



by a 'Faith & Worship' assessor

Focus on Exegesis

MY DICTIONARY defines exegesis as 'a critical interpretation of a text - especially Biblical'. That definition can give an impression that exegesis is a task for only a few scholars rather than the foundation of good sermon preparation for *all* preachers.

Although few of us may be able to study the original Hebrew and Greek texts, all of us can turn to commentaries, Bible dictionaries and even relevant websites for the help and wisdom of scholars. We can let them lead us on a journey of discovery that can reveal new insights into even the most familiar of Biblical passages. Those insights can then shape and inform our preaching.

This is why the 'Faith & Worship' course places such an emphasis upon exegesis, requiring students to include exegeses on two given Biblical passages every time they submit work for assessment. This is not to add another chore to a student's workload, but to help make this practice become their natural approach to sermon preparation (as it should be for all preachers).

Some students submit exegeses of a very high standard and invariably their sermons too are of a similar quality. However, even in the later stages of the course, for a significant number of students, exegesis can be the weakest element of their work. Despite being given guidelines, these students do not show a clear understanding of what is being looked for.

Let me share with you an idea from photography that my own students have found helpful, even though they know I am no expert photographer!

Begin with a wide lens view – not giving great detail but just a broad view of the book as a whole from which the passage is taken: author (and key points about them), date and situation, purpose, type of literature, sources etc. This provides the **Background**.

Then change to a zoom lens to move towards and beyond the particular set verses of the book. There's no need to pause on them. Just view and note the main things that come before *and* after the chosen verses. This provides the **Context**.

Now is the time for a close-up lens to focus *just* on the set passage to reveal all its minute detail. In the light of all you have viewed thus far, study each word (even words like 'but' and 'for' can have particular significance), each phrase. Pick out key words and consider their theological importance. Consider what the author may have meant, or the hearers understood, or what reactions were provoked. All this helps tease out **Original Meaning** as best we can. Take care to focus on the meaning *then*. That involves avoiding words like 'I', 'my', 'we', 'us' 'our' in relation to the passage. In the case of an Old Testament passage it also involves avoiding words like 'Church', 'Christian' and 'Jesus'.

Finally, turn and point the camera to a **Message for Today**. This is the point where those personal pronouns have a place as all that has been viewed is looked at in the light of our present situation, culture, understandings. It is also here that an Old Testament passage can be linked to the ministry, teaching, life, death and resurrection of

Jesus and in the life and teaching of the Church.

What points could you draw out in a sermon? What relation has the passage with the Gospel you proclaim? What are its relevance and challenges, for you, for your congregations, for the world today? Specific examples are essential, not optional extras. Offer snapshots of what is going on around us, in the news, in our churches, which highlight the good news or the need for it.

In 'Faith & Worship' assessment, there are more marks for Original Meaning than for Background and Context put together, but most marks go for Message for Today. The marks show where our priorities need to be as preachers.

Now, here's a stimulating focus for a preacher's study evening that might encourage and develop exegesis skills and good practice in more than those 'on trial'. Ask preachers to come with Bibles, commentaries etc. Begin with an introduction, by a tutor perhaps, outlining the approach just described. Then preachers move into groups of 2-3 to apply the approach to a given passage (e.g. from the lectionary for a coming Sunday). After a time, preachers come back together for ideas to be pooled onto a screen or flip chart with assessment of what is important – particularly for 'Original Meaning' and for 'Message for Today'. The activity often gets high marks – especially from preachers who are planned on the Sunday in question!

This 'Faith & Worship' assessor is staying 'in camera'