

Expository Preaching: Context, Content, Communication

Example Text: Ephesians 4:25 – 32

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Definition: Preaching that powerfully illuminates and applies the original meaning of the biblical text.

This document is a tool to help you feel more comfortable teaching straight out of the Bible in an expository fashion. It is also a tool to help you get feedback from others by asking them in what concrete ways you can improve your teaching style. By no means is it an exhaustive guide, simply a tool I thought would be useful.

I recommend three main criteria to train and evaluate expository preachers: Context, Content, and Communication. I also recommend moving through three basic outlines: a Grammatical Outline, an Exegetical Outline, and a Teaching Outline (see separate document).

I. CONTEXT

This is always the first step toward accurate teaching of the Bible. It starts with treating the entire book in question as one unit. Context answers the historical question, “Who was this addressed to?” and the broad literary question, “What does this book mean?” For people not familiar with the Bible, this is important to help them understand that the Bible is not a “magical book” that just popped out of nowhere.

A. Is the book theme explicit?

1. Gospel of John: True Life is in Christ

‘These have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.’ (John 20:31)

2. Gospel of Matthew: The Mission Jesus Gives Us

‘All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ (Matthew 28:18 – 20)

B. Is the book theme implicit? Or developed by the unfolding of a motif?

1. Gospel of Luke: The Restoration of All Humanity

2. First Corinthians: The Future of Your Body

Exercise: What is *Ephesians*? The book theme appears to be implicit. Two possibilities:

- *Union with Christ:* because Paul uses the phrase ‘in Christ’ very often!
- *Sit, Walk, Speak, Stand – In Christ:* because Paul relates us to Christ using key postures
 - *Sit* (1:20 and 2:6)
 - *Walk and Speak* (4:1, 15, 17, 25; 5:2, 4, 8, 12, 15, 19, 26; 6:4, 9)
 - *Stand* (6:11, 13, 14)

Exercise: What about *Ephesians 4:25 – 32*? What is its context in the letter?

- In the section *right before* this (Eph.4:17 – 24), Paul talked about the new human self, which Jesus perfected in himself through his personal choices. This is essential to point out because if we separate this list of commands from the rest of the letter, it can sound like moralism or legalism – something we're just supposed to do by ourselves. But this section demonstrates choices Jesus himself made, and we are 'in Christ.' Jesus always spoke the truth. Jesus was angry but then dealt with it appropriately. Jesus labored and gave. Jesus spoke gracious words. And so on. Jesus is everywhere in this. And if we are sharing in his new humanity, this is how our lives will look.
- What comes *after* this section? Marriage, parenthood, employer-employee or master-slave relations come afterwards. But friendship and ministry is in Ephesians 4:25 – 5:21. That reflects something about Jesus' teaching. Friendship will last into eternity. Marriage will not, according to Jesus in Matthew 22. For example, there will not be MARRIAGE in eternity. There will not be DATING in eternity. But there WILL BE FRIENDSHIP. This helps us make a very important point about priorities in character formation, discipleship, etc.

C. Application: Briefly reminding your audience to look backward and forward in your selected text.

II. CONTENT

After you've determined what the book is about on a high level, you are ready to start breaking up the book into smaller units and selecting a text to teach. Content answers the question, "What does this particular passage mean?"

A. Have You Observed, Observed, and Observed the Text?

For a helpful illustration about what it means to observe a text carefully, see also "The Fish and Agassiz." For a discussion about how biblical narrative works, see my paper, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.

Go through the recommended Three Outlines.

- First, outline the passage in its Grammatical/Poetic Outline.
- Second, make an Exegetical Outline
- Third, make a Teaching Outline

^{4:25} Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not give the devil an opportunity. ²⁸ He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. ²⁹ Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Example: In each case, Paul gives a DON'T, a DO, and a WHY:

Don't	Do	Why
Speak falsehood	Speak the truth	We are members of one another (4:25)
Sin, prolong anger	Be angry, resolve quickly	To not give the devil a foothold (4:26 – 27)
Steal	Labor	So you can give (4:28)
Speak unwholesome words	Speak gracious words	To not grieve the Holy Spirit (4:29 – 30)
Be verbally bitter	Be kind, forgive	God in Christ forgave you (4:31 – 32)

Example: Paul seems to be working from the truth and reality that we are members of one another (v.25), to our personal emotions. In this case he highlights anger (v.26 – 27). Next he addresses what we do – our actions – towards one another, highlighting stealing (v.28). Then he addresses how we speak towards one another (v.29 – 32). What he's doing is starting with the truth and applying it into the entirety of our lives.

Example: Paul says, 'Be angry' in 4:26, but then he says, 'Let all... anger... be put away' in 4:31. Is he contradicting himself? Is that the same word in Greek?

Example: Paul refers us being 'sealed for the day of redemption' by the Holy Spirit. How does that connect with what he said about the Holy Spirit sealing us in Christ in Ephesians 1:13?

B. Are You Operating with the Arrow Theory (sharp) vs. the Shotgun Theory (scattered)?

Assume that the text you're studying has *one main point*. This may depend on how you've divided up the passage, but try to find one main point around which other minor points are threaded around. Say what the text says and stick close to it. Don't try to make points that aren't there.

If you find that you have more than one main point, you might want to save those other points for another sermon.

Example: How can we summarize Ephesians 4:25 – 32 in one sentence?

C. Have You Identified Points of Emphasis Set By the Text Itself?

Literary structure is one way to find out the main point of a particular text. Some examples of literary structures in Ephesians are:

1. Repetition

- a. In Ephesians 4:25 – 32, there is an emphasis on the body of Christ, and the quality of relationships in it. Paul uses different words and phrases to indicate that.
- b. Paul alternates between examples of speaking and walking/living
 - o Speak truth... (4:25) Speaking
 - o Be angry... (4:26 – 27) Walking/Living
 - o Do not steal... (4:27 – 28) Walking/Living
 - o No unwholesome mouth (4:29) Speaking
 - o No bitterness... clamor, slander... Speaking
- c. 'God in Christ' (4:32) is a major repeated theme in the rest of the letter. The significance of this observation is to remind us again that God and humanity meet 'in Christ.' So our unity with one another and our unity with God are connected.

2. *Inverted Parallelism / Chiasm*

In an inverted parallel structure (or chiasm), the central point is the main point, while the parallel points around the center have similar meanings to each other. This is useful in knowing that the emphasis is in the center. And the central point usually interprets the outer points. Contrast this structure to the 'five paragraph essay' that American public school students are taught how to write in 7th grade.

3. *Dynamic Parallelism*

Dynamic parallelism is typically the poetic style found in the Psalms and the Prophets, where 2 or 3 phrases correspond with each other. There are various types of dynamic parallelism.

- a. Synonymous: the same thought of the first line is repeated in different words in the second
- b. Intensification: the second line explains or further develops the first line
- c. Antithetical: the first line is emphasized by a contrasting thought in the second
- d. Consequentiality: the subject in the first line causes the subject in the second

Example: In Ephesians 4:26, Paul quotes Psalm 4, but amplifies what follows:

4:4 Tremble,
and do not sin;
Meditate in your heart upon your bed,
and be still. Selah. (Psalm 4:4)

4:26 Be angry,
and yet do not sin;
27 do not let the sun go down on your anger,
and do not give the devil an opportunity. (Ephesians 4:26 – 27)

Example: In Ephesians 5:14, Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah 60:1 in a compressed and modified form:

60:1 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
2 For behold, darkness will cover the earth
And deep darkness the peoples;
But the LORD will rise upon you
And His glory will appear upon you.
3 Nations will come to your light,
And kings to the brightness of your rising.
4 Lift up your eyes round about and see;
They all gather together, they come to you.
Your sons will come from afar,
And your daughters will be carried in the arms. (Isaiah 60:1 – 4)

5:14 For this reason it says,
'Awake, sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.' (Ephesians 5:14)

D. Principle of Constancy

Motifs beginning in one biblical book are used consistently in later biblical books. This is important in decoding biblical symbolism.

Example: In Scripture, the Holy Spirit is very connected to speech (divine and human): Gen.1; Luke – Acts

- When Paul speaks of ‘grieving the Holy Spirit’, he connects this to *speech* that would grieve the Spirit, presumably because the Spirit wants to speak other words through us!

Example: Paul refers to ‘the devil’ in 4:27. What was the Jewish understanding of ‘the devil’? Did Jesus add any information to that?

E. Identifying Points of Emphasis by Investigating Culture and History

There may be times when the main point of a text is more clear once we understand the historical and cultural background the text references.

Example: Why would Paul use stealing as an example, out of all the examples he could use?

- Christians met in ‘house churches’ at this point.

III. COMMUNICATION

After you understand what the text says, you must think about how to communicate it. This is the most difficult part of teaching, so be prepared to spend a lot of time in this area. Communication answers the question, “How am I going to share with my audience what this text means?”

A. Are you using the Arrow vs. the Shotgun approach?

Are you communicating one main point around which all your other points revolve? Or do you have points that aren’t connected? What are your transitional statements and rhetorical questions?

B. Have you selected good illustrations and stories?

Taking time to select good stories is helpful for a number of reasons. First, a different part of your audience’s brain is engaged when you tell a story. This helps them stay awake and involved because we are by nature story-telling animals. Second, a good story draws your audience in emotionally and can show that you have an understanding of them. Third, sometimes a story can draw your audience in intellectually and can show that you have an understanding of facts. Fourth, an appropriate illustration can reinforce your main point. For instance, if you are a man, you may want to tell a story about a woman who understood the same point you’re making. Fifth, an appropriate illustration can often be its own application. This lets you spend less time confronting the audience directly.

Below is a list of places I look to find illustrations. Please note that the top sources are from real live people. The reason I insist on illustrating out of the lives of real people is that Christianity is based on *real events in history*. There is a trend today that makes the Bible just a collection of (possibly fictional) stories with an interesting metaphysical point. However, while the Bible is literature, but it is also *real history*. God acts and speaks to human beings in real *history*, and therefore, there is no separation between *historical facts* and *spiritual truth*. It behooves a Bible teacher to find *real historical events and people where God has already intervened* with which to illustrate a Bible that puts forward a God who really intervenes in us.

Songs and movies are therefore an interesting case. I believe movies are useful for illustrating negative points that can describe all human beings (sin, superficiality, selfishness, unforgiveness, unwillingness to repent, etc.), but for

illustrating positive points (how Jesus really transforms our lives) I relegate movies to last place because it is too easy to illustrate with a Hollywood invention and it may cast a shadow of insincerity onto the Biblical message.

Some places to look for illustrations, in order of my personal preference:

1. Personal stories about your own relationships, either with God or with others, including stories about your friends or family
2. Biographies and stories about other Christian people illustrating God's work (e.g. Early Christian history and people)
3. Biographies and stories about non-Christian people illustrating a spiritual need or principle
4. Your feelings about
 - a. A news event
 - b. Certain findings, theories or statistics from sociology, psychology
 - c. Comic strips (e.g. Calvin and Hobbes)
 - d. Children's stories and fables (e.g. The Grinch illustrates heart transformation, the Wizard of Oz illustrates the quest for inner substance, Beauty and the Beast illustrates struggling with a conflicted identity, etc.)
 - e. A work of literature (e.g. Lord of the Flies, A Separate Peace, Crime and Punishment, etc.)
 - f. Poem and the poet's personal background (e.g. Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins)
 - g. A song or movie

C. What is your tone? Have you identified the need or needs your audience has?

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After having prayed for God's wisdom and love for your audience, are you communicating respectfully? Are you connecting your audience with God in a relevant and spiritual way? Here are some do's and don't's:

Don't use the phrase "you should"	Do assume there are non-Christians in the audience who don't share a common moral sense; God personally invites and calls and commands people
Don't jump around in Scripture, except to quickly substantiate a difficult point or make a reference	Do focus on the passage you've selected
Don't elevate formal church positions as examples of obedience	Do illustrate a wide variety of life stages, life situations, careers, male and female, single and married, as examples of obedience
Don't assume that everyone believes in the goodness of God	Do assume your audience is suffering and questioning the character of God
Don't just give out information	Do carve out a place in your message where your passion and personal investment comes through; "stick the sword all the way in"
Don't be monotone	Do be aware of your audience's energy level