

# **TOPICAL PREACHING**

What it is and why we need it

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## **Introduction: preaching on topics**

Evangelicalism has freshly thrived as exposition of the Bible from the pulpit has been recovered. This has certainly been the case in the last 50 or 60 years.

We are to 'preach the word', 2 Timothy 4.2, and that word is God's word, the Bible, 2 Timothy 3.16-17. Opening up a passage of Scripture and bringing God's truth and its application to the hearers feeds and revives the soul, Psalm 19.7-11. Jesus said, 'man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God,' Matthew 4.4.

But because the return to expository preaching of a Bible passage has been so successful and has brought so much help to the churches, it has become, in some circles, seen as the *only* way to preach. Churches expect, Sunday by Sunday, that a preacher will exegete a Bible passage with an eye to glorifying Christ and with contemporary application of the text to the hearers. Congregations will speak of a preaching series by saying something like 'we are in Isaiah' or 'we are going through John'. We have come to assume that the exposition of a particular passage or verse is what preaching is – nothing else will do. It is almost seen as a heresy to suggest otherwise.

But I want to question this uniformity. While certainly acknowledging that exposition of the books of Scripture ought to be an essential part, and probably the main part, of the spiritual diet in every church, I am convinced that you can have too much of a good thing. In fact, it seems, this monochrome view of preaching can ultimately damage the churches. I will argue in this booklet that, alongside what we have come to call expository preaching, we also require topical preaching.

### **What are we talking about?**

By topical preaching I mean a sermon which addresses one subject and tries to give the Bible's teaching as a whole on the matter.

Topical preaching accepts the need for expository preaching. In fact, of course, topical preaching is a form of expository preaching. It seeks to let many different passages of Scripture speak on a particular subject. It might be a doctrinal topic, like the Trinity, or an ethical issue or even a current event in the world for which it seems right to answer the question, 'what does God say about this?'

A good example is Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost. What is Peter doing in his sermon? He is actually answering a question the crowds were asking about what had happened, 'What does this mean?' Acts 2.12. The people were asking, what does this sound from heaven, these supernatural flames, this speaking in tongues imply? What is the significance of what we are observing?

Peter takes up the question and he answers from Scripture. But not just one Scripture. He, in fact, rests his message on at least four passages, Joel 2.28-32; 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 16.8-11; Psalm 110.1. And he marshals these Scriptures to give an answer to the question, 'What does this mean?' It means that, 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ,' Acts 2.36.

The first Christian sermon is a topical sermon.

## **1: Why we need topical preaching**

Let me give you a number of reasons as to why, pastor, you need to add topical preaching to the normal diet of expositions of Bible books and passages.

As I think you will see, some of the issues raised here have quite serious implications for the churches. Why we should think about a recovery of topical preaching? Here are five matters to consider.

### **1. You will find no example of our idea on expository preaching in the NT**

If you search through the sermons of the NT expository preaching, working through a Bible passage, is simply not there.

None of Christ's sermons are expositions in the way we currently understand that term. The Sermon on the Mount draws on many OT passages, not just one. Various of his parables can be seen to have OT roots, but they are not expositions.

There are 10 sermons or quasi sermons in Acts. Many of them give a synopsis of the whole OT. Others draw on at least 2 or 3 OT Scriptures. At Lystra and Athens there is no reference to Scripture at all. None of them are expositions in today's sense.

You might respond by saying, 'Well many of those messages are evangelistic – they are different'. But if you then go to the NT letters, which are specifically aimed at Christians, none of them are expositions in our sense either. They are topical. It is usually Paul or Peter or John addressing a particular problem or set of problems in the churches. The nearest you get to an exposition is perhaps Hebrews (which is called 'a word of exhortation', 13.22) but this draws freely from across the Pentateuch and the rest of the OT as it seeks to encourage the readers to cling to Christ despite their troubles.

However, by contrast to this lack of 'exposition' in the NT, you will find books with topical structures. Think about Paul's letter to the Romans. It has a logical topical structure. It works like this: 1.18 – 3.20 Humanity's lack of righteousness; 3.21-8.39 God's provision of righteousness and its implications; 9.1-11.36 Israel's rejection of God's righteousness; 12.1-15.32 Working out the life of righteousness in practice. It concentrates basically on one matter, the matter of

righteousness, and expounds it.

## **2. Without topical preaching, the unity of Scripture is undermined**

Is the Bible only made up of piece-meal literature which does not necessarily hang together or is even self-contradictory? Do the different writers of the Bible actually have essentially different theologies? We would rightly balk at such an idea.

This is the approach of certain kinds of theological liberalism. It also smacks of a post-modern outlook on life which sees the world as having no over-arching unity or meta-narrative. We reject liberalism and post-modernism. As Christians we believe the Bible fits together as a whole. There is unity. There is a story to our world. Scripture gives us the will of God and the way God sees the world.

If that is the case, then it will seem very strange if we never put it all together. If the Bible is one book, we should demonstrate that and use the fact. The apostles agree with each other about the gospel, Galatians 2.9. There is such a thing as '*the faith* once for all entrusted to the saints', Jude 3. It is that body of truth given by God which is both understandable by us and does not contradict itself. Indeed, part of the evidence that Scripture is the word of God is that, though given over 100s of years, there is a total harmony across the whole Bible, Acts 10.43; 26.22.

The Bible can be imagined as an orchestra of 66 instruments. It is good to hear each instrument giving a solo. But it is also good and necessary to hear the whole orchestra play together on a given theme. If we never do this we downplay the Bible's unity. We inadvertently give the impression that the Scriptures do not really fit together. We leave the door open to the idea that the Bible is the work of fallible men. Or else we are implying that either the truth of God is too complex for us to put together or that God can change his mind, Numbers 23.19; Titus 1.2. Our hearers might even begin to toy with the idea that the God of the OT is different from the God of the NT, which was the heresy of Marcion of Sinope.

We may not intend such heresy but when we only ever give expositions of single passages and never try to draw the whole of God's word together on a particular topic, we flirt with it.

### **3. Without topical preaching we lessen the renewing of the mind**

The NT makes it clear that the key to Christian living is the renewing of the mind. Paul exhorts us, 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,' Romans 12.2.

God gave us minds as human beings. Part of the Fall was an embracing of wrong ideas by humanity. False assumptions and errors about the world flooded in, to misinform our logic and pervert our hearts. Becoming a Christian in the first place involves the mind. Repentance is a change of mind, Mark 1.15. Part of our conversion is the rejection of wrong ideas and false worldviews perpetrated by the devil, the father of lies, and the embracing of the true worldview taught by the word of God which makes true sense of the world.

Paul's preaching specifically attacked false worldviews. 'We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ,' 2 Corinthians 10.5.

If, as preachers, we fail to provide a Biblically coherent view of the world and its different aspects, our people will continue to be conformed to this world – because they will see no reason not to be. They will have no coherent grid through which to understand the world and to detect Satan's lies – and so continue to be sucked in by them. E.g., it was a failure of evangelicalism in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century to teach clearly on the doctrine of man which led to little or no opposition from Christians to the legislation in the UK concerning abortion. We just concentrated on 'the gospel' in a very narrow way and no-one was worried. We had the basics of the good news, but no Christian mind.<sup>1</sup>

In particular, simple systematic theology needs to be explicitly taught to protect from heresy. But I am getting ahead of myself. We will come back to this in the next chapter.

### **4. Without this we are leaving ourselves vulnerable to demise via assumption**

In exposition you tend to assume a Biblical framework from which to exegete the particular passage. That is right. But often that framework is there as an

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, *The Christian Mind*, by Harry Blamires, SPCK, 1963 and *Loving God with all your Mind*, by Gene Veith, IVP, 1987

assumption – it is not explicit. When we assume things without ever bringing them out into the open and explaining why they are true, we leave ourselves vulnerable.

There is an interesting article by Justin Taylor you can find on the web, titled *It only takes one generation for a church to die*. In it Don Carson is quoted to telling effect.

‘Don’t forget Don Carson’s perceptive analysis and warning: In a fair bit of Western evangelicalism, there is a worrying tendency to focus on the periphery. [My] colleague . . . Dr. Paul Hiebert . . . springs from Mennonite stock and analyses his heritage in a fashion that he himself would acknowledge is something of a simplistic caricature, but a useful one nonetheless. One generation of Mennonites *believed* the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation *assumed* the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation *denied* the gospel: the “entailments” became everything. Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.’

A total emphasis on expositional preaching tends to leave us in a position in which doctrine / theology is assumed but never explicitly taught and put together. From here things can disintegrate – literally. The next step is denial.

## **5. We inadvertently cooperate with the church becoming lightweight**

The world in which we live tends to be a very superficial place. It is more interested in style than substance. It prizes popularity above integrity. Even good evangelical churches can get swept away by this prevailing cultural wind. We want a well organised church service with uplifting music and a slick Biblical sermon, which ticks the boxes of enjoyment and accessibility for our ‘customers.’

But listen to Ann Douglas, a feminist historian: ‘That church is an eager participant in the emerging consumer society is shown by its obsession with popularity and its increasing disregard for intellectual issues’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Michael Horton in *A Better Way: rediscovering the drama of Christ-centred worship*, Baker Books, 2002

Without preaching topically we tend to neglect intellectual questions – or skate over them with our desire to get through the passage. And so we become lightweight. We fail to take up the challenge and so thinking non-Christians can understandably dismiss us as lacking depth.

Ronald Macauley, of the L'Abri Fellowship, has warned about Biblical sermons which are really 'expositions in a vacuum'. They fail to connect, or connect only very briefly and inadequately, with the real world, with our current culture. Unless we directly engage with intellectual questions we may as well, in the eyes of many, simply be preaching inspirational myths.

## **2: Different types of topical preaching**

In its total love affair with its own particular view of Bible exposition, current evangelicalism is actually slowly drifting from its historical roots.

Former generations of the church did not rely so completely on expository preaching. Among other things, they knew the vital part played by both Confessions of Faith and Catechisms. These both follow a topical approach to Christian truth.

From the NT we seem to have various fragments of ‘doctrinal’ hymns embedded in Paul’s letters. We think immediately of Philippians 2.6-11, which sets out the truth of the person of Christ in his humiliation and exaltation. Again, Colossians 1.15-20 comes to mind, where Christ’s supremacy both over this world and the world to come is taught. Similarly, there are the ‘faithful sayings’ of a doctrinal and practical nature in Paul’s Pastoral epistles, e.g., 1 Timothy 3.16; 2 Timothy 2.11-13.

From the Second century we have the Apostles’ Creed, which sets out the basics of Christianity. The Fourth century saw the more detailed Nicene Creed. And the Fifth Century witnessed the Christological refinement of the Creed of Chalcedon.

When we come to the Reformation, we find a great explosion of Confessions and Catechisms – the 39 Articles, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confession and Shorter Catechism, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith etc.

Both Confessions and Catechisms seek to arrange Biblical truth in a topical / logical way – to enable God’s people to gain a systematic grasp of their Faith. But modern evangelicalism appears to almost think it can do without such things. While it pays lip service to the great Confessions of Christianity, ordinary Christians are rarely, if ever, taught them.<sup>3</sup> Topical preaching is partially an attempt to rectify this situation.

I want to suggest five different types of topical preaching which I believe it is worthwhile to consider adding to your teaching curriculum as a leader of a local church.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Grounded in the Gospel: building believers the old-fashioned way* (Baker Books) by Jim Packer and Garry Parrett which explores just this point and has many practical suggestions.

## 1. Preach through the church's doctrinal basis

This is actually a rich and wonderful vein of preaching on which many churches sadly miss out. It focuses on bringing all the Bible together to display the lustre of glorious doctrinal topics such as the attributes of God, the cross of Christ, the nature of grace given the nature of sin, the hope of the resurrection etc.

Many churches have currently taken the line that the doctrinal basis is for the leaders, the elders, to sign up to. Well, that is certainly necessary. But churches should at least be working towards the whole congregation being clear on the church's doctrine and what the church stands for based on Scripture. We should be seeking 'unity in the faith', Ephesians 4.13.

It may even be that the distinction seen in the NT sometimes between preaching and teaching (Ephesians 4.11; 1 Timothy 3.2, 1 Timothy 4.13; 2 Timothy 4.2) is along these lines. Teaching was to do with imparting and clarifying the body of truth which the church believed to its members. Preaching, of course, was doctrinally sound, but was more of an immediate / prophetic declaration of God's word.

In at least a rudimentary way, a doctrinal statement should certainly be part of 'membership classes' for men and women joining the church. They need to be clear as to what kind of church they are going to belong to and how it works. Unless this is done a pastor might well be storing up trouble for himself for the future. 'We didn't know you are Calvinists! We didn't know you don't believe in a literal millennium and the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. We didn't know you don't have women elders'.

But for a more thorough engagement with the church's doctrinal basis, we need topical preaching. We can perhaps take a section of it for a short preaching series once a term or go through the whole thing once every 5 or 6 years.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, one of the great differences between Scripture and a statement of faith is that a statement of faith can be, and may need to be, updated from time to time in the light of contemporary challenges to the faith. This, of course, does not apply to the Scriptures. When we do need to refine our doctrinal basis, it is to God's inerrant and all-sufficient word we turn for our guidance.

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<sup>4</sup> Sam Waldron's *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* is very helpful for doing this, as is G. I. Williamson's work on *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

## 2. Preach through the big questions of Apologetics

Christians must be prepared to be able to give a reason for the hope they have, 1 Peter 3.15.

- **Classic questions**

There are the classic questions for which Christians in your church need to know answers.

How do we know God exists? If God is good, why is there evil? How can a God of love send people to hell? Isn't the Bible out of date? Hasn't the Bible been changed? Isn't the Bible full of contradictions? Doesn't science contradict faith? Aren't all Christians hypocrites? Aren't we better off without religion? How can there be only one way to God? How can I believe that Jesus rose from the dead? These, and more, are topics to address from Scripture.

- **Contemporary questions**

Recently with the momentous changing of our times – the move from a framework of public truth and morality to a feel good / relative truth outlook – all kinds of other questions have now to be answered.

Why do I need to listen to you? (What's wrong with a closed mind – if it makes me happy?) If Jesus is so great why didn't he invent the internet? Doesn't Christianity denigrate women? Doesn't Christianity crush diversity? Isn't Christianity homophobic? What's wrong with wanting to change gender?<sup>5</sup>

Of course, you cannot answer these all at once. But you do need to gradually cover such things. You may need to go over them more than once. Apologetics and answering challenges is important. Otherwise your people will feel that Christianity doesn't bear scrutiny. They will begin to construe their faith as a purely private matter which 'works' for them rather than what it actually is – public truth. Further, if you never tackle questions in your preaching your flock will not feel able to ask their questions and get solid answers. This will lead to lack confidence as Christians.

Answering such questions also provides your people with ammunition for their witness in the wider community.

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<sup>5</sup> A recommended book for the more recent questions is *Confronting Christianity: 12 hard questions for the world's largest religion* by Rebecca McLaughlin (Crossway)

### 3. Preach through character studies in Scripture

By character studies I do not mean simply the stories of Bible characters – though it will include that. I mean looking at their whole story and piecing together an idea of a personality, a character and what drives the person. When we fail to do this, the great men and women of Scripture come over as rather wooden or as plaster ‘saints’ to whom our listeners find it quite difficult to relate.

Of course, the idea of character studies is sometimes scoffed at by those who feel that all we must ever do with Scripture is look for Jesus and find him, for example in the OT. It is true that we must find Christ in all the Scriptures, Luke 24.27. But Scripture is deeper and more serviceable than that. The writer of Hebrews 11 draws our attention to the various individuals. In Romans 4 Paul directs us to the example of Abraham’s faith and calls us to similar faith. They become role models for God’s people.

But also as we meditate deeply on a man or woman of faith and the details of their lives, we will often see real people emerge from the page of Scripture. We gain insight into the kind of people they were. They are no longer one-dimensional. We penetrate their humanity. And understanding them like this can give great insight into understanding ourselves. What were their goals in life? What were their deepest longings? What were their temptations? Why were they angry sometimes?

For example, we might come to understand the enigma that is Samson – a very gifted man with a chip on his shoulder. (So like many pastors?).<sup>6</sup>

### 4. Preach with regard to the errors and ‘hot potatoes’ of the day

Here just let me mention a few examples – there are plenty more.

In a ‘feel good’ society, the so called ‘health and wealth’ gospel is very appealing to people. What is wrong with it? There are many texts – especially in the OT – that seem to point in that direction. ‘Obedience will lead to prosperity’. What is the answer to that? Do your people know? Are your people able to protect themselves from it – and not be taken in by it. This can be a matter of spiritual

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<sup>6</sup> See *The Lion’s Honey: the psychology of Samson*, by John Benton, Evangelical Press

life and death. If simple people are drawn in by the prosperity 'gospel' and then find that it is false, they may well conclude that the Bible isn't true at all and walk away from Christ himself.

A decade ago now we were confronted with the claims of the 'Emergent Church'. Its advocates like Rob Bell (*Love Wins*) and William P. Young (*The Shack*) drew many Christians into error. They had to be answered directly. And you can be sure that there will be more evangelical liberalism confronting faithful servants of God in coming years.

And can you give a Biblical and balanced view of the charismatic movement? People need to be given a thoroughly Biblical approach to such things as spiritual gifts, healing or present day 'Apostles'. It is not good enough to deal with such subjects in passing when they happen to turn up in an expository series. Often the need is urgent and such topics need to be taken on directly.

## **5. Preach as necessary on current issues which are filling people's minds**

We don't need to get involved in every newspaper report and every up and down of politics. But there are things which are bigger than that – and 'what does God say?'

At the present time, as I write, the world is facing the pandemic of corona virus. That's what all the conversation is about. What does God's word have to say about plagues? What comfort does Scripture give to the Christian as we face these things? It is only right that men of God take on such topics from the pulpit.

Then there is the ongoing issue of climate change which appears to threaten our planet. What does God's word have to say?

These are the kinds of areas which are necessary to address from Scripture and which won't be addressed fully by a passing reference in an exposition.

### **Nota Bene!**

The danger with topical preaching is that it can simply become a lecture. That's not good enough. It falls short of what we are meant to be doing as preachers. We are about the work of, by the grace of God, changing lives.

As we cover a topic, therefore, it is imperative that we draw practical conclusions and life applications. We must inform, but we must do more than that. We must speak into the lives of our people. It is noticeable that in 2 Timothy 4.2 the preacher of God's word is to correct, rebuke and encourage. So you have to get to lessons to be drawn – from doctrine, from the truth of the resurrection, from the Bible character, from the error or the world calamity which you are considering from a Biblical perspective.

### **3: Practical considerations around topical preaching**

There are a number of practicalities and questions concerning the subject of topical preaching which are essential to pick up on.

If a pastor decides that he should make room for preaching on topics in his ministry schedule (and I hope you do) then he will probably run into these things.

#### **Questions concerning preaching on topics**

Let's start with a few of the questions which may arise from the congregation or from elsewhere.

##### **1. Aren't these topics better fitted for mid-week Bible Studies?**

That is certainly where some of these matters – like the church statement of faith – may have been dealt with in the past.

But actually preaching and teaching them on Sunday is better. Why?

*First*, it is because very in many places mid-week Bible studies are now a thing of the past. Today's people are very pushed for time. Whereas churches may have had two mid-week meetings in the past, one for prayer and one for Bible study, the present 'time poor' generation have understandably opted for just one. That one mid-week meeting tends, rightly, to be given over mostly to prayer. There's no substantial time in the mid-week to work through a topic. So preach it on Sundays.

*Second*, mid-week meetings are not well attended now anyway. You might be able to address topics in small specific interest groups (Marriage or Parenting for example) – but many of the topics you should address, the whole church needs to be taught, not just a small minority who might sign up for a Tuesday night 6 week course. For example, the whole congregation needs to be cognizant of the church's doctrinal basis. The whole church needs good grounding in answering the questions the world throws at Christianity.

## **2. Won't you be pushing out exposition from the pulpit?**

No. If you have and defend two Sunday services, you have room for both – e.g., exposition in the morning and a topical series in the evening. Churches really do need to try to maintain two Sunday services.

Such a formula for the Lord's Day actually brings more variety to a church's Sunday. So this argues for the leadership of the church insisting on two services each Sunday and pressing hard for good attendance at both services. You do need consecutive exposition. You also need topics addressed in the preaching. Therefore, you need those two services.<sup>7</sup>

## **3. Doesn't topical preaching tend to 'proof texting'?**

In dealing with topics, a preacher has to refer to many texts of Scripture to show the wider Biblical foundation for what he is saying.

This, so-called, 'proof-texting' suffers from a bad press in some quarters. There is a danger, of course, of quoting verses out of context – which is not good. But this denigration of looking up individual Bible texts and passages has been used by some – mainly academics of a liberal bent – to attack Systematic Theology generally (which they don't like) and Topical Preaching gets blown away as collateral damage if you listen to that argument.

The truth is that the Lord Jesus Christ and the other NT writers generally use 'proof texts' in their teaching. For example, in his teaching about marriage, Jesus answers those pressing the case for easy divorce by quoting Genesis 2.24: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife." So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate,' Mark 10.7-9. And for Jesus that text ends the argument. Or again, think how the Gospel of Matthew draws many texts from the OT at different points to argue the case that Jesus is the Christ, Matthew 1.23; 2.6; 2.15; 2.18; 2.23.

Many of the great Confessions of Faith provide footnotes of 'proof texts' and so will your own church's doctrinal basis, I hope!

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<sup>7</sup> A day in Scripture comprises both a morning and an evening, Genesis 1. Therefore to keep the Lord's Day it makes sense to meet twice.

## Methods in preaching on topics

There are practicalities to be considered too when it comes to topical preaching.

We are so used to opening up a single passage of Scripture (maybe with a minimal use of references to other Bible verses) that the congregation has got into certain habits. They are used to having their Bibles open at just one page and simply being able to glance down to follow the passage as you preach. That's easy.

But in topical preaching things are slightly different – slightly more complicated. We are wanting to try to get an overview of what the whole Bible says about something. This will involve the church turning the pages of their Bibles a lot more – and without one dominant passage to focus on perhaps almost becoming a little disorientated. If we are not careful they will not find the topical message so easy to follow. What can we do about that? Here are 2 practical suggestions:

### **First, the congregation will find it easier to follow a lucid argument**

You must try to make sure that you deal with a topic in a very logical way; the tighter and more cogent the logic the better. Then your argument will be like a golden thread through the sermon which the hearers can follow.

- For example, use simple questions – why? what? and where? Why is this subject of abortion important? What does the OT teach about this matter? What does the NT say? Where does that leave us – our stance, our needs, our actions? (As we have already noted, Romans can be seen as a book with this kind of logic – why do we need this righteousness from God? (1.18-3.20); what is this righteousness and what are its consequences? (3.21-8.39); where are the Jews in all this? (Romans 9.1-11.36); how does this righteousness affect my way of living? (12.1-15.13)).
- Another example is to build an argument. Suppose you want to encourage small churches. You could use an argument which builds like this: A). The purpose of everything is to glorify God; B). Small and weak things have great potential to glorify God – because they lack resources which can be attributed to man's abilities. C). So when God uses weak things happen it is easier to see God has been at work. D). Small churches are therefore in a good position for God to show his glory. E). If all this is true then we can see God could use us!

- Or again, use argument to drive to a conclusion. Dr. Lloyd-Jones' has a great sermon on the foolishness of atheism based on Psalm 14.1, 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"'. Founded in a Bible text his message is definitely more of a topical sermon than an exposition. His two points are as follows. *First*, the atheist jumps to conclusions on insufficient evidence – the Dr then gives explanation and examples. *Second*, the atheist refuses to look at the actual evidence – again Lloyd-Jones gives explanation and examples. This drives to the conclusion of the necessity of seeking God.
- Or again, an argument that looks at the alternatives to the Biblical teaching on a subject – and shows they lead to trouble, followed by the benefits of God's way. Keep it simple.

## 2. Second make good use of power-point, or better still, paper notes

This time you are building visually. You can use visuals (similar to Ezekiel's acted out parables). But the visuals you use must serve the word of God not dominate it or divert from it.

In power-point, I would strongly recommend that you use just one slide onto which you bring all your headings. One dear IT specialist in our own congregation, when he first became an elder, preached with a power-point and had almost a new visual for every sentence. All these rapidly changing images just left people confused.

You want something that folk are helped by. You build up – flying in headings one at a time as you come to them in what you are saying –until you have constructed the whole (argument) so people get one overall picture. It can be helpful to include Bible references discreetly on the visual.

Better than power-point is to produce a sheet of paper which is an outline of your sermon that folk can follow. Once more, including Bible references is helpful. And again it should be just one sheet – one side of A4. This takes the place of the one page of the Bible people usually have open. They can look down at the sheet and follow where you are leading.

But the great benefit of a printed sheet is that you can encourage folk to take it home. They can look at it again. They can be like the Bereans and look up the references to check out what you have said, Acts 17.11. There may be some extra references on the sheet which you won't have time for in the sermon.

The congregation can look them up for homework, 2 Timothy 2.7.

The main thing is to help folk concentrate as you move through the material.

## **Conclusion**

Exposition is good – but you need topical preaching too!

I would perhaps put it like this. Exposition can be rather like a shotgun which fires off many pellets. There are many valid applications of a passage which may be legitimately pressed upon our hearers. That is helpful, because there will be a variety of needs in our congregations. But topical preaching is more accurate. It is the equivalent of the sharpshooter or sniper. There are particular issues which need to be addressed and dealt with thoroughly and accurately. In topical preaching we focus on the pressing issue.

Just to underline the value of topical preaching, it is worth looking at the sermons of many of the great Puritans.

We rightly value the teaching of these great men from years gone by. Reading their books, it is almost impossible to find ‘expositions’ in the form we think of them. They are basically topical sermons.

One of the first Puritan volumes I ever read was John Flavel’s *The Fountain of Life*. This work is really a doctrinal work, a collection of sermons displaying ‘Christ in his essential and mediatorial glory’. Though each sermon begins with brief exegesis of a particular Bible text, each of the messages takes off into a very full exploration of the particular topic highlighted, e.g., the necessity of Christ’s humiliation.

Similarly, we could think of Thomas Brooks. He has a terrific work based in Ephesians 3.8 on *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*. Not many pages in, you will find Brooks opening up ‘12 supports to comfort and uphold weak Christians’. This is rich fare for the hungry soul. But this is topical preaching and it tends to delve much more deeply into Scripture than today’s brief exposition of a passage and a few applications, which make up most contemporary sermons.

The idea of topical preaching is not something new and novel; it is something today’s church has lost and needs to recover.