
Expository Preaching

by Michael Green

Dr. D. W. Cleverly Ford, who has written a number of books called *The Expository Preacher's Notebook*—(in this country, *The Ministry of the Word*, Eerdmans) says that, “expository preaching could almost be called a lost art in the mid-twentieth century. This may be due to various causes: the decline in Bible reading, the cult of short sermons, the fact that preaching has been on decline for many years, and the fact that many ministers have received formal training whose approach to the Bible has left them uncertain of its authority.” If, then, expository preaching is at such a discount, you may wonder why I propose to devote one of three sessions to it. Indeed you may wonder what it is?

Defining Expository Preaching

Basically, it is opening up the Bible to people. There is a phrase in that story of the Emmaus Road when those people were walking along and Jesus (lovely word, *dianoigō*) opened up the Scriptures to them and their hearts burned within them as they talked with Him along the way. An expository preacher seeks to *open up* the Scripture so it will burn in people's hearts and thrill them, because the living Jesus, though unseen, is speaking to them. In this sort of preaching, the preacher is eclipsed by the message, so much so that people are confronted by the Lord Himself. The preacher is forgotten and the message becomes deeply burned into the hearts of the people. He discovers the meaning and natural divisions of the text, and just like a skilled stonemason with only his hammer, he taps that stone in the right place and it falls into place for the constituents. He doesn't impose his views upon the text. He allows the text to speak for itself, with its own authority, power, and memorableness, so that when the listener comes back to that text years later, he can't remember the minister who opened it up, but the Scripture is perspicuous to him.

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Expository preaching is not delivering lectures. It's not dull repetition of Scripture in rather less evocative language than the original. What is it? You've sometimes been into one of those old rooms that your great aunt Mabel had; you know, all the furniture has been covered with a dust sheet. The expository preacher whisks off the dust sheet so that the lovely qualities of the furniture (message) are visible and people are challenged to do something about it. Such preaching is directed at the whole person and it is meant to induce change.

A curate went to his vicar and showed him his very early attempt at preaching. He had it all written out, as a lot of Anglicans do, and he handed it to his vicar and said, "Will it do?" Somewhat unkindly, the vicar replied, "Will it do what?" That's the thing. What will it do? It's meant to do something.

Expository preaching is not necessarily verse by verse discourse. It is a type of preaching that rips the dust sheet off the furniture; that opens up the Scripture; that exposes people to the helpful beams of the Word of God.

Assumptions in Expository Preaching

A certain major assumption behind expository preaching is the string which winds up the whole clock: *the Scriptures contain God's self-disclosure to man*. I wonder if you think Christianity is a religion? It isn't. It's not a religion at all. I hope you are not going out to invest in religion because that will be a very dreary business. You are ambassadors of a revelation, and that is entirely different from a religion. Religion is man's attempt to get up and sort himself out with God. It goes back to the old days between Jupiter, the chief Roman god and Numa Pompilius, second king of Rome. "*Religio*" was the bond between them. Jupiter said, "As long as my sacrifices and my smell comes up in my nostril, I'll guard your armies." A very good arrangement. And that is how much self-religion works.

Jesus Christ, said Bonhoeffer, came to destroy religion, and He did. He came to make the revelation of God plain to man. Notice that marvelous opening to the Hebrews (1:1,2), "...God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son..." He goes on to explain who the Son is. A self-revelation

that was partial and gradual and in different modes in the Old Testament has culminated in what G. Campbell Morgan called God's last word to man, God's supreme disclosure to man, Jesus Christ.

You may well know that several debates have raged over the last fifty years on the subject of revelation. But those who believe that God does reveal Himself have been much divided as to whether He reveals Himself in mighty acts or whether He reveals Himself in words. And that debate is by no means dead in the United States at this time. But the Word of the Lord is to be seen in both ways in the Old Testament. It is to be seen in His mighty acts of deliverance in the Exodus and the Exile in the Old Testament, and also in the inspired interpretation of that given to men of God at that time. He is the God who reveals Himself both in action and interpretation. He reveals Himself in nature and His mighty acts. He reveals Himself in the testimony to those mighty acts in Scripture—*pasa graphē theopneustos*—all Scripture is God-breathed.

Attitudes Toward Scripture

There have been, I believe, four main attitudes toward Scripture in the church:

One is that the Bible has no normative significance today. I know some distinguished theologians in Britain who believe that. They say, "Of course you can't know what the Bible said anyway. But even if you could, you couldn't know what it meant. But even if you knew what it said and what it meant, and even if you knew that Jesus had really said it (which, of course, you don't), then there is no earthly reason why it should benefit you as a Christian to follow it." The logic of that position defeats me.

Secondly, people of the church see the Bible as a sort of Christian tradition: the Bible is very right, but is it the whole story?

Thirdly, some people see the Bible as supremely a work of religious genius, a sort of God-squad edition of Beethoven or something. And that is true too, but is that the whole story?

There is a fourth view and that view is what the Bible has to say about itself. The Word of God claims that it embodies God's self-disclosure to man and is, therefore, normative for Christians' belief and behavior. That is the official view of almost all the mainline

churches, although it astonishes me how little it is observed in practice.

Christ's View of Scripture

First, Christ studied Scripture carefully and framed His whole life by it. We can't understand the New Covenant; we can't understand the Messiah; we can't understand the Son of Man, we can't understand the suffering servant—none of these things—without the Old Testament.

Secondly, Christ regarded the Scripture as inspired by God. He didn't say David said this or the other. He said, "God through David has said." He didn't just think that the author of Genesis had a brilliant idea when he said that man should leave father and mother and should cleave to his wife and the two should become one flesh. In Genesis that idea could be ascribed to the author of Genesis, but when Jesus quotes it in Matthew 19, He says that God said it. So Christ really believed that God's hand was behind the Old Testament writings. There was a dual authorship. Men wrote, certainly, but with different languages, different styles, different competencies. Behind it all, God was directing and holding the Word together. Jesus treated it as inspired by God.

Thirdly, Jesus was quite clear in his manner of treating God's Word as utterly authoritative and reliable. In summary, Christ studied and framed His life upon Scripture; He regarded it as inspired by God; and He treated it as authoritative and normative. In the end He would say that the Scripture cannot be broken.

There are two recourses to which many people have been driven: one is the doctrine of *kenosis* and the other of accommodation. The first one says, "He did know better, but He didn't let on." I don't find that a credible view to take of the one whom I call my Lord and my Savior. Therefore, I take very seriously the view of Scripture which all mainline churches—certainly Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Wesleyan, Anglican, Baptist—have taken. I find myself totally in line with the position Jesus Christ Himself adopted.

There is another reason, actually; that is because it works. You know very well that this book has a power to sort you out like nothing else has. You know when you speak it. There's the classic story of Spurgeon himself, the great Baptist preacher of the middle

nineteenth century. Do you know how Spurgeon was converted? One day the small lad stumped along to some one-horse church in the middle of the back and beyond. There was snow everywhere. Only one marvelous old farmer and one other person showed up, and then there was this little lad standing underneath the gallery looking very wet and embarrassed. The one who was to preach because the minister couldn't get there just got up and read, "Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." He was such a stumbly, bumbly sort of guy who said it, and said it again, and said it once more for luck, and sat down. Yet, it was there that this prince of preachers of all centuries was converted. The Word of God changed him.

I take my stand on the Scriptures because my Lord did and because it works. Listen to Scripture speak of itself, "For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

I don't go around defending Scripture to great lengths. It's a waste of time. Spurgeon was once asked if he would defend the Scriptures and he said, "Defend the Scriptures, Sir. I would as soon defend a lion. Let it out!" That's what Scripture does when you let it out. It's got its own power; it's got its own teeth. This book contains the truth of God and we are here in the preaching business to make its message heard. That is expository preaching!

The New Testament Preacher

There are quite a lot of interesting pictures of the preacher in the New Testament. He is not there as an originator of new ideas. In the Roman world, preaching was revolutionary and Romans didn't like preachers. The New Testament preacher is not presented as a guru where people gather and sit at his feet. He is not there in the New Testament as a prophet, though a preacher may prophesy from time to time. Prophesying is not the same as preaching. Don't let anyone tell you they are the same thing. The Word of God comes to the prophet. The preacher goes to the Word of God. The preacher is not a collector of other people's ideas. Nor does he get his message from his own mind or directly from God. He gets it from the Bible. Of course, his own thinking and wrestling with it

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are all part of it. But basically the preacher's subject matter is God's revelation. And so, in Scripture we read about sowing the Word, teaching the Word, being stewards of the Word, being heralds of the Word, and cutting a straight path through the Word. We are shepherds who feed sheep, not on junk food but on the Word. There is a "givenness" about the preacher's subject matter. That's the assumption behind expository preaching and if you don't share it, I hope you will gain it.

Advantages of Expository Preaching

Biblical preaching is authoritative. Expose people to the sources of the Christian religion, and the Lord Himself is behind it. So, the preacher is not speaking in his own name, but he is speaking in the name of the One under whose judgment he sits. If we don't preach to ourselves before we preach to others, our preaching is bogus and the people can smell it. Biblical preaching is authoritative and has authority over the preacher. The preacher does not pass judgment on the Word of God; he preaches so that the Word of God may pass judgment on himself and on those whom he serves.

Biblical preaching brings good proportion. Isn't it true that one of the big dangers in all Christian teaching is the one of proportion? We get so absolutely zapped by the Charismatic Movement that we forget about structure. We even forget about Scripture. We get so heavily into Calvinism that we can hardly believe that Methodists were in the good old family at all. You know? We all stress one or two things too much. It's not that they're wrong. They're right, but the other guy's perception may be right too. The Gospel is a many faceted diamond, and it's much more valuable and much richer and many more sided than we think. Therefore, biblical preaching tends to bring good proportion to our preaching, eliminating the danger of plowing the same old furrows, or of being dominated by what our congregation will buy, or by what we might overemphasize.

Biblical preaching drives the preacher to study. Don't think at the end of your master's program here that it's game to set a match to the books. It is not. It is very important to keep reading. Judge it, and allow it to work for you. Biblical preaching drives you to study, and this is good for you and your hearers. Think, you preachers of the future, what bad luck it could be for members of

your congregation to hear you year in and year out for twenty years. But if you are deeply rooted in the Word, your study will drive you back again and again and you'll bring forth treasures, new and old.

Biblical preaching hides the preacher behind the Word. Beware of flamboyant preachers. Beware of preachers who draw attention to themselves. Our prayer as we go into the pulpit ought to be, "Lord, hide me behind Your cross, so that it's Your voice that's heard and it's not too much fouled up by my voice." The preacher needs to be hidden and he needs to be hidden from the bad eggs sometimes, too. Suppose you get up and say, "All right, folks, today I'm going to talk to you about divorce." Three-quarters of your congregation would get up and walk out, wouldn't they? But if you happen to be innocently toddling along through Mark, chapter 10, and you come to a passage that's on that subject, nobody can throw bad eggs at you, can they? In the balanced proportion of preaching, these painful areas get touched.

Biblical preaching gives cohesion to the service. I believe that the worship of the Lord is the most powerful dynamic in drawing people to Him. The Word and the worship go together and the marvelous thing about expository preaching is that the lection, preaching, psalmody, hymns, testimonies and vision can all come into a wonderful, coherent whole. People leave with a sense of togetherness and harmony about it all.

Here's my last reason why I think there's something to be said for expository preaching: You never run dry, you're never short of anything to preach about. Enough said.

Dangers in Expository Preaching

First, you can slide into a rut. You know expository preachers who try to squeeze every last bit of juice out of the orange; they'll only take a fraction of a verse and they'll hammer about it. In the old days there were marvelous comedians who would say, "Old Mother Hubbard, a remarkable lady, full of gentleness and kindness. Full of compassion and mercy. Where would you find one like old Mother Hubbard? Well, my second point is that she went, she didn't hop, skip and jump. She didn't dance, she went, but where did she go? She didn't go up a wall or down the chute, she went to the cupboard." You know, that sort of thing. Well, don't

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get into that sort of rut with expository preaching. It can blind you to any topical issue of importance. If you are working your way inexorably through II Chronicles and the president gets shot tomorrow, that's bad. You ought to be able to drop everything and go to the topic of the moment. It's very, very important to be able to do that.

Another snag expository preachers must watch out for: *There is an element of pleading and challenging with men and women, with their souls, that can be lost to some extent if there is rigidity tied to our expository preaching.* There's no earthly reason why any of these dangers should apply, but I have seen that from time to time.

We've looked at what expository preaching is. What is the assumption behind it? What are the advantages? What are the dangers? Now, let's look at the types of expository preaching.

Six Different Types of Expository Preaching

(1) *Expounding a book.* Have you ever read through I Peter or Mark's gospel in one sitting? It's an interesting exercise. If your people are taking a real hammering from one thing or another, go through I Peter, because it was written to people who were suffering. Or, if you've got a lot of new converts, why not give a bird's-eye view of I Thessalonians, because it was written to build up new converts. Or, suppose you have some wobbly Christians, not quite sure whether they're coming or going; you can take them through I John because its design is to destroy false assurance and to build up proper assurance. If you have some people in your congregation, large numbers of them who are reluctant to get their feet wet in doing anything for the Lord, why not read them the Book of Jonah? If you want to teach about the church, why not do so under the imagery of the Epistle to the Ephesians? Giving a bird's-eye view of a book can be very helpful.

(2) *Expounding a chapter.* Just think of a mighty chapter like Romans 8 where Paul talks about the eternal security of the Christian; his past cleaned up; now, therefore, there is no condemnation to the person who is in Christ Jesus, who is present, supportive even in the midst of suffering and anguish because of the Holy Spirit. The end of the chapter states that nothing, no nothing in all creation will be able to separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus, the Lord. The past, the present and the future tenses

of salvation are all in that marvelous eighth chapter.

If you wanted to help Christian workers see what they're meant to look like, hold a mirror up in front of them. There are seven pictures in II Timothy, chapter 2 that you could build upon.

Are your people a bit stuck? They know the Lord, but they don't seem to know anything else, much. That's exactly the situation to which II Peter, chapter 1 was addressed: "Add to your faith, virtue, and to virtue, knowledge, and to knowledge, temperance..., " and so the marvelous ladder continues.

To teach on prayer, why not go to Luke 11? You have Jesus' example in prayer, and you have his teaching of the Lord's prayer, which you can take apart, phrase by phrase. Then you have those marvelous parables about prayer. To ram it home, take a chapter, or a chunk, a very substantial chunk, but I've only taken you down to verse 11. You don't need to go through a whole chapter.

(3) *Expounding a character.* We are human beings and it's lovely to see what the Lord has done in the life of other human beings. Just think what you could do with a character like Jacob. I mean Jacob was the nastiest, most sniveling character you'll find. Yet he was turned into a prince of God. What a story! Or think of Hosea whose wife left him to go into a brothel. He had to take his wife back. Think of how you could preach on restoration and renewal from that. Or take Aquila and Priscilla, that marvelous couple who in the egalitarian days of the New Testament are mentioned six times: three times Aquila comes first and three times Priscilla comes first. You can't beat that for fairness. In their story you can find the most marvelous teaching about Christian homes. I'm an impetuous character, so I did a Bible study on King Saul, showing the dangers of an impetuous nature. The lessons are there in biblical character study.

(4) *Expounding a theme.* Take a theme like the remnant. The whole story of the Old Testament is a story of the remnant getting hacked about. First, it was a flood that drowns most of them. Then you have one people going on and becoming the people of Israel. They're not much good and so they have to go through an Exodus. Then they all follow Baalam and so they have to have an exile. Then they get offered a little pen picture of the suffering servant and they say, "No way," but we don't credit that in any of their literature. So all the way you have a remnant until the remnant is

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only Jesus. Then it begins to open out again—the people committed to Jesus. It's a marvelous, broad theme you can expound.

Take something like the Messiah. What does that mean? Or the kingdom of God. There is not nearly enough teaching on the kingdom of God and that is the main thrust of the teaching of Jesus.

The thrust of Hebrews is “better”; *better sacrifice, better priesthood, better covenant*, everything is “better.” Everybody wants something that's better these days, don't they? Well you can give it to them in a manner of speaking.

Work on Bible teaching about government and its limitations. Last Sunday morning my colleague preached on Romans 13. Whose hand is on our government?

You need to preach about sex, family, home life, discipline, affluence, and about the qualities of the early Christians in contrast to our own. Expound on the content of their *kerygma* which is so much more broad than ours.

(5) *Expounding a verse.* Take a verse like Philippians 3:10: “That I may know Him.”

“Paul, don't you know Jesus yet?”

“Yes, indeed, I met him on the Damascus road.”

“Well, of course you know him then.”

“No, I know him after a manner of speaking, but I want to know him better.”

What a fabulous ambition, as well as a starting point for the Christian life. “And the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death.” There are four points in that one verse.

Or think of I Peter 3:18—the most marvelous verse on the cross you could possibly find: “Christ has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust to bring us to God.” *Who is this executed criminal?* It's Christ. *What was He doing there?* Well, it was very costly for Him. He was suffering. *Well, why was He suffering?* He was suffering, not just to show us a good example, but for sin. *But what link on earth can there be between His suffering and our sins?* Look, it's the just for the unjust. *Oh, I see. Well, wasn't that all a very long time ago?* Yes, once and for all and unrepeatable. Evangelistic material par excellence.

Or, for a sermon on faith you could take a verse like II

Chronicles 14:11: “King Asa cried to the Lord his God, ‘O Lord, there is none like thee to help, between the mighty and the weak. Help us, Oh Lord our God, for we rely on thee, and in thy name we have come against this multitude. O Lord, thou art our God: let not man prevail against thee.’ ” Amazing, the *amount* of faith in this man, the *rest* of faith, the *adventure* of faith, the *confidence* of faith, and the *prayer* of faith, all out of one verse.

Let me insert here the importance of using your Greek. Have your quiet time in Greek and you will find nuances will come to you which you won’t get from the English text. For instance, suppose you are preaching on Acts 4:11,12. Peter and John with great boldness declare, “This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Now, if you go over that in the Greek it will teach you that salvation is *en christō*. It is in Him and there’s no other *onoma*, no other name—no other utterly dependable area. Secondly, there is no additional way of salvation. No *allō*, *en oudeni allō onomati*. So, not Jesus *and* Mary Baker Eddy or Jesus *and* this, that, and the other. Thirdly, there is no alternative way of salvation for there is no *onoma heteron* the difference between *allos* and *heteros* which you thought was so dull when you were taught it here. But now you discover that it lights up the text. Not only no additional way, no Jesus *and*, but no alternative to Jesus. Not Islam, or whatever it may be. And there’s nothing optional about salvation. *Dei sōthēnai*. It’s necessary to be saved. All of that is there in the Greek New Testament which you study.

(6) *Expounding a word*. A concordance is necessary for this type of expository preaching. Faithful, able, the will of God, riches, inheritance, take heed. You can take themes like these, just a word and spin it out.

Preparation for Preaching

Begin early in the week and do your own Bible study, before you look at the commentaries. It lifts the burden to start early in the week. You can meditate and it will sink down into you. I am going to hint at the different things I find important in preaching or preparing to preach.

Choosing the Subject

It may be assigned to you like “preaching” was to me in this series. If not, it may emerge as you pray, or it may emerge as you meet people and chat with them. Subjects may surface from:

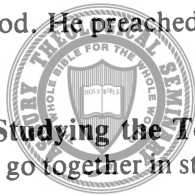
(1) *Personal lessons*; if they’re warm to me they’re likely to be warm to other people.

(2) *The congregation*; I often sit down with my staff and say, “Now what are the areas in which our congregation is hurting? Where are they weak; where are they wobbly?” So, look at the needs of the congregation. Interview, talk with members, visualize people and their needs as you prepare to preach. You can’t be a preacher without being a pastor, reading the letters that come in and responding to people at the end of your addresses. Sometimes people say to me, “Nobody ever speaks to me at the end of an address.” Well, I hardly ever preach when somebody doesn’t. That amazes me, because if you’re really breaking open the Word of God, that is dynamite. It’s going to bring you some reaction, even if it’s hostility.

So, the subject may be a personal, a congregational, or a liturgical thing, or it may be a national thing. For instance, if inflation gets worse, you might preach about those who gather wages into a bag full of holes. It takes you back to the Old Testament prophets, doesn’t it? When the recent Falklands War came we preached and we had preach-ins on the subject of the Falklands War, and loyalty to God being more important than loyalty to country. We were against our government on that matter. We believed it was wrong for all sorts of reasons I won’t get into now. But these matters of government need to be assessed by Christians. I remember the day that one of the greatest men in my lifetime, President Kennedy, was assassinated. At the very next service, a marvelous preacher in the church, where I was just a student at the time, preached on “the day that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, sitting upon a throne and his train filled the temple.” What do you do when the hope of the New Frontier packs off? The only thing left is to have faith in God. He preached marvelously on that topic for that day.

Studying the Text

Prayer and hard work go together in study. “Chew the cud of the



Word of God,” says the Epistle to Barnabas. Ask “What does the text actually say?” Sometimes variant readings are very significant. Do you know that variant reading about Jesus Barabbas in the trial scene before Pilot? “Which do I release to you, Jesus Christ, or Jesus Barabbas?” Both sons of the Father, *bar abba*; one, the violent revolutionary; one, willing to absorb violence in Himself. You can go on drawing the contrasts. What does the text say? What does the text mean? This avoids fanciful exegesis. We ought not to be those who, being dislodged or persecuted from one verse, take refuge in another. We need to actually be rooted in the text and know what it means. For instance, the Colossian epistle is about other mediators coming between the Colossian believers and their God. That’s what it meant. What does it mean now? Well, you move from exposition of the passage to applying it to the contemporary scene, getting at the inherent principle which is: You don’t have additional mediators with Jesus Christ, and you don’t have them in the modern cults any more than you had them in the days of the Colossians. How does it apply now? Apply it to whoever may be the current guru and bring it right down to the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* or whatever. Jesus said to feed His sheep, not giraffes. Most preaching is miles above the applicable area of cognition of people. Remember, after the preaching on the Day of Pentecost the people said “Wow,” though you won’t find that in the text. Always see what the text means in our culture and then apply it.

How to Shape the Material

Analyze and question the text. Say you have a text like Acts 12:5, “But prayer was made constantly by the church to God for him (Peter).” What does that teach us about prayer? Answer: That we must pray, we must pray regularly, we must pray earnestly, we must pray corporately, we must pray definitely, and we must pray believingly. And they did. All of that is there in that one verse. Or the inference is there.

Or question the text, John 3:3, “You must be born again.” Whenever George Whitefield was in doubt he would fall back on John 3:3. When someone asked him, “Mr. Whitefield, why do you preach on this in the morning, and why do you preach on it in the evening?” Whitefield’s reply was, “Because you must be born

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again.” There are four questions that you can ask almost any text: what, who, why, and how (and don’t forget the how).

First of all, write down on a piece of paper in front of you in bold capital letters *what your aim is*. What are you trying to do with this sermon? It’s got to do something. Everything else you do is subservient to that aim. It takes enormous discipline to do that. There’s so much bad preaching because preachers don’t know what their aim is. They produce a few points, but they’re not geared to any one aim and the sermons don’t actually challenge anybody to do anything.

Second, formulate your plan. Break up the material in front of you to serve that aim and make sure that each point is absolutely crystal plain. A good plan will break up the material into a few memorable portions, preferably each one leading on to the other. To illustrate, take John 3:16: Your aim would be to bring people to Christ and so your plan might be, as you wrestle with that Scripture, to speak first of God’s great love, and then to move into man’s great need, which makes that love not an optional extra. Then speak of the need for a step: a step of faith—a step of commitment. It’s all there in the passage in John 3:16. These steps follow logically, one after the other, but you have to shape the material so that you can enable the people to see them.

Third, build your structure. It must be so clear that nobody can misunderstand it—clear like the enormous signs on your great freeways. They are so clearly marked because drivers are moving at great speed and could easily miss them and get lost fifty miles down the track. As preachers we need to have those freeway signs in our sermons. After all, we’ve been over the way before in preparation; they haven’t. They’re passing at great speed and we don’t want to lose them into the next year. Show them where the turns are going to be; make those freeway signs, and make sure that your material really fits under the headings.

Fourth, plan your illustrations. This is such an important area. People need illustrations not only to let the light in, but to allow a pause for concentration. My friend John Stott is a wonderful preacher. He used to be the master of illustrations, but he has resigned their use in order to get more sermon packed in. He uses illustrative language full of simile and metaphor, and that’s marvelous as far as letting the light in, but I suspect that he

stretches many people too far. That's where illustration would, I think, still serve him well, because it would enable people to pause in their concentration. Therefore, illustrations are very important.

Never illustrate the obvious. Always illustrate the unknown by the known. If you are trying to take people somewhere new, start them where they are. Use illustrations about nature, people, news; not some highly specialized point in nuclear physics, because that will leave a large number of people behind.

Illustrations from nature are my favorites. Grace and nature have a common source, but that's where modern man is so divided. He's got values and things on one side, and he doesn't know what to make of those; and he's got a material world on the other side, which is susceptible to the scientific method, while his values are not. So the poor man is torn between being a rationalistic person on the one hand, looking at his test tubes, his presuppositions, ditching God, ditching the future and eternity; and on the other hand, he's got to go home to his wife, his kids, his loved ones, and his values, and so he is torn apart.

Christians are not torn apart. We don't have that great divide. We believe in one God who is the source of this world and the people who live in it. We can use things in nature to illustrate things in grace, knowing that the same God is the author of both. The early scientists used to maintain that God has two books: the book of nature and the book of Scripture. I constantly use illustrations from nature.

Phillips Brooks said that preaching is truth showing through personality. Your personality illuminates your message, so don't be embarrassed about your personality. Sure, it's not the same as the personality next door, but it's yours. God has given it to you! At one stage I tried to preach like other preachers and it was a total disaster. I've got to preach like me. And God's truth has got to come through my personality. However addled that personality may be, God will still use it. Therefore, don't be afraid to use personal illustrations.

For sermon building I would recommend two books to buy. One is W.E. Sangster's, *The Craft of the Sermon*. I am very cautious about buying books that people tell me I must buy, but if I were you I would buy this one. The other one by John Stott is, *I believe in Preaching*. I'm not sure which is better. Sangster is more human;

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Stott is more clinical and organized.

One thing I would say with Sangster about illustrations: “Don’t cheat with them.” It is very easy to tell a story as if it happened to you in order to make it a bit more memorable and a bit more personal. Sangster tells the story of a speaker coming into a long preach-in occasion in a big hall, and two of the speakers had preceded him. He got up and he spoke to the subject and he used an illustration that produced gales of laughter. He knew it was a good story but he didn’t know it was that good. Afterwards he found out the reason for the laughter. Both of the previous speakers had used that illustration. And both of them had used it as a personal experience. It’s very easy to let that sort of thing happen, and that’s wrong and God won’t honor it. Remember, of course, that the preacher is the best illustration of the Gospel. I am afraid that we are the only gospel some people will ever read, and, therefore, we need to embody what we talk about, or we are absolutely walking hypocrites and they’ll see through us quickly.

Now a word about the start and the conclusion of any address you give. I used to always start with a text. I see the force of that because it says the Word of God is paramount in what I proclaim. But I very rarely *start* with the text now, although I hope to get to the content of Scripture very fast. But I like to start with a brief, interesting, and arresting attention-getter. A good start is crucial. If you lose them at the start you won’t get them back.

It’s a temptation to moralize when concluding a sermon. Jesus didn’t moralize. He would tell those matchless stories. He didn’t bore the pants off people by saying, “Now of course what that means really is this.” The only occasion that he gave an explanation of His parables was when the disciples asked Him. In public he said, “Which one was the real friend to the man who fell among thieves?” Or, “Go and do thou likewise,” or, “He that has ears to hear let him hear.” Wow! What a challenge to action. Give something very short, sharp, and chisel-like. We often mess up in our conclusions—similar to an aircraft going round and round in circles, not knowing when it’s going to be allowed to land. We should come straight in and land, and remember that landing has to take the nail of our aim and give it a final tap into place at the conclusion. Then people will go away knowing crystal clear what we are all about and what the challenge is for them. We can sometimes

end with a really memorable illustration or we can sometimes end with a text. Have you ever thought of that? It's quite possible to speak on obedience and end up with your text, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not the things that I say," and then sit down. Never introduce new material in your conclusion.

Pay Attention to Your Words

Words matter to the Holy Spirit. In I Corinthians 2:4 (NIV) Paul says, "My message and my preaching were...with a demonstration of the Spirit's power." If words matter to the Holy Spirit they should matter to us. Word-prepare your sermons, not just generally prepare them, and be ready for the Spirit of God to guide you on the occasion. You're going to do the sweat before that—the hard work that actually helps you in your language. It will enable you to concentrate on simple words, familiar words, evocative words to bring home a familiar truth, maybe in a new way. Determine that there shall be no possibility of being misunderstood. Pay attention to your words.

Pay Attention to Your Manner

You are an ambassador of Jesus Christ. It is no bad thing to have your Bible out in front of you as you speak. That is your authority. And always ask yourself how Jesus Christ would act in that situation. Of course you won't attain to it, but it's a good goal. "Sir, we would see Jesus," ought to be painted onto the inside of many a pulpit so that the minister sees it as he preaches. There's one in London like that. How would Jesus act? Well, He would show warmth. He would show simplicity, as well as profundity. There would be nothing flashy about his dress; nothing grotty about it either. He would not draw attention to Himself. He would show profound earnestness, courage, humor, and humility.

Ask your friends to point out your mannerisms. I was told yesterday that I have a mannerism of putting my left hand in a pocket as I speak. Well, that's an ugly mannerism and I shall try to get rid of it, and I am grateful to the friends who have pointed this out to me. If I am an ambassador of Jesus Christ, I shouldn't have my hands in my pockets. When I am worshipping, I shouldn't either. It's not respectful. I want nothing to distract from the Lord Jesus as I proclaim Him to people. Christ is making an appeal to human

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hearts through me, and I am in a very privileged position, but a very exposed position.

So, watch your language and your manner and encourage friends to sit in the congregation and to give you criticisms and suggestions afterwards. That is one of the great ways to improve.

A small group of our faculty from the seminary at Nottingham would take student groups out Sunday by Sunday to preach. Then we'd all come back and have supper at my place, and we'd take the message apart and ask: What was the aim? How about the use of Scripture? What about the plan? What about the illustrations? How about the application? How about the manner and mannerisms? It's amazing how many different answers we got to the question: "What do you think his aim was?" If he was a good preacher you'd get great clarity—everybody knew what the aim was. But my main point is: Get helpful criticism, not only on sermon content, but on your mannerisms.

Pay Attention to Your Prayers

Finally, it's important to go into preaching in prayer. Do pray! Get the elders to pray! We spend half an hour in prayer at our church before every service. I used to resent that because I like to talk to people as they come in, but I know that I need to talk to God before I go out to preach. The church needs to be encouraged to pray. A number of you said to me yesterday, "Michael, we're praying for you," and that encouraged me. You want to encourage that in your congregations. Prayer burns the message into you. Prayer links the message into the hearts of the people who listen. The Holy Spirit can work powerfully in a context of prayer. After all, He inspired the Scripture. He moved you as you worked upon it. He is going to use you as you proclaim it. It is His task in the end, not yours, praise God, to take it home to the souls of men. So you can relax. I don't know what the Holy Spirit is doing here this morning, but I know He's doing something, so I am quite relaxed about it. One lovely old saint, when asked how he prepared his sermons, said this: "First I reads myself full, then I thinks myself clear, then I prays myself hot, then I lets go." Very good, actually, isn't it? *Read yourself full, think yourself clear, pray yourself hot, and let go.*