

Interview with Jim Shaddix

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There are several contexts that affect our exposition of the Scriptures: literary, historical, canonical/theological, and cultural. Why is each context important and helpful to the expositor?

In my estimation, one of the coolest things about God’s Word—and one of the greatest testimonies to its supernatural nature—is that God gave us his Book through a variety of natural and understandable means. He didn’t just write a book and drop it out of the sky or hide it under a rock. He didn’t choose to use a cosmic microphone and broadcast it from the heavens. He didn’t make his revelation a mystery that couldn’t be solved or a puzzle that couldn’t be put together. The Bible isn’t a celestial version of “Where’s Waldo” where God is sitting up in heaven being entertained by mankind’s vain attempts to find his intended meaning in the Scriptures. He spoke—and continues to speak—through language and literature known to normal people, through historical events that happened to normal people, through cultures familiar to normal people, all by the pen of normal people. He used all these elements and more to inspire a supernatural account of his self-revelation through Jesus Christ to mankind. For me, that speaks of the astounding credibility and integrity of the supernatural nature of the Bible.

Consequently, preachers and teachers who are serious about discovering, embracing, and exposing God’s intended meaning of the biblical text adopt what’s commonly known as the historical-grammatical-theological approach to Bible interpretation. Normally, this approach assumes the consideration of not just history and grammar, but also literary genre, cultural background, and both biblical and systematic theology, not the least aspect of which is the Christological relationship between the text and the larger canon of Scripture. Such an approach reduces the human subjectivity in the interpretation process to the greatest degree. We don’t just look at our favorite quality of God’s reve-

lation, whether we be language geeks, literature lovers, history buffs, cultural analysts, or scholarly theologians. We consider all the elements God sovereignly chose to use in inspiring Scripture to reduce the risk of biased and limited interpretation of the Bible.

That makes all these elements important and helpful for the expositor. Minimally, literary genre determines the rules of revelation and its subsequent interpretation, and sometimes the mood and tone of the biblical author; grammar provides us with the system and structure of human language, including the meaning of specific words and phrases; history and culture give us the necessary background and setting that helps us interpret language and events through the lens of the biblical characters and audiences. And, of course, the gospel of Christ provides us with Scripture’s end game, the goal of all that God has spoken and done, which is the ultimate lens through which we are to see every passage. Together, these elements enable common folks to understand, obey, and be transformed by God’s revelation in the Bible.

What are some recent trends in exposition that you consider helpful or unhelpful in recognizing literary context?

I’m excited about so many things I see in the practice of biblical exposition today that have a relationship to literary context. One of the most significant, I believe, is that many expositors are doing a better job of taking into consideration the different ways that meaning is communicated through different kinds of literary genres. Robert Stein helped me so much with the simple illustration he uses in his book, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Baker, 1994). He talks about the difference between the rules of football and the rules of soccer. He notes that in football every player on the field can hold the ball with his or her hands, but only one person kicks it. In soccer every player can kick the ball, but only one player can hold it with their hands. Stein points out the obvious: When we don’t understand the rules of a particular game, confusion is bound to follow (pp. 75–76).

The same is true in Bible interpretation when it comes to literary context. If we don’t understand the rules by which meaning is communicated through the literary genre of our text, then the probability rises significantly that we will misinterpret the text. Many of us preachers grew up in ministry trying to interpret and preach historical narrative passages the same way we preached Paul’s epistles. That resulted in us taking shorter portions out of many Bible stories and forcing meaning on them that wasn’t there. We failed to recognize that the rules for interpreting historical narrative are different from those for interpreting Paul’s letters. I’m thankful that many expository preachers are growing

more comfortable with preaching longer passages of story material because they're giving more attention to the different way narrative communicates truth.

In the unhelpful category, I get concerned sometimes when I hear conversations about exposition that fail to make a distinction between the role of literary genre in hermeneutics (Bible interpretation) and its role in homiletics (sermon development). Some homileticians in recent years have suggested if we're going to do true exposition, then the sermon should be developed in the same genre as the biblical text on which it is based. While I affirm the passion for being as true to the text as possible, I think such a suggestion overlooks a crucial distinction in exposition—*The expositor's assignment is not to reveal truth but to explain it and apply it.*

Let me explain it this way. Exposition involves both hermeneutics and homiletics, and they must be done in that order. We can only do homiletics *after* we've done hermeneutics. Expositors must find out what the Lord saith before they can say, "Thus saith the Lord!" So, we must interpret the biblical text with integrity to determine accurately what God has revealed in that text. Then, we develop a sermon that serves as the contemporary vehicle through which he continues to say it. That makes the literary genre essential for the hermeneutical part of this process. Because the Holy Spirit revealed truth by inspiring his intended meaning in each text of Scripture using a particular kind of literature, we must take that kind of literature into account if we're going to interpret God's revelation in that text correctly. Every literary genre has its own set of rules, and those respective rules must be considered to get the text right. So, literary context is crucial for an accurate interpretation of God's revelation.

Once we get the text right, however, the homiletical part of the process takes on a different nature. As I already said, when we develop a sermon, our task is not to reveal the truth of God's Word but to explain and apply it in our contemporary context. The literary genre has played an important role in God's revelation and our subsequent interpretation of that revelation. But in the contemporary context, that kind of literature may not be the best way to explain and apply the truth of a given text. Carried to its logical conclusion, the suggestion that the literary shape of the sermon ought to be in the literary shape of the text would mean that all our sermons from the Psalms need to be delivered in poetic form or musical score. All our sermons from historical narrative texts would need to be delivered through stories (which I'm sure would please the New Homiletics camp!). All our sermons from apocalyptic texts would have to be couched in cryptic figures and symbols. While such

restrictions may inspire some artistic sermon-making and delivery, they likely won't foster clarity and understanding in the hearts and minds of contemporary listeners. The sermon, then, doesn't necessarily need to be driven by the literary genre of our given text, but by the development that enables us to explain and apply it in the most understandable way.

Is it still worth it to formulate a main idea? Is textual unity a fair expectation? How does an expositor discover and articulate this idea well?

It's not only worth it but it's necessary if the expositor is concerned about things like representing God rightly and communicating what he is saying with clarity and understanding. The Bible is not a collection of disjointed subjects like a dictionary or encyclopedia. It's a supernatural message that God wrote to his people with purpose. He wasn't just giving us a compilation of God-subjects when he wrote the Bible. He was and is communicating something specific to us. The Bible begins in Genesis and ends in Revelation with the overarching theme of its entire context—the re-creation through Jesus Christ of heaven, earth, and mankind into what God intended them to be. That unified story of the Bible means that every passage in it plays some role in that story and, therefore, has some purpose.

The expositor's responsibility begins with finding out what that purpose is in every text. He's responsible for "exposing" that meaning by peeling back the layers of time, language, literature, culture, and other elements that have covered up that meaning since the time the Holy Spirit inspired it. He must determine where every text stands in relation to the Christ event. Sometimes the purpose—or main idea—may be discovered in a paragraph. Sometimes we need to look at an entire Bible story. Sometimes we may have to consider several chapters in the Bible to find the main idea. But if we identify a segment through careful exegesis, we're sure to be able to discern the main idea in the text that serves the main idea of the entire Bible regarding the gospel.

It follows, then, that if the main idea can be identified in each passage of Scripture, then that main idea can and should determine the main idea of the expository sermon. Contrary to some recent conversations, Haddon Robinson didn't invent the concept of the 'big idea' in sermon development. We're all indebted to him for reviving and popularizing it in the latter part of the 20th century. But other homileticians discussed similar concepts before him, as well as numerous rhetoricians throughout history who championed the unification of a message around a single subject to communicate meaning with clarity. Doing so just makes sense in communication, especially public speaking. So, textual unity ought to inspire and determine sermon unity with the accu-

rate identification and clear communication of the main idea of every biblical text.

There have been debates in recent years over the relationship between the biblical text and the historical events. As expositors of Scripture, how does historical knowledge benefit people's understanding of the text? How can it distract or even distort our understanding?

As I indicated earlier, God gave us the Bible through a variety of natural and understandable means, including historical events that happened to real human beings. So, every passage of Scripture is rooted in a particular time and place in history and is couched in a particular set of circumstances. Those circumstances include a specific time in history, a particular human author and his target audience, and a combination of unique circumstances that were going on in their lives, whether they be political, economic, cultural, or religious. That kind of information often is critical for determining the meaning and purpose of a given text of Scripture for its original hearers or readers. And because the Bible can never mean what it never meant, that original meaning and purpose provide the key to its meaning and purpose for the contemporary audience.

I think the history of the Bible—just like its grammar, literature, culture, or any other interpretive element—becomes a hindrance to the expositor when he begins to see it as an end in and of itself. Again, the Bible contains a lot of history, and it's consistent with all verifiable historical events. God chose to make himself known throughout history. However, the Bible was never intended to be just a history book. If I approach the Bible merely for its historical value, then I will learn a lot of interesting historical facts, but I will miss hearing the voice of God. If I let the Bible's history play a more influential role than the other interpretive elements, then my interpretation of it likely will be skewed and I will miss what God is saying. History is a crucial interpretive element in Bible exposition, but it's only one of several crucial interpretive elements.

There's an old adage that says, "Don't miss the forest for the trees." How does the expositor maintain a balance between the immediate context in the passage and the canonical context of the whole Bible?

I don't think the issue is as much balance as it is relationship and order. I'm assuming by the "old adage" that we're implying that the historical context is the tree, and the canonical context is the forest. A bunch of trees make up a forest, and a bunch of historical contexts make up the canonical context. The two are related and cannot be separated into

parts, but they aren't necessarily always balanced. Sometimes the more immediate context carries the weight in interpretation. Other times the larger biblical context carries the weight. So, we must think in terms of the relationship between the elements as well as the order in which they are considered.

Let's start with the relationship between the two elements. People can indeed become so enamored with the beauty of a particular tree that they never consider the grandeur of the forest of which it is a part. In the same way, a Bible interpreter can become consumed with the historical context of a passage but never consider its relationship with the larger context of the biblical canon. When that happens in Bible interpretation, the expositor never fully grasps the ultimate purpose of the immediate passage because he fails to see that its purpose in the Bible is to contribute to the grand narrative. Similarly, it's certainly possible to look at a forest from a distance—to gaze upon its splendor and beauty—and yet never appreciate the intricacies of the individual trees that make up the forest. When that happens in Bible interpretation, the expositor never completely draws out the practical truths embedded in the immediate passage because he fails to determine what it meant to its original recipients. To fully appreciate both the forest and the trees, we must observe them both from a distance and up close. Similarly, to grasp and appreciate the Holy Spirit's intended meaning in the Bible, we must zoom in to see each passage up close and zoom out to see it from a distance. So, for each Bible passage, we must consider both historical context and the larger biblical context if we're going to interpret the Bible correctly. The relationship between the two must always be part of the expositional process.

Now, let's consider the order of the two elements. This is where the analogy of the forest and the trees breaks down a little bit. It's possible (if not likely) that a hiker or traveler will see the forest before the trees as he or she makes their way along a journey. And the beauty of the forest can be seen and enjoyed from that vantage point. But we can't understand the Bible that way. We can't get the big picture of the Bible without first considering the individual trees and the contribution each one makes to the larger story. To say it another way, the only way we have been able to discern the grand narrative of the Bible is to have first considered each of the smaller components to determine how they're all tied together. Since the Holy Spirit utilized a bunch of historical contexts to inform the larger biblical context, it just makes sense that the expositor needs to first consider the original author's context of each passage to fully appreciate the biblical context. Once he determines the human author's purpose for his respective audience, he then can deter-

mine timeless truths that apply to all people of all time.

But the expositor can't stop there. Along with those considerations drawn from the immediate historical context and their relevance for succeeding generations, he must also think about theological implications intended by the divine Author regarding the larger biblical context that may not have been completely understood by the original author. And that "larger" meaning will never undermine or contradict the meaning of the text in its historical context. There will always be a relationship between the two, just like there's a relationship between the forest and the trees.

Should the expositor be a prophetic voice in the culture? What are the dangers and benefits of having (or not having) such a voice?

The first question on this subject isn't whether the expositor should be a prophetic voice in our culture. It's whether God's voice is a prophetic voice in the culture. And I think all of us would agree that it is. Our culture—and every culture—desperately needs to hear God speak. Consequently, if exposition is exposing the voice of God, then that makes the expositor a prophetic voice in our culture, whether he thinks he is or not, whether he wants to be or not. And that's just another reason good expository preaching is essential in our day. Contemporary culture needs to hear the voice of God, and expositors must see themselves as prophets who are communicating God's voice.

The danger of being a prophetic voice in this culture is just that—it's dangerous. Those who speak on behalf of God have always been the targets of the world's wrath. The gospel is scandalous, and those who declare it have paid the price with their blood in every generation. Israel rejected and killed God's prophets in the Old Testament. The Jewish religious leaders resisted Jesus and ultimately put him on a cross, and they treated the apostles with the same hatred. Rome persecuted and killed Christians, including their preachers. And church history is full of the testimonies of God's preachers who have been martyred for their faith...and their sermons. And while that ire has largely been limited to preachers outside the United States, the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* inspired both verbal and physical outbursts against those who risk taking a stand for the value God has placed on human life. The danger that goes along with being a prophet of God is increasing in America. The days of insulation and safety for God's prophets even in our own country are fading fast. Speaking on behalf of God is a dangerous duty.

Of course, the biggest danger of contemporary preachers not exposing the prophetic voice of God is people failing to hear the words of life. The gospel is the only chance our culture has of repentance from

sin, forgiveness from God, re-creation into Christ's image, and eternal fellowship with him. When many of Jesus's followers were abandoning him because of the scandalous nature of his message, he asked his apostles if they planned to jump ship with them. Peter's response articulates the real danger of not hearing the prophetic voice in every generation: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68–69 ESV). To rob people of prophetic gospel preaching is the supreme tragedy of preachers failing to speak for God. But faithful, prophetic exposition redeems this danger and transforms it into its greatest benefit—people today get to hear and respond to Jesus's words of eternal life.

What are the benefits of the expositor not having or being a prophetic voice in our day? Based on what we've just said above, there are none. The prophetic voice of contemporary expositors is critical if people today are going to hear the words of eternal life and believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior.

After years of teaching expositors, what is your hope for the next generation of preachers and teachers of the Word? Has that changed over the years? If so, how?

If I had been asked this question ten years ago, I would have said that I'm prayerfully hoping for a new generation of preachers and teachers who are unapologetically committed to the careful exposition of God's Word, and who are utterly dependent on the power of his Spirit to do it. Neither of those desires has waned; both continue to be burdens and prayers of mine. And I don't think that will change in the coming days. I think both of those dreams will be challenges for every future generation. There will always be a tendency to make the preaching and teaching of the Bible something it was never intended to be. Preachers and teachers in every generation will be constantly lured to let something other than the Holy Spirit's intended meaning of the text drive their messages, whether it be their audiences or contemporary trends or something else. And preachers and teachers in every generation—with more and more access to more and more resources and more and more training and education—constantly will be tempted to depend on something other than God's other-worldly power to provide their messages with effectual power. The dual resolve to represent God's voice rightly and to be utterly desperate for the help of his Spirit will always be among my greatest hopes for the coming generations.

That two-fold hope, however, is based on a fundamental assumption, and that assumption is that there *will be* a next generation of preachers and teachers of the Word. Today, that assumption is at risk.

Now let me be clear at this point to say that I believe God will be faithful to raise up proclaimers of his Word in every generation. His kingdom will advance, and his gospel will prevail. But we've been in a crisis for several years now in the number of men who are responding to God's call to preach, and especially to do it as pastors of local churches. We have an increasing number of empty pulpits, and we have fewer men coming to seminary with a strong sense of call to be pastors and preachers. I don't think God is calling fewer men to be preachers and pastors, but there are certainly fewer who are responding to that call. And many of us who are pastors are not doing as good a job as we used to do of calling out the called in our local churches. So, at the top of my list of hopes and prayers for the next generation of preachers is that there will be one, that there will be a mighty army of men who rise up to take the mantle and be pastors, preachers, and teachers of God's Word in the coming days. We need a revival of men responding to the call of God to do this most important task.