on our preaching when our sole concern is to do what he himself was solely concerned to do—to magnify the great God Who works all things to His own glory, and to exalt His Son as a great Saviour of great sinners.

But what about the thing that most concerns us—this question of *power* in preaching? What would Simeon say to help us there? He would tell us that ultimately this was a matter of God's sovereign gift. "It is easy," he once said, "for a minister to prate in a pulpit, and even to speak much good matter; but to preach is not easy—to carry his congregation on his shoulders as it were to heaven; to weep over them, pray for them, deliver the truth with a weeping, praying heart; and if a minister has grace to do so now and then, he ought to be very thankful."²⁶ Meanwhile, he would say, we should seek to put ourselves in the way of such an endowment, first, by making it a matter of conscience to observe in all our sermon preparation the five principles set out above, and then by labouring constantly to be compassionate, sincere, and earnest in heart whenever we preach—men possessed by our message, saying what we say as if we meant it. How can we do this? By taking care deeply to digest the bread of life in our own hearts before we set it in the view of others. "Do not seek to preach what you do not feel," Simeon advises; "seek to feel deeply your own sins, and then you will preach earnestly . . . preach . . . as fellow-sinners."²⁷

Simeon himself is our example here. The feature of his preaching which most constantly impressed his hearers was the fact that he was, as they said, "in earnest"; and that reflected his own overwhelming sense of sin, and of the wonder of the grace that had saved him; and that in turn bore witness to the closeness of his daily fellowship and walk with his God. As he gave time to sermon preparation, so he gave time to seeking God's face. "The quality of his preaching," writes the Bishop of Bradford, "was but a reflection of the quality of the man himself. And there can be little doubt that the man himself was largely made in the early morning hours which he devoted to private prayer and the devotional study of the Scriptures. It was his custom to rise at 4 a.m., light his own fire, and then devote the first four hours of the day to communion with God. Such costly self-discipline made the preacher. That was primary. The making of the sermon was secondary and derivative."²⁸

That was primary. If our question is: where is the Lord God of Charles Simeon? we now have our answer. As so often with God's answers, it takes the form of a counter-question: where are the preachers who seek after the Lord God as Simeon did? This, surely, is the final word, if not of Simeon, at least from God through Simeon, to us who would preach the gospel of Christ in the power of God's Spirit today. God help us to hear it, and to heed it.

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Endnotes:

- 1) *The Preparation of Sermons*, p. 69.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 4) *Op. cit.*, p. 2.
- 5) *The Art of Preaching*, p. 175.
- 6) A. W. Brown: *Recollections of the Conversation Parties of the Rev. Chas. Simeon*, p. 177.
- 7) *Horæ Homileticæ* (21 vols., 1832-3), I. vi (Preface).
- 8) Brown, p. 183.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p.189.
- 10) *Claude's Essay on the Composition of a Sermon with notes and illustrations . . .* (1866 edn.), p. 5.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 12) Brown, p. 376.
- 13) Claude, p. 5.
- 14) W. Carus: *Memoirs of . . . the Rev. Charles Simeon* (3rd edn., 1848) p. 483 f.
- 15) *Ibid.*, pp. 481 ff.
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 595.
- 17) Claude, p. 4.
- 18) Brown, p. 177.
- 19) *Horæ Homileticæ*, I. xxiii.
- 20) Brown, p. 183.
- 21) Claude, p. 1.
- 22) Carus, p. 505.
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 376.
- 24) *Horæ Homileticæ*, I. xxi.
- 25) See by all means the seventeen discourses by Simeon reproduced in *Let Wisdom Judge* (I.V.F., 1959).
- 26) Brown, p. 105 f.

27) *Ibid.*, p. 332.

28) F. D. Coggan: *Stewards of Grace*, p. 32.