

Expository Preaching, Part 2: How to Do It

George O. Wood, D.Th.P.
General Secretary, Assemblies of God

Now comes the critical question. How do you preach expository sermons?

Let me walk you through the process by taking Matthew 28:18-20, one of the most familiar passages of the Bible. In fact, this text is so familiar that many never preach from it at all.

A topical preacher might use this text as a jumping off point for a sermon on the need for evangelism or missions, and simply take the one word *Go*.

A textual preacher might just take one phrase, such as “Go into all the world,” link it with Acts 1:8 and speak of the three realms into which we are to go: home, the place nearby and the uttermost parts of the world.

However, an expository preacher is required to include every single word of the text in the sermon. Matthew 28:18-20 focuses on matters more inclusive than that of going or where we are to go.

Remember the first question in preparing an expository message? What *did* the text say? To answer this question we must do good exegesis. Do not, however, begin your exegesis by flying to the commentaries. An expository preacher should first study with nothing but the Bible in hand.

Begin by sizing up the text. What is it saying? How can the Holy Spirit help you to understand it afresh? What parts

seems to jump out at you? What do you not understand? Where are the nouns? Verbs? Adjectives? Adverbs? What is the passage’s main thought? What are the sub-themes?

It never hurts to write a paraphrase of the text. Imagine you are going to preach this text to a mixed audience of 8-year-olds and college professors. How would you phrase it so both groups would clearly understand? Spend at least an hour on your own with the text before you consult your Bible study resources. If you know Greek or Hebrew, spend time in the original text gaining the nuances from the biblical language.

Why is it important to “wrestle with the text” before consulting outside helps? Because this passage must begin to get into your own spirit. You can never successfully preach expositarily if your messages sound like book reports. That is what they will be if you fashion your sermon after studying the commentaries. God’s Word must speak to you first if it is to pass through you and speak to anyone else.

In this time of initial direct encounter between you and the text, ask yourself how to outline these verses. What title seems appropriate?

Then, pull out the helps such as Bible dictionaries, concordance, interlinear translations, paraphrases and other versions, word studies and commentaries. Don’t be sparse in your

repertoire of commentaries. Some make the mistake of relying exclusively on one or two commentaries, and their sermons simply become a rehash or restatement of what that learned individual said. I try to use at least about eight commentaries on any given passage. This ensures I am drawing from a wealth of viewpoints although I will not agree with or be helped by some. I need the multiplicity of input to understand the text properly. I must resist the impulse to jump into the application of the text without engaging in the thorough process of examining it.

As you carefully mine the text of Matthew 28:18-20, you begin to notice the major themes. In verse 18, Jesus makes a very striking claim. In verses 19 and 20a, he gives an order. In the last phrase of verse 20, he issues a promise.

An expository sermon will build upon the text's skeletal structure. Always, the text itself must control your outline. Expository preaching does not give you license to force your ideas onto the text. The text must be allowed to speak for itself.

As you focus on the exegetical aspects of the text, begin to notice some things that stand out. For example, take the word *all*. In the King James text, the word *all* occurs three times: *all* power, *all* nations, *all* things. In the New International Version, *all* occurs only twice: *all* power, *all* nations. But, in the underlying Greek text, *all* [Greek root *pas*] actually occurs four times: *all* power, *all* nations, *all* things, *all* days.

I note, "That's an important repetition. That needs to be included in the message. How shall I use that?"

My exegesis also makes me focus on connectives. First, Jesus claims authority. Then, he issues orders. Finally, he makes a promise. Aren't these connected? Doesn't his authority serve as the underpinning for the orders? Would Jesus send us out on a mission that had no hope of success? Isn't our responsibility, therefore, linked to the success of his mission? Unless he has authority, we have no responsibility. Are we sent forth to do his work on our own? No! With the commission comes also an assurance. He will be with us.

Do you see what we are doing here? We are working on the "connectives." Sometimes a sermon simply contains a bare-bones outline: points one, two and three. Yet, the preacher never connects the points. How does point one relate to point two? Point three?

You can usually tell if you are connecting your points if you will insert *therefore* or *because* between them. For example, in this text, Jesus has authority. Therefore, we have responsibility. Because we have responsibility, we need his presence if we are to accomplish what he has asked.

Seek to follow the logical flow of the text itself. When God speaks, He does not stutter. Words are not given in random order, but in proper sequence. There is a purpose and method within God's revelation. Seek to see it, and proclaim it!

We are still working on the exegesis, "What did the text say?" I began to notice in my study that four verbs dominate the middle of Matthew 28:18-20. In English, two of the verbs—*go* and *make disciples*—are imperatives or

command. Two are participles: *baptizing* and *teaching*. At first, that means nothing to my sermon development. I simply take note of it. As I consult the Greek text, I discover only one verb in the imperative: *make disciples*. The other verbs are all participles, *going* or *as you go* or *having gone*, *baptizing* and *teaching*.

I have no ideas as to what to do with this discovery. I will have to think on it awhile and do further work in the commentaries. Often you will experience this phenomenon in preparation. Something will strike your attention, but you initially will be clueless as to how you can develop the observation.

All the while I am studying, I am making notes. By now, I have pages of notes. My exegetical study ends. I think I have an accurate understanding of the meaning of the words. Now, it's time to build the sermon and begin to answer the second question, "What *does* the text say?" How do I take these verses and have them leap off the page into the hearts of people to whom I minister?

That is the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is my work. Such effort cannot be successful without prayer. Thus, underlying all study is the act and attitude of praying: "Lord, teach me first what this passage is saying to me, and then open it to the hearts of my people."

As Pentecostals, we do far more than preach to inform. We preach to persuade. We want persons to do something after we preach. We are looking for a response. Dry cold sermons produce dry cold people. We want our sermon to be a live coal from

God's altar. It cannot light a fire in our people if it does not first light a spark in our heart. My goal, therefore, in building the sermon is to apply the text to the persons to whom I preach, beginning with myself.

Pictorially, I see the sermon like a house with a front porch, main rooms and a back porch. Let the front porch be a welcome center for the sermon. Don't keep your guest forever on that front porch with a long rambling introduction. Keep it to the point and welcome the guest to the main rooms of the house or the major themes of the message. When the sermon is done, I think of exiting my guest through the back porch. That porch also is smaller than the main house just as the sermon's conclusion should not be greater than its body. Endlessly extending the conclusion is like never releasing people off the back porch to get back into the landscape of the everyday. Come to the point and provide opportunity for decision or response.

After exegesis, the three things that require the most work in sermon preparation are: (1) the title and introduction to the message [front porch], (2) the proposition [main rooms] and (3) the conclusion [back porch].

Expository preachers differ on which of the above will concern them first in the preparation process. Some prefer to begin like a lawyer, crafting their summation or conclusion. Others give first attention to the introduction, treating it as the headwaters for the flow of the sermon—believing that the rest of the message will follow the channel begun in the opening words. Usually, I concentrate first on building the proposition and outline.

Of course, the congregation never hears me say, “Now, the proposition of my message is...” The proposition is for my benefit and, if I build it well, the congregation will retain what is preached. Simply put, the proposition is a one-sentence summary of your entire message. It will include your main points. If you cannot reduce your sermon to a one-sentence, clearly articulated summary it is not ready to preach.

Simultaneous to building my proposition, I am constructing the outline of the message because the two go together. Within that process, or at the conclusion of it, I seek to crystallize the message with an appropriate title.

For example, it’s hard to title Matthew 28:18-20 as anything other than, “The Great Commission.” That’s the name given it over the course of Christian history. Perhaps, for effect, you might try a variation, “The Great Co-Mission.” You might choose a more creative or contemporary title. However, avoid titles that promise more than they can deliver, mislead or misrepresent the content of the text.

Employing “The Great Commission” as title, I asked myself, “What’s so great about the Great Commission?” *Great* does not appear within the text itself. Why has it been inserted? The more I reflected on this question (and good sermon preparation requires that you do considerable prayer, meditation and reflection), I realized the text itself answered the question. The great commission is great because it contains a great claim, a great responsibility and a great assurance! There is both my

proposition and outline in one sentence. I can employ it throughout the sermon!

In the introduction, I can ask why we call these words of Jesus, “The Great Commission?” The main body of the sermon answers that question. First, it makes a *great* claim: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Second, it carries a *great* responsibility: “make disciples.” Third, it conveys a *great* assurance: “And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”

In the conclusion, I return to those themes. Have you accepted the claim of Jesus? Have you acted on the responsibility given? Are you filled with the assurance he has promised?

For me, the title, proposition and conclusion serve somewhat like the design on a coloring book. I can’t begin to color unless I know what I am filling in.

Carefully and methodically, I begin to craft my notes for the message. At the top of the page, I write the title, “The Great Commission.” Then comes a paragraph called, “Introduction.” In expository preaching, the goal for all introductions is to get the text into the people and the people into the text. A simple way to sum up an introduction to the Great Commission is to note that these are Jesus’ last words, in the Gospel of Matthew, to His disciples and they are His last words for us. It was their commissioning message and ours. If the last words of a dying loved one are important, how much more so the last words of the Risen Christ!

From there, the first main emphasis—the great claim—unfolds. If you have done your exegetical homework in the greater context of Matthew’s Gospel, you will be drawn to Matthew 4:8,9 where Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry turned down the devil’s offer of “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.” You will want to drive home the application that Jesus could not have made the claim at the end if he had bitten on the temptation in the beginning. It is the same way in our lives. Power with God comes through the pathway of obedience and resisting the enemy’s temptations.

You will also want to emphasize the universal claim of Jesus. His authority extends to heaven (something the devil could not offer since he is not in heaven and has no authority there) and earth. Jesus is telling us that in that day we will not answer to Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius or any other person. We will answer to Him.

I could not have reached the above insight without connecting the immediate text to the whole text. Expository preaching requires you to develop a passage within its context: immediate (chapter and book of the Bible) and general (the whole of Scriptures). Only as I did concordance work on the word *all* in the Gospel of Matthew did the observation come to me that I should connect Matthew 4:8,9 with Matthew 28:18-20.

Within each point of your sermon, employ an apt illustration, if possible. A sermon without illustrations is like a house without windows. In declaring Jesus’ great claim, I reflect that some in my audience may have problems with

that statement. “If he has all authority, as the preacher says, then why do we see so much that is out of control? Why does evil win so frequently? Why am I having difficulty?”

It is important, therefore, to note that what Jesus is talking about is final authority: the decisions that relate to heaven or hell, forgiveness of sins, eternal life and ultimate realities. The illustration I used to overcome this silent objection is one from my personal experience. I had a friend who, as a young man, had an opportunity to buy SONY stock when it was only \$0.10 a share. Had he known what would happen with SONY, he would have sold everything he had to buy as much stock as he could. Jesus’ words let us know outcomes. How is my behavior today affected by what I know about the future he holds securely? If I am persuaded that he is victor, I will invest everything I am in his cause today!

After focusing on the great claim, a moment of transition comes. Every expository sermon needs to navigate carefully the transitions. What connection does point one have to point two?

In this case, the great responsibility (point two) flows out of the great claim (point one). Jesus’ connective word is *therefore*. Thus, our responsibility flows out of the power claimed by Christ. He would never send us on a mission that had little or no hope of success.

Quickly, the transition comments flow into the development of the core of our responsibility. Remember, we discovered in exegesis that three of the verbs are participles and one is

imperative. That now controls the development of this second point.

Our main responsibility is “to make disciples.” Jesus is not content that we just get people to say the “sinner’s prayer.” He is not primarily interested in head counts of decisions made. Often, our focus on evangelism is to get people ready for heaven, but discipleship impels us also to focus on getting heaven into people. A Christian is a follower of Jesus, who lives as his disciple.

The participles define the process of making disciples. First, there is going. No one can become a disciple unless someone has gone to him or her.

In the English text, our exclusive focus sometimes is on the word *go*. However, that is not the focus of Jesus. There is no explicit command in the Greek to “*go*.” Jesus says, “As you *go*” or “*having gone*.” In other words, he assumes we will *go*. However, *going* is not the end of it. *Going* is just the start. The purpose of “*going*” is to eventuate in “making disciples.”

Today, many people are “taking trips” and assuming they are a fulfillment of the Great Commission. Jesus says the evangelism or missionary trip must have the purpose of making disciples.

Baptizing is the second element in making disciples. Baptism is important enough that Jesus included it in the great commission. But, Jesus’ focus is not upon the outward ritual, but the inward surrender. Jesus desires public and visible identification with him through water baptism.

The illustration I found helpful here was the post-apostolic description of baptism in *The Didache* (The Teaching), written in the late first century or early second century. These early believers required baptism to be in running cold water. Why running? To symbolize the carrying away of sins? Why cold? To illustrate that the Christian life was one of rigor, a “real shock to the system.” Living the gospel is not a matter of convenience, but commitment. Jesus’ focus is not on self-fulfillment, but self-denial; not on cross avoidance, but cross bearing.

A conundrum of expository preaching is that it requires you to develop every word or phrase of the text before you while not getting bogged down by overdeveloping a particular point. For example, some commentaries devote page after page to the words “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” You will see long treatises on infant baptism versus believer baptism and the mode of baptism: immersion, pouring or sprinkling. Others focus on how this text refutes “Jesus Only” teaching.

If I were preaching a sermon on water baptism, I would want to deal with all these issues. However, I am not preaching a water baptism sermon. I am preaching from a text on the Great Commission. Therefore, I must not get lost in the forest of baptismal topics. You must make similar judgment calls as you work with the text before you. Your exegesis may tempt you to spend more time than you should on developing a sub-theme within the text. Don’t get distracted by making minor details into major themes.

I simply note that if you are a disciple of Jesus, you will be baptized. The baptism is more than into water; it is into the very Person of God. *Name* is a singular noun. We are baptized into the One God who has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In being baptized into that name, I not only get wet. I am placed into a relationship with him.

Then, the third component within the text for making disciples is “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

There is a curriculum in the lifelong course of discipleship. It’s everything Jesus has commanded by personal example, discourses, parables, precious sayings, promises, warnings, lessons on hypocrisy, prayer, humility, trust, forgiveness, obedience, marriage, discipleship, cross bearing and so on. Our Lord never foresees a time or circumstance when any part of his teaching will become antiquated or untrue, inappropriate or needless.

How easy it is, as ministers, to preach some things and not others; to preach “our things” rather than “everything” he has ordered. How frequently we are tempted to ride themes about which Jesus said absolutely nothing!

For illustration here, I find a quote from Hugh Thomson Kerr most helpful: “We are sent not to preach sociology but salvation; not economics but evangelism; not reform but redemption; not culture but conversion; not progress but pardon; not a new social order but a new birth; not revolution but regeneration; not a new organization but a new creation; not democracy but the Gospel; not civilization but Christ...”¹

For application, here is an excellent opportunity to underscore the importance of personal Bible study, prayer, stewardship of time and talents, obedience to Jesus and a host of other issues that relate to learning to be a disciple.

At this point in the sermon, I am still working my proposition. For transition, I review where I am. The Great Commission is great because: (1) it contains a great claim, (2) it gives a great responsibility and, finally, (3) it conveys a great assurance.

Once more, exegesis helps builds the emphasis. In the Greek, the literal translation is “I *myself* am with you.” Jesus, in employing the reflexive pronoun, underscores the surety of his presence.

Thus, sub-point “a” is easily stated. The great assurance is (a) personal. “I myself am with you.” But, it is also (b) an abiding assurance: “always.”

If you have done the exegesis carefully on this text, you are now ready to point out an exciting truth. In the Greek text, the word *all* occurs four times in Matthew 28:18-20.

1. “All authority.” There is no power over which Christ does not have control.
2. “All nations.” No person of any color, ethnicity or background is left out.
3. “All things.” There is no precept Jesus failed to teach us that is vital for our relationship with God.

4. “All times” [literally, “all the days”]. There is no period in our life as a disciple of Jesus when he is not personally with us! “All the days” includes days of strength and weakness, of success and failure, joy and sorrow, youth and age, life and death.

Finally, the great assurance is not only (a) personal and (b) abiding, it is (c) a victorious assurance: “to the very end of the age.”

For illustration on the great assurance, I found the story of David Livingstone pertinent. He once said, “For would you like me to tell you what supported me through all the years of exile among people whose language I could not understand, and whose attitude towards me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this, ‘Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.’ On those words I staked everything, and they never failed!” Livingstone said of this phrase, “It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honour . . .”²

[Time does not permit me here to re-tell the drama and pathos of Livingstone’s story. You can find it in Frank William Boreham’s sermon, “David Livingstone’s Text,” as referenced above.]

Nevertheless, this does raise a vital point for expository preaching. As you near the conclusion of your message, you realize it must not only touch the minds of your audience, but also their hearts. Jesus understood this, and that is why he so often told stories. You will never be effective as an expository preacher, nor

any other kind of preacher, unless you incorporate material that moves your own heart and the hearts of persons to whom you preach.

The sermon quickly draws to a conclusion. Relying upon the Holy Spirit, you seek to bring people to a response. Have they accepted the claim of Jesus? Have they accepted the responsibility he himself gave? Do they live in the assurance he has made?

It is now time for the altar, a moment when people can respond to what they have heard and make a personal commitment in response to the preached Word.

My purpose in walking you through the exercise of preaching from Matthew 28:18-20 is simply to give you a working model for how to preach expositarily. The principles and insights given will apply to any text in Scripture.

Follow these easy steps:

1. Take time to thoroughly read, meditate and pray over the Scripture passage from which you will be preaching. Do this with just the Bible and without the aid of any outside studies. Take notes of the thoughts and questions that come to you.
2. Consult the commentaries. Use a wide selection of study aids. Take copious notes.
3. Develop your title, proposition and outline. Can you express the entire message within a single declarative sentence? Is your title true to the text and does it elicit interest?

4. Think through your introduction (getting the people into the text and the text into the people). Does it grab attention?

5. Think through your conclusion. What appeal are you making? What response are you seeking? What do you want people to do with the message you have preached?

6. Give your sermon windows. Do your illustrations fit, or are they forced or far-fetched. Tell a story to make a point, not just to tell the story.

7. Pay attention to your connectives. Will the people be able to follow your train of thought? Are your points connected to each other? Do they flow out of your proposition? Have you kept your main points succinct and memorable?

8. Soak your message in prayer. Do you feel it is “fire within your bones?” Do you have a sense that you fill a prophetic role as you preach? Is what you proclaim indeed God’s Word to your people for that occasion?

When you begin to preach expositarily, don’t be surprised if you struggle at first. I would not want to preach some of my earliest expository sermons today. Like all disciplines, expository preaching comes more readily as you practice it. However, the dividends are worth it! Nothing will affect your personal spiritual growth more dramatically than constant absorption in expository preaching. You will take in far more than you ever give out. Moreover, the people you preach to will readily grow into spiritual maturity for you will be putting God’s Word—not your ideas—into their lives.

¹ Cited in George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 209.

² Andrew W. Blackwood, comp. *The Protestant Pulpit: An Anthology of Master Sermons from the Reformation to Our Own Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, Reprint 1977), 164.