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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Introduction

- I The High Call of Preaching**
- I The Spiritual Life of a Preacher**
- I Considering Hearers**
- I Interpretation and Application**
- I Structure**
- I Style**
- 100** Determining Your Strengths and Weaknesses
- 101** Interesting Preaching
- 102** Crafting an Experience
- 103** Seven Habits of Highly Effective Preachers
- 104** The Sermon's Mood
- 105** Teaching the Whole Bible
- 106** Dramatic Expository Preaching
- 107** Verse-by-Verse Sermons That Really Preach
- 108** What Makes Textual Preaching Unique?
- 109** Can Topical Preaching Be Expository?
- 110** Topical Preaching Can Be Truly Biblical
- 111** Topical Preaching on Bible Characters
- 112** [Topical Preaching on Contemporary Issues](#)
- 113** Topical Preaching on Theological Themes

CHAPTER 112

Topical Preaching on Contemporary Issues

How to preach expositionally when a current issue is the talk of the town.

Timothy S. Warren

After more than four years of pastoral ministry at a church, I thought it would be helpful to let my congregation choose a series for the summer. Over those four years my paragraph-by-paragraph expositions had covered several Epistles, the Minor Prophets, Genesis, and a few selected Psalms, and had been supplemented along the way by textual messages for special occasions. I had preached what I thought were the most critical themes. That approach had been well received.

So I passed out three-by-five note cards and invited all regular attenders to write down what they wanted to hear preached. The results? The only book study suggested by more than three people was on Revelation. All other requests were topical. And almost all touched on a contemporary issue: "Talk about AIDS." "Is welfare biblical?" "Are computers Satan's tool?" "What about evolution and the Bible?" Saying something about these relevant issues would be no problem; speaking with biblical authority would be the challenge.

Biblical texts communicate over three ranges of meaning: statement, implication, and extrapolation.

A truly expository preaching method made it possible. Since it is text-centered, expository preaching gives the sermon a "Thus says the Lord" authority; and because it is audience-focused, it provides contemporary relevance. The message of an expository sermon must clearly emerge out of the intended meaning of a biblical passage or

- 114 Making the Most of Biblical Paradoxes
- 115 Getting the Most from the Sermon Series
- 116 The Next Big Thing
- 117 The Compelling Series
- 118 First Person Narrative Sermons
- 119 Biblical Preaching Is about Life Change, Not Sermon Style
- 120 Seven Timeless Principles for Reaching Lost People
- 121 Evangelistic Preaching in the Local Church

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passages. That meaning must then be applied anew for the immediate audience. Without both biblical authority and contemporary relevance, a sermon, by most definitions, is not expository.

Many roads to the subject

There are at least three different styles of exposition. *Textual* exposition bases its message in a single verse or sentence of Scripture. *Verse-by-verse*, or paragraph, exposition bases its message in two or more verses in a literary unit. *Topical* exposition bases its message in two or more different biblical units which share a common subject.

Within topical exposition there are at least three divisions. *Theological* topical exposition finds its subject in a theological topic specifically addressed in the Bible: marriage, temptation, forgiveness, and so on. *Biographical* topical exposition finds its subject in the original author's intentional use of a biblical character to reveal a divine truth. *Contemporary issue* exposition finds its subject in the context of current culture and then moves back to Scripture to discover what passages address that issue.

Whether the preacher starts with a text, a paragraph, a theological topic, a biblical character, or a contemporary issue is not a question or concern for the person committed to expository preaching. What is crucial is that the preacher—wherever he has discovered his sermon subject—move into and then through the exegetical-theological-homiletical process (see "Can Topical Preaching Be Expository?"). Preachers cannot speak with biblical authority unless they have discovered the original and intended meaning of the passage(s), identified the timeless theological message of the passage(s), and only then sought to apply that truth with immediate relevance to a contemporary audience.

Sometimes theological and biographical expositions are initiated with a topic from a contemporary setting (for example, the need for church discipline or a challenge to wholehearted devotion to the Lord) and then move to relatively easily identifiable biblical passages that address that subject. On other occasions the theological or biographical expositions begin with a passage (for instance, [Matthew 18:15-20](#) or [Numbers 32:12](#)) that suggests the topic. The contemporary issue exposition, however, always begins with a question, problem, struggle that has emerged from within the context of contemporary culture (for example, air or water pollution, weapons of mass destruction, homosexuality, abortion, capitalism).

Challenges of preaching on current issues

I find contemporary issue exposition a greater challenge than theological or biographical exposition, though those two have their own challenges. One reason: current issues have multiple viewpoints with multiple arguments. The question of our present response to crime illustrates this challenge. The problems of unreliable witnesses, convictions based on circumstantial evidence, and an overextended judicial system make the question of capital punishment a complex topic. How can a preacher hope to know, understand,

and address the multitude of related arguments?

The expositor who expects to maintain integrity will research the topic sufficiently enough to know its major questions, and only then strategically and candidly narrow the sermon's subject. Reading the "experts" or those with different and opposing views can expose blind spots and fill in gaps. It is presumptuous to speak on God's behalf without knowing the basic facts.

Another reason I find contemporary issue exposition a greater challenge than other forms of exposition is because of the typical preacher's rush to relevance. When a topic surfaces in the give and take of everyday life, it is easy to get caught up in the need for an immediate, relevant answer. Preachers may find themselves preaching an audience-centered and audience-focused message simply because the popular "fix it now" and "how to" mentalities tempt them into sliding past the exegetical and theological interpretation of relevant biblical passages.

Sometimes there seems to be no biblical passage that addresses the topic, at least in the way it is shaped by contemporary culture. No texts address the topic with any explicit intent. For example, there are passages that deal with the creation of the world as we know it, but none that specifically address the debate between creationism and evolution. To make [Genesis 1](#) and [Genesis 2](#) argue the contemporary issues is to misuse the text and miss the intent of its author, resulting in a lack of biblical authority and a compromise of integrity. To say, however, that Genesis has nothing to offer the debate would be to fail to consider some significant inferences from what Moses did intend.

Ranges of biblical meaning

As we try to address current issues like this from Scripture, we need to answer two crucial questions.

First, what ranges of biblical meaning lead to legitimate authority in preaching?

My friend Ramesh Richard taught me that biblical texts communicate over three ranges of meaning: statement, implication, and extrapolation. When the Bible says, "You shall not commit adultery," that's *statement*. This statement could lead to a meaning implied by the [Exodus 20:14](#) text: marriage is sacred. That's *implication*. The condemnation of all sexual activity outside marriage would be an *extrapolation*, a further drawing out of meaning, from the text.

Application is another question. "Never have sex with anyone other than your spouse" is an obvious application of the biblical *statement*. "Cultivate your own marriage" is a possible application of that text's *implication*. "Avoid pornography" is a legitimate application of the *extrapolation*. All may be preached with authority. The issue is not whether the applications are legitimate, but rather, whether all the ranges of meaning have been legitimately validated. Expositors of contemporary issues must move with caution through the ranges of meaning to keep from finding implications or extrapolations that cannot be proven consistent with the original intent of the passage.

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Second, how do contemporary issue preachers signal the level of meaning from which they are preaching? I suggest we simply state, "This passage does not specifically address our topic, at least not in the same way we are considering it. However, there are some implications (or extrapolations) we can legitimately draw from this passage that will help us decide how we should respond to today's issue."

I believe God has spoken explicitly and absolutely on some subjects. On many subjects the Scriptures are not explicit; we are left with implications or extrapolations. Knowing the difference and expressing a proper tentativeness seems prudent.

A crime in my community

A few years ago a paroled sex offender raped and killed a child, provoking outrage in our community. I prepared the following message knowing I couldn't say everything, but that I should say something:

Once my topic found me, I chased down close to 50 passages. A concordance and topical index proved invaluable for my initial search; then cross references guided me to further texts. I started exegeting each text in its original context to determine its intended meaning. When a passage seemed not to address my topic even by implication or extrapolation, I dropped it. Since no text provided a statement about child sex offenders specifically, I worked with implications and extrapolations. It seemed that several passages made legitimate contributions by addressing sex crimes and justice in general.

Theological propositions often address more than one topic at the abstract level. For example, in [Deuteronomy 17:2-7](#) Moses speaks to the specific issue of providing idolaters due process. Few people in my culture wrestle with how to handle idolaters. But by taking Moses' message to the theological level we can generalize a message for any criminal violation. "Any accused criminal deserves due process." That truth applied to idolaters in Moses' day. It just as authoritatively applies to any contemporary issue of supposed criminal behavior. It is at the level of the theological abstraction that ancient and contemporary particulars meet. That's why it's essential to move through the exegetical and theological processes—to insure a proper understanding of biblical meaning. Only then may new applications of timeless truth be affirmed.

I'm certain my message left much unsaid. In fact, I always have that nagging feeling when I preach a contemporary issue. However, when an issue so captivates a congregation that not to speak would signal indifference, contemporary issue topical exposition enables the preacher to address the issue with authority and relevance.

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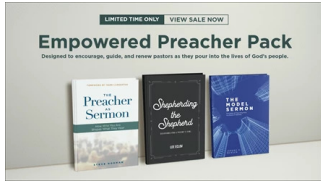
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