



## **Expository Preaching**

by David Dunlap

The faithful exposition of the Word of God powerfully transforms lives. This was never more true than in the ministry of the Scripture by the so-called "Plymouth Brethren" 150 years ago. Men of God with such names as J. N. Darby, William Kelly, C. H. Macintosh, R. C. Chapman and others were exceptionally gifted expositors of the Bible. C. H. Spurgeon commented that R. C. Chapman, was one of the most godly and gifted expositors in England. J. N. Darby visited the United States and preached to eager audiences in the largest churches in North America. He preached on a number of occasions at Moody's Farwell Hall in Chicago and at the Walnut Street Presbyterian church in St. Louis at which James H. Brooke was the minister. "Brethren" Bible conferences in North America and in Great Britain attracted overflowing crowds of serious Christians.

Many of the leading evangelical church leaders of that time attended these conferences. Gratton Guinness, Henry Varley, and D. L. Moody visited the Mildmay conference in Dublin in 1872. C. I. Scofield and Arno Gaebelein frequently attended Bible conferences in the U. S. The Bible teaching among the "brethren" was considered to be the richest and most spiritual available in that day. Dwight L. Moody wrote concerning the teaching of C. H. Macintosh,

*"I had my attention called to C. H. M.'s notes, and was so much pleased and at the same time profited by the way they opened up Scripture truth, that I secured at once all the writings of the same author, and if they could not be replaced, would rather part with my entire library, excepting my Bible, than with these writings. They have been to me a very key to the Scriptures."<sup>1</sup>*

### **The Legacy of Expository Preaching**

In consideration of all the contributions of the so-called "Plymouth Brethren" movement to the evangelical church, it may be that expository preaching is its most enduring legacy. Expository preaching had fallen into disfavor at this time in the history of the church. Most ministers preached topically or textually; that is, using one text or verse and then building a sermon around the theme of the verse. The Plymouth Brethren did not follow this method, but introduced a verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter, consecutive exposition of the Scriptures. Moreover, they preached the Bible as one unified book. They demonstrated that

***"Expository preaching puts the supreme emphasis on the Word of God. It magnifies the Word of God, and gives it the place of supreme authority...this type of preaching serves to edify the people of God as the Scriptures are applied to their everyday lives."***

**A. P. Gibbs**  
(1890-1967)

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**Dr. Norman Krauss**  
from - “Dispensationalism in America”, p. 47

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the prophecies of the Old Testament and New Testament teaching could not be isolated from one another, but rather both were essential to the proper understanding of the Bible. They took seriously the historical-grammatic method of interpretation of Scripture, and labored in the exposition of types, dispensations, and prophecies of Scripture. They were recognized authorities on the original languages of the Scriptures, trends within theology, and biblical history and culture.

This spoken teaching of these Brethren was in due course recorded using shorthand, and these notes were soon edited and published. These published works soon gained wide acceptance as sound commentaries on the books of Scripture. This style of preaching was a refreshing change, stimulating spiritual growth and stirring great interest in the Scriptures. This unique approach virtually transformed the method in which the Bible was proclaimed and has influenced expository preaching well into our present day.

Church historian Dr. C. Norman Kraus describes how the Plymouth Brethren's expository preaching remarkably transformed evangelicalism of the late 1800s:

*“The striking feature of their ministry was their simple exposition of Bible passages. They did not preach a series of sermons on different topics or hold series of evangelistic meetings, as Moody did. Rather, they held Bible study meetings. The ministry of Malachi Taylor, who died in 1897 and was succeeded for two years by A. C. Gaebelien, is a good example of how they worked. For a period of about twelve years he held a daily Bible study meeting in Temple Court in New York City. Darby himself gave a series of studies at Farwell Hall at D. L. Moody's invitation. It was this method, taken no doubt from the Brethren's example, that was expanded and used so effectively by James H. Brookes and his associates in Bible conferences all over the country.”<sup>2</sup>*

The efforts of these Brethren expositors had a significant impact on L. S. Chafer, H. A. Ironside, and the founders at Dallas Theological Seminary and at Moody Bible Institute, influencing the expository preaching of a whole new generation.

### **The Importance of Expository Preaching**

As expository preaching was given great emphasis by the early "Plymouth Brethren", leading evangelical preachers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean were quick to see its great importance. As expository preaching began to gain acceptance, the spiritual lives of many Christians were revitalized. This expository preaching movement may have contributed in part to the deep interest in the Scofield Reference Bible, the surge in missionary interest, and the “Bible Prophecy Conference Movement” of the late 1800s and early 1900s. How does expository preaching transform lives? Why is expository preaching so important? Author Alfred P. Gibbs explains vividly the importance of expository preaching when he writes,

*“Expository preaching puts the supreme emphasis on the Word of God. It magnifies the Word of God, and gives it the place of supreme authority...this type of preaching serves the far better purpose of edifying the people of God as the Scriptures are applied to their everyday lives. It provides an opportunity for speaking on many passages that would otherwise be*

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*neglected. By means of this method of preaching, little known truths will be given their rightful place, and it will be demonstrated that all Scripture is essential to furnish the man of God.”<sup>3</sup>*

The well-placed emphasis on expository preaching is a great tool in the hand of God for spiritual renewal.

### **Henry Moorhouse and D. L. Moody**

The faithful exposition of the Scriptures was the passion of the early brethren and they were tireless in passing on this deeply-held conviction. When Moody visited Dublin in 1867, he was told of the preaching of a zealous young Brethren evangelist named Harry Moorhouse. By this time, Moorhouse has established the reputation of being one of the leading evangelists in England. Initially, Moody was not very impressed with young Moorhouse. To Moody, Moorhouse appeared to be so young and frail. However, a few months later, when back in Chicago, Moody sent a note to Moorhouse telling him if he was ever in Chicago, he was welcome to preach at Farwell Hall—not expecting him to ever come.

When Moody was in Dublin, he took notice of the expository method of preaching used by the Plymouth Brethren during meetings at the Mildmay Conference and at Merrion Hall. Henry Moorhouse's ministry was also greatly influenced by the very men Moody heard preach in Dublin. Young Henry Moorhouse had been schooled in the art of preaching by Brethren pulpit giants like John Hambleton, F. C. Bland, and Richard Weaver. Their preaching was so much different than his usual sermons. Henry Moorhouse was a preacher of the Scriptures; every point was backed up with Scripture. Moody's wife, Emma, upon hearing Moorhouse, once commented, “I like Moorhouse's preaching very, very much. He is very different from you. He backs everything up he says by the Bible.”

Moody's approach to preaching, at that time, was to string together in a sermon a number of detached thoughts and texts from the Bible. Moody saw that there was something missing in his preaching. He longed for a more biblical ministry. On one occasion, young Moorhouse challenged Moody, “You are sailing on the wrong tack. If you will change your course, and learn to preach God's words instead of your own, He will make you a great power.”

The Spirit gave him no rest. As a result Moody now saw more clearly than ever that he needed to preach Scripture-based messages. The Lord had plans to use Henry Moorhouse in Moody's life in an even greater way. When Moorhouse first arrived in Chicago, Moody was unexpectedly called out of town. He asked Moorhouse if he would preach for him at Farwell Hall. Moorhouse began preaching on the subject of the love of God. Moorhouse preached nightly for one solid week using the text of John 3:16. When Moody returned, he was greatly surprised to find Moorhouse still preaching. As he listened to Moorhouse, he discovered that Moorhouse was still preaching on the same text, and that souls were being wonderfully saved. Moody confided to a friend,

*“I never knew up to that time that God loved us so much. This heart of mine began to thaw out: I could not keep back the tears. I just drank it*

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***“The whole idea of verse-by-verse Bible exposition is only 150 years old, starting in Dublin Ireland in the 1800s. It started among Irish and British Christians who were known as the ‘Plymouth Brethren.’ ”***

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**Dr. Thomas Ice**  
VBVMI Conference 2014

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Bible & Life Ministries, Inc.  
3407 Brenford Place.,  
Land O' Lakes, FL 34638

## December 2025

### INFORMATION

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge, supported entirely by the freewill offerings of the Lord's people. Checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

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**BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter**  
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*in. So did the crowded congregation. I tell you there is one thing that draws above everything else in the world and that is love."*<sup>4</sup>

### Conclusion

Early Plymouth Brethren expositors evidenced a deep love for Christ, a faithfulness to the Scriptures, and godly diligence in the exposition of the Word. These human messengers of the oracles of God were powerfully gripped by the realization that they were handling divine truth. Therefore, faithfulness and spiritual care were essential in setting forth the truth of the Scriptures. Many hours of careful study were devoted to understanding the truth of God. These expositors, armed with the Word of God in their hearts and skilled with gift from above, brought untold blessing to many. Many were challenged by the godliness of their character, the breadth of their knowledge of the holy Word, and their commitment to the truth of God at all costs. Many who heard their ministry were changed forever. Harold St. John writes of his personal experience as he listened to one of these expositors,

*"I remember in my youth how the late William Kelly used to come up to London and deliver his annual series of lectures. He would take up perhaps seven lectures on Isaiah, or on the captivity books, and each year he would lecture on some broad portion of Scripture. He spent months preparing his lectures and there would be queues outside the largest hall they could get, and the good man would speak in a very studied English for over an hour, simply opening the Word of God."*<sup>5</sup>

May we take up this important challenge to passionately preach the Word of God, and to faithfully make known the truth of God to a new generation.

### Endnotes

1. Earnest Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 166
2. C. Norman Krauss, *Dispensationalism in America*, (Knox, Richmond, VA, 1958), 47
3. A. P. Gibbs, *The Preacher and His Preaching*, (Walterick, Kansas City, KS), p. 243
4. Richard Day, *Bush Aglow: Life of Moody* (Philadelphia, PA: Judson, 1945), p. 145
5. Patricia St. John, *Harold St. John: Portrait By His Daughter*, (P & I 1959), p. 141