

Bangalore Conference, Preaching Workshop 2

Understanding and Expounding the bible

Introduction

Heralding a message from the king, announcing good news, bearing witness to facts, spelling out implications of message.

Notes below taken from a book by Stuart Olyott, "Preaching, Pure and Simple", mostly from the chapter on Exegetical Accuracy but also summarising the following chapters. You can read the book online for free from Google Books at the following address:

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=jLritgrtjKEC&lpg=PP1&dq=stuart%20olyott&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=&f=false>

If you wish to buy the book, it is published by Bryntirion Press, ISBN - 1 85049 204 2.

Understanding the bible

The work of preaching is to explain and tell people the word of God and then to apply it to their lives. It is not explaining our ideas or our thoughts on their lives, but God's word. The source of God's word for us is the completed revelation of the bible. We will be seeing as week goes on how the bible is one story that unfolds from start to finish. We will be seeing that it has Christ at the centre. It is all about him. So our job begins with this one crucial step – understanding the word of God, understanding the words, sentences and paragraphs of the bible. The words of the bible have an intended meaning. God by his Holy Spirit inspired its writing. It was written down by men, but God protected what they wrote so that they wrote what the Holy Spirit intended them to write. We know this because Paul tells us so:

2 Ti 3:16-17 *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

So the job of preaching and expounding the bible begins with understanding it. I want to talk about that for a short while and then we will look at an example from John's gospel ch 4.

Problems to avoid

Let's get some wrong ways of understanding out of the way first.

Hidden meanings: there are some who think that the meaning of the bible is hidden and needs to be unlocked by some key. They might think of this as more "spiritual" than just the plain meaning. The plain meaning doesn't interest them much, but only something hidden from the rest. Much of the bible was written in Hebrew and you can give Heb letters a number and start to add numbers up to find all kinds of patterns in the bible. There was a book called "The Bible Code" that was very popular that did this. If you have the imagination for it, you can find ANYTHING hidden in the bible this way.

Other people don't go this far, but like to understand many parts of the bible in an allegorical way. That means that they often ignore the plain meaning of the text and look for deeper meaning. The plain meaning is often ignored as the least important. An example might help.

Rahab and scarlet thread – equals salvation through blood of Christ

Abraham's servant getting wife = God the father bringing home bride for his Son (Abraham=God, Isaac=Son, servant=Holy Spirit, Rebekah=church, camels=divine promises etc.)

Some famous allegories – John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. Each character, each place, each event stands for some aspect of the Christian life. Story is designed to tell us about these things, not just for itself. There is a meaning behind the story.

Question – is this the intended meaning of the passage? Is this what the writer (and the HS) had in mind for us to understand? There is nothing in the text that would lead us to this way of understanding the bible. This was NOT the intended meaning. This approach shows off imagination of preacher, but not truth of God's word.

Putting our own system first: some people come to bible with their own understanding, their own system of Christian teaching and they try and fit everything they read into that system. They don't try and understand the text of the bible as it stands FIRST but they fit it into their system no matter what! Nothing wrong with being principled and systematic, but must always be in submission to what the bible ACTUALLY SAYS. Must be prepared to adjust and change it as we correctly understand bible.

For example, some have a particular understanding of the last things, Christ's return etc. So any text that relates to this, they fit into their particular view no matter how difficult it is to do this.

Human reason: here is a big problem in the west, not sure about India. In our scientific age, many are embarrassed at parts of the bible that seem to be beyond explanation. They are concerned about accounts of miracles or of supernatural phenomena. Every account of this type must be explained away somehow. Noah can't have saved some people and loads of animals in the ark when the world was flooded, the people of Israel can't have crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, Jesus can't have raised anyone from the dead, he can't have fed thousands of people with just a few loaves and some fish.

One result of this approach is to say that to understand bible, we must realise that writers wrote from the perspective of their time, with all sorts of primitive ideas. To get to the truth, we have to strip away layers and see the real picture underneath. E.g. We don't have to believe Jesus really rose from dead. That story is all about new life.

This type of thinking MUST be rejected. If God is God, then his word IS supernatural. God ensured that what the writers wrote was true. We must understand it as Jesus understood it (and he believed the OT to be true and historical). And we must understand and believe the NT that he commissioned his disciples to write.

Those are some problems to avoid. What about some positives principles to help us understand the intended meaning of the bible so that we might preach it faithfully?

Principles to apply

Seven questions to help our understanding (sometimes called "exegesis") to be accurate:

What does God expect of me as I take on this work?

He expects me to remember that the book I am studying is God's word. He expects me to understand that God has spoken HERE. He expects me to believe what I read and to talk to God while I read. He expects me to remember that as I read his word, it is a revelation from him and so has an intended meaning. He expects me to come with an open heart to hear what the word ACTUALLY says and not come with my mind already made up as to what I THINK it says. He expects me to remember that I am a sinner and so all my powers are touched by that. He expects me to remember that I am a creature so my powers are always limited. And therefore he expects me to remember that I can't understand his word without his help.

You can't understand and preach the bible correctly unless you recognise that to do that properly, it must be an act of worship.

What is the grammatical meaning of the words?

The bible is a unique book, a book breathed-out by God (2 Tim 3:16), a book that is God's word to us, but it is still a BOOK. It is made up of words that are joined together in sentences and paragraphs. There are different kinds of words (verbs, nouns, adjectives etc.) with different tenses and moods, some singular, some plural. They are all arranged in a certain order to give a meaning. You will never understand what the intended meaning of the words are if you don't give careful attention to the choice of words and the way they are arranged.

The bible is a book and preachers who want to understand the bible must pay attention to the meaning of the words and the way they are arranged (grammar). Not all of the bible is the same style and kind of writing and we will think about this next. But understanding the bible means we read what the text actually says and look for the natural meaning.

In what particular literary style are these words found?

The bible is a book, but it is not all written in the same style. Every word has a context, a background. Even a simple word like "yes" or "no" can have a slightly different meaning. It might be "yes" in answer to a question, might be triumphant "yes" when your team wins, might be admission of guilt. Bible is full of variety (God is a god of variety, just look around!). There are parts of the bible that are laws and they are written in very straightforward plain prose. Historical accounts are similar style. That is different from poetry or songs or even conversation. Poetry has metaphors and similes in it, conversation has all sort of means of making it more lively. In English we might say, "their bark is worse than their bite". We don't actually think that they bark or that they will bite. The phrase means they talk tough but they are not really.

A couple of examples from the bible:

Ps 1:1 "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers." v3 "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."

Mt 7:15 "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."

The **literal** meaning is not the same as the **intended** meaning. It is the intended meaning you are after. To get there, you must take note of the style of writing. There is law, history, poetry, prophecy, gospels, letters and parts in books like Daniel and Rev that are full of symbolism. If you read them all in the same way, you will get confused!

What is the immediate and wider context?

If you ignore the context of any kind of writing, you can get it to say almost anything. If you took a line from the paper or from the middle of someone's speech, you could make it mean almost anything you wanted. It is the same with the bible. Every word is in a sentence and every sentence is in a paragraph and then in the wider context of the book of the bible, and even wider context of who it is written to, who is writing, why they are writing, when they are writing (come onto in a minute).

You ignore context at your peril! Consider Matt 6:25ff. Taken in isolation, you might be tempted to interpret this to mean that God will give you plenty of food, fine clothes and you might even extend it to say that Christians ought to be wealthy. But you only have to look at the few verses before (Matt 6:19-24) and the verses after (6:33) to see that this is not teaching that you will be rich, rather that you are NOT to put your trust in money so that you serve it as master, but rather to commit yourself to your wonderfully loving heavenly father. If he cares for birds and plants he will certainly care for you.

What is the historical setting?

The bible has a storyline that begins at the beginning and runs to the end of time. Thousands of events are recorded but they didn't all happen at once. Thousands of people are mentioned but they didn't all live at the same time. Thousands of truths are taught but they were not all revealed at the same time. Understanding the bible means fitting things into the story. If you don't remember this, it could lead to disaster in your understanding.

God has dispensed his grace at different times and in different ways. There are similarities but also huge differences between an outline sketch, a detailed drawing and a photo. God's revelation of himself is like that. It is the same God, but he has revealed himself throughout the story in different ways. Beginning of OT history is not same as the middle or the end. NT is different to OT, before the cross is different to after, before Pentecost is different to after. Example would be some of the OT laws that require capital punishment. Need to understand historical setting to correctly apply these today.

What light do other parts of scripture shed on this passage?

Because the bible is not 66 unrelated books but one unified whole, you will find that it is self-interpreting. If you struggle to understand some part of it, ask the question – is there any other bible passage that speaks about THIS part? What is the significance of Naaman the leper being healed or the widow at Zarephath being chosen? Luke 4:24-30. No prophet is accepted in his home town. Elijah and Elisha are examples of this truth.

Other examples – Melchizedek in Gen 14 and Hebrews 5 and 7. Manna in Ex 16 and John 6. It is vital that you compare the bible with itself to understand correctly the intended meaning.

In what way does this passage point to Christ?

Last but not least! The bible is about Jesus Christ. Of course it teaches us about other things as well, but they all revolve around Christ like the planets around the sun. He is the centre, the focus, the subject of all. All our dealings with God are only through Christ. God has revealed himself to us in Christ. God has made Christ the only way to be right with him. If you think that there is some part of the bible that doesn't point to Christ, it is because you have not understood it properly yet.

Lk 24:25-27 *"He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."*

Not all the bible speaks in the same way. Some it is implied, some it is explicit, some it is indirect, others direct. But all of it points us to him.

Ways to improve: improve bible knowledge, read (what others have written), develop skills to help us in understanding the text.

Expounding the bible

So we have talked about understanding the scripture and have laboured it because that comes first. Without that in place, you will only be expounding what is faulty!

Illust – doesn't matter how good your delivery system is. If you are sending dirty water down the pipes, you will poison people.

Understanding the intended meaning of the text is critical. But expository preaching is not just telling people WHAT the text means.

What about expounding it? What is expository preaching? There is no great secret, no great mystery here. We have been doing it in our studies in 1 Thess, we have been talking about it already yesterday. Perhaps you would like a definition? Here goes:

"Expository preaching is when the meaning of a particular passage of the bible is so explained in terms of the needs and circumstances of the people that they understand what God is saying to them. That means drawing a line from the circumstances when the passage was written to the circumstances today so that the unchanging principles of God's word can be interpreted in the light of present needs." Denis Lane, *Preach the Word*.

It is not just saying "God has spoken here" but it is saying "God IS speaking here and he is speaking TO ME!"

Let me just say a few brief words about other characteristics of expository, bible preaching.

Doctrinal substance – preaching should be full of bible doctrine. It should be rich in theology. The bible is a revelation of God and teaches us about him and about what he expects of us. Every part of the bible adds to our understanding of him and each piece fits somewhere into a system of doctrine or teaching. Not every passage has ALL of that doctrine, so we need to fit the pieces together, check it against other scripture. But our preaching must cause those who hear to grow in their knowledge of God.

Clear structure – All of your work in understanding the bible and your work in pulling together the doctrine it teaches will be wasted if your people cannot follow what you are saying. Structure helps people follow. Someone said a sermon should have unity, order and proportion. Unity means that there should be some link between the points made. They are not random thoughts, they are all connected. Order means that the sermon is made up of ideas that follow each other in some logical way. Proportion means that ideas are given their proper place. Unimportant things are not magnified, important things are not minimised.

Vivid illustration – Illustrations are like the windows in a house, they let the light in (I think Spurgeon said that!). That is an illustration and it helps you see more clearly what is being said. It brings it alive, it breathes life into it. People think in picture language. God uses so many pictures and images in the bible. In just one chapter (Matt 13) Jesus says 7 times, "the kingdom of heaven is like..." Paul uses them in Rom 6 and 7. He talks about slaves dying to one master and being resurrected to a new one. He talks about marriage where the spouse dies and the other is free to marry someone else. It is only words, but he makes his words into pictures in our minds.

A few people have said that Indian mindset is visual etc. Must be careful here. There were all sorts of visual arts available to Paul, and yet we don't read anywhere that he did anything but speak, argue, persuade, reason with people. We must put eyes in people's ears.

Some warnings: not too many. They are always servant of the truth we are proclaiming. Not too long for the same reason. Culturally relevant (people will not see if you have to explain everything). Historically relevant (similar to last, no good if they are from bygone age). Accurate! Varied (not all about MY family or me!)

Sources: bible is good if people know but be careful. Observation, just look around. Invention, nothing wrong with making stories up as long as you don't deceive people by claiming something not true.

Pointed application – already talked about this. All our efforts in understanding, putting in doctrine, having structure, illustrating will be useless unless our hearers WEAR what we are saying:

James 1:22 doers not just hearers.

A surgeon's job is to heal. He uses a knife to do so. But unless he knows where to cut, he will kill the patient. Just the same for preacher. We have already seen that Paul applies his word. It is not for its own sake, it is not for mere theoretical interest. It is for USE. It is Nathan's "you are the man" (from 2 Sam 12:7).

Just on a very practical note, check your use of "we" must do this and that. What about "you"?

Be specific (Mark 7:20-23), be discriminating (one medicine won't fit all). Be persuasive.

Stuart Olyott also has a chapter on "Helpful delivery" which we didn't really touch on. The issue here is on the way you speak, the way you dress etc.

Final word is on supernatural authority. This is important above all else. We speak God's word and we need God's Holy Spirit to enable us to speak his word with authority and to illuminate the minds of those who hear.