

Boring Sermons – and How *Not* to Preach Them!

We are going to talk about preaching. This is not because we are all preachers, not because we all should be preachers, not because we all want to be preachers, but because all of us here believe in the importance of preaching. Otherwise there would be no reason for us to be present.

Preaching and God's cause on earth are like conjoined twins. What happens when one twin dies? They both die eventually. That's the way it is. When preaching dies, the cause of God dies. You can prove that from Scripture and from history. And when the cause of God dies, preaching dies. The two are so intimately joined together that you can't separate them.

So anybody who is interested in the cause of God on earth will be interested in the cause of preaching, even if they are not preachers. It's something we will all be interested in if we care about God's cause in this world. In approaching the subject before us, I am going to ask you to consider thirteen points:

Number 1: Reflect on when you last switched off

We are talking about boring sermons. Can you please tell me if you've never heard a boring sermon? Honestly, is there anybody here who has never heard a boring sermon? No one? And that's the way it is, isn't it? So what do you do when you're bored? (This is an interactive session, so please chip in with your replies.) Some of you switch over, you switch channels, don't you? The sermon is boring; the preacher is going on and on. So you switch to another channel. What do you think about? Sometimes it's your grocery list. In my wife's case it's the roast potatoes. Did she turn the oven on high enough or too high? Will the potatoes be burnt when we get back? People who don't switch over, switch off. We have an old saying in English, "Sometimes I sits and thinks, and sometimes I just sits." And that's what some people do. They just sit. The preacher is preaching and that's all they're doing. They're breathing, their vital life functions are continuing and that's all you can say.

Now what else happens when you're bored? How do you actually feel when you're bored? **Restless?** Yes, some people do. **Tired?** Yes, some people actually sleep when they're bored. **Discontented?** May be even angry. And what do you really want when the preacher is boring?

You want real spiritual meat, or want to go home or just want to be out of there. Boredom is a terrible thing. Think of it, there is only one infallible Book. A man is opening it; he is proclaiming it, and as he proclaims the only infallible Book in the world, people are bored. I think that that must border on sin.

What else caused you to switch off or switch over? Just think of the last boring sermon you heard. **Repetition.** Yes – so you say to yourself, "He's said that already", and you go off on another channel, or you just turn off. What else? A **monotonous voice.** There is actually a group of Particular Baptists in England who believe that it's essential to be monotonous. In every sermon they speak in a monotone all the time and aren't allowed to look at anyone or show any particular expression. Well, their churches are dying. Yes, a monotonous voice.

What else? **You can't hear,** Yes; anything else? **No passion.** So you feel that the words are coming out, but that the man isn't in the message. And so we could go on.

Now, if you would just reflect on *what* caused you to switch off, or *when* you switched off, really you don't need the rest of this seminar. Just by that process of analysis, you will become a more interesting preacher.

At this point I have to say something. There is a difference between a critical spirit and a critical faculty. God commands that we have a critical faculty. In other words, God commands that we weigh up what is right, what is wrong; what is better, what is worse; what is helpful, what is unhelpful. All the time we are to put everything through our mental processes in the light of His Word and to make a judgment about what is best and what is less helpful. That is commanded. So I'm encouraging you to exercise a critical faculty while you listen. But there is such a thing as a critical spirit. A critical spirit is where you actually degrade, diminish and despise the preacher because he's doing what he's doing or not doing what he should be doing. You're belittling him in your mind; you're looking down on him. That is sinful. He has probably prepared and prayed and is doing the best he can in good conscience. When we listen to preaching, we must be very careful to exercise our critical faculty but not to do it with a critical spirit, because we don't want to belittle any of God's servants or dishonor any praying man in the world.

Number 2: Learn communication skills

Our next point: learn communication skills. There are ways of getting through with words, and there are ways of not getting through with words. For example, "three blind mice" is better than "a tertiary number of visually impaired rodents" . One phrase is understood immediately and one is not. Our forefathers used to put it like this: "There are efficient modes of preaching the gospel, and inefficient modes" *(1) So there are ways of getting through with words and there are ways that stop our words getting through. Do you agree with that? So why is it so? It is because of the way that the human soul has been constructed. And who constructed it? Well, God did, of course.

The point I'm trying to make is that the fact that some speech gets through, while some does not, is because of the way that God has ordered His universe. In other words, communication skills are God given. Now the moment I say that in Wales, the audience rises in uproar. Someone immediately says, "What about 1 Corinthians 2:1-5? Doesn't Paul say there that communication skills don't matter a straw? They don't count at all. How can you say that communication skills should be learned when Paul says he doesn't use them?"

Let's look, then, at 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 right now. This reading is from the New King James Version, North American edition: *(2) (Vs1) And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. (Vs2) For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (Vs3) I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. (4) And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, (5) that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

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*(1) The quotation is from Henry C. Fish (1820-77) of Newark, New Jersey, in his article "Power in the Pulpit" , which appeared in *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* (1862). This article was later reprinted as a booklet (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, not dated) where the quotation is on p.2. *(2) *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, Copyright 1982, by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

“There you are”, say the objectors, “Paul just relied on the Holy Spirit. He didn’t care at all about communication skills, so why are you going on about this?” How would you answer that? Well, first of all we note that Paul’s paragraph is a very good example of skilled communication. But, for the Greeks, the point of communication skills was to attract public admiration. People would sit there and listen to the speaker and say, “Did you notice the way he pronounced Mesopotamia?” Greek rhetoric was designed to make sure that you were admired or respected. The whole point of Christian preaching is, of course, to make sure that Jesus Christ is admired and respected. The other thing about Greek communication skills was that they were manipulative. It is possible to speak in such a way that you get people to comply, not because they want to but because you’ve manipulated them.

Now, excuse a little bit of drama here, won’t you? Here is a little child of three or four who is disobedient. Do you know that you can get this child to do more or less what you want? Do you know that if you speak very softly and kindly to this child, then shout harshly at him, then speak very gently to him again, and just continue alternating in that way, eventually he will break? This was precisely the technique used by the Gestapo in their interrogations during the Second World War. Eventually the child will break and will comply. He will do what he’s told, not because he’s an obedient child, not because he wants to obey, but simply because there are ways of talking which are manipulative.

What Paul is saying is, “I renounce all that. That’s dishonest. I don’t peddle God’s word. I don’t draw attention to myself, but to Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When I speak, I actually speak in weakness, in fear, in trembling. I speak in such a way that if you’re converted, then it’s obvious that the Spirit of God has done it.” But Paul does not say that he renounces communication skills. He renounces the sort of oratory that was around at the time.

I would like all preachers to learn good communication skills. How would you learn them? *Practise them*. Yes, but how can I practise them if I don’t know them? *Listen to good sermons*. Yes, we are actually back to number one in reverse, aren’t we? Certain sermons switch you on, don’t they? So, especially if they’re on tape or video or DVD, why not listen to them again and ask, “What was it about that sermon that got through so well? Is there anything I can learn about communication?” That’s one way of learning communication skills. What’s another way of learning them? *Study how Jesus did it*. Yes, he was the epitome of good communication. *Ministering like the Master* ⁽³⁾, a little book I’ve written, has a chapter on how our Lord communicated in the Sermon on the Mount, and He has some very clear principles in mind.

How else could you learn communication skills? *Study them*.

How? Where would I get the books from? When I’m travelling I stop at airports and stations and places, and I look around for books on communication. Yes, some of them are nonsense, but some of them are not, and most of them are a mixture. I like reading books like that. While others are reading great big books on the details of Puritan theology or on subjects like neo-Platonism, I confess that I am usually reading on how to get through! Are there any other ways of learning these skills? When you’re speaking in public, there are times when you’re conscious that you are getting through, and there are times when you’re conscious that you are not. It’s like street lights. Do you ever see the street lights going out one at a time? That’s what sometimes happens when you’re preaching.

⁽³⁾ Stuart Olyott, *Ministering like the Master: Three Messages for Today’s Preachers* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003).

You see people's eyes glazing over – that one, then this one, and then this one. Soon one of your hearers nods off, and you realize that you're not getting through. Just by analysing your own preaching, in fact, you can learn communication skills. But they have to be learned! And frankly, in most seminaries, but not all, they are never even mentioned.

Number 3: Be Expository

Be expository. Let the Word of God do the work. I love to see a congregation being confronted by God's Word. Now what are some of the pictures which God's Word uses when it speaks about itself? A **sword**. Just think of that! It pierces right through, doesn't it? Please suggest some more. **Light**. Let it shine. It gets through. It sheds light. Do other pictures come to your mind?. **Bread**. It feeds. **Life**. Think of that. **Hammer** – some things can't be broken any other way, can they? Any more? **The gentle dew falling down** – refreshment. So let the congregation be confronted by the Word of God itself.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I live in Wales. In Wales there is almost no expository preaching left. This is what tends to happen. A brother stands in the pulpit. (Please remember what I said about a critical spirit and our critical faculty. Here I am trying to exercise my critical faculty.) A brother opens the Bible in the pulpit, and he tells you what he sees in the passage. That is not exposition! Take the story of Naaman. Do you know the story? The preacher tells you that he sees someone who's got leprosy. Leprosy resembles what? Sin. This person looks for a cure, and he finds it in Israel through God's word. He's told to wash and be clean and out he comes. We're sinners, we need cleansing, God's Word tells us how to get it. We simply have to obey God's Word. When we obey God's Word, we're wonderfully cleansed in a way that we can never even begin to imagine. And that's how the sermon goes.

THAT IS NOT EXPOSITION! In Luke 4:27 Jesus uses 2 Kings 5 to tell us that the real meaning of the passage is not that. You could certainly use the passage to **illustrate** cleansing, but that is not exposition. The point is that, apart from a small minority, the people who are called the people of God have rejected Him. From completely outside the people of God comes a man who enters into all their covenant blessings by simple faith in the word of God. He actually goes back to his homeland with two sack-loads of Israeli earth. A believer who is a Gentile is grafted into Israel and becomes a member of the true Israel, whereas the physical Israel has rejected God and proves itself therefore not be the true Israel. That's Jesus' lesson. That's why the passage is there. Exposition is telling the people why the passage is there and what it is actually saying – not what the preacher sees in it. So we need to be expository.

I was brought up in churches that used the old King James Version. It's a wonderful version, isn't it? It was translated in 1611, but most people who use it are using the 1769 revision. When I was a boy, expository sermons went like this. The preacher opened his Bible and read a passage filled with words like "didst", "doest" , "dost" , "fain" and "wouldst". Now, please understand that I am not mocking that honoured version at all. It's a great version. But in expository sermons, the minister would read from the Scriptures in Elizabethan English and then explain the passage in modern English. That was all there was to it. So all he had done was to translate older English into modern English, which he then called exposition. Exposition is not that!

Exposition is telling people what the passage means and what it means to them. And when the hearers go out of the church, they say to each other, "Do you know, he didn't say anything that wasn't in the passage. Do you know, everything he said came from the passage or by implication from the passage. Do you know, he preached the passage."

And there's a power, a unique power in the Word of God, isn't there? Try it with children. Tell children a story about a railway. Go on, make one up. Now tell them (just as it is) a story out of the Bible, and notice the difference. There will be something compelling about the second which was missing from the first. I repeat, exposition is letting the Bible loose, telling people what it means and what it means to them.

So I'm pleading with you to be expository. Preach the Bible in such a way that you stir up thought and so that your hearers go away thinking about the passage – whether that passage be very small, small, medium or large.

Number 4: Use Story

Use story. What is a story? *It's an illustration.* Not all illustrations are stories, though all stories are illustrations. *An event.* An event or events are one of the two ingredients of a story. What's the other one? People, personality. The personality could be a fox, but you give it a personality. It could be a bat. It could be a tree. It could be a person. The event could be real or invented, as could the personalities. But you've got to have a personality and you've got to have an event to have a story. Tell me a short story in two words. *"Jesus wept."* That's the shortest story you could ever possibly tell, isn't it? When we say "Jesus" , of course, our minds are flooded with all sorts of meaning. But there's the person. "Wept" - we all know what that means. There's the event. Of course, there is a lot more that we want to know now, isn't there? Why was He there? Why did He weep? But that, nonetheless, is a story. It has all the elements of a story.

All the world loves a story. This is true at every stage of history, in every generation, and of every language group, culture and age group. Everybody loves a story. Tell me why. *It's interesting.* But what's so interesting about a story? If I just say, "Fellow humans, please listen to my peroration" , it's not half as interesting as a story is. *You can identify with a story.* You can put yourself into it, or your imagination allows you to be a spectator. What else? *You actually live what you're hearing.* Yes. Everyone loves a story.

Name me some preachers who have used story. *Jesus!* Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God Himself, almost all His teaching is story. Nathan the prophet, "You're the man." That was the conclusion of the story. What a story! Tell me some preachers who used or use story. *Spurgeon.* Yes, he was a powerful nineteenth-century Baptist preacher in London, and virtually every line you read of Spurgeon has a picture in it. It's very hard to find a line without some form of picture in it. Constantly he reverts to story. Anybody else? *Billy Graham.* I know that he uses stories, because I can remember some that I heard from him when I was a young man. Some of them were very funny, and all of them were helpful.

Have you ever heard of John Chrysostom, "Golden Mouth", the great preacher of the fourth century? *(4) He constantly told stories. And what about Christmas Evans? *(5) Some people believe that he was the greatest Welsh preacher who has ever lived. Guess what day of the year he was born on. Yes, he was born on Christmas day.

*(4) John Chrysostom (345?-407) was the most popular of the Greek Fathers in the Church and an extraordinarily powerful preacher. After years of denouncing sin in both the Church and among the civil authorities, he eventually became Archbishop of Constantinople in 398. He died as a result of a forced march imposed on him by the Empress Eudoxia. *(5) Christmas Evans (1766-1838) was a Baptist preacher whose name, until recently, was a household word in Wales. He was largely responsible for the evangelization of the Isle of Anglesey, off the north coast of the Principality.

He was quite a brutal young man, and in a fight he lost an eye. (Do you notice that this is a story? Has it made you interested?) Shortly after that he was converted and became a preacher, but actually he was a pretty boring preacher. His doctrine was sound, his exposition was solid, but his manner was rather dull. Listening to him was like trying to eat meat without cutting it up.

The problem was that Christmas Evans didn't know what to do about it. Then one day he heard a little, tiny hunchback called Robert Roberts. This little hunchback stood up and preached exactly the same sort of solid material, but he used story.

From that moment on Christmas Evans was set free, and he became the John Bunyan of Wales. If you ever get a chance to read any of Christmas Evans' sermons, do it. You will see how again and again he teaches everything from the everlasting covenant to our final entry into glory after our safe acquittal at the judgment seat, and he does it all by means of narrative. It is wonderful! He used story. There is always a way to picture what we have to say.

How could you learn to be a story teller? **Have children?** Yes, because if you have to explain things to children, sometimes difficult things, story is often the way. But not always. An eight-year old once asked me to explain to him the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, although he didn't use those terms. You can't do that with story. But story is the usual way of teaching children. Have children around you and start talking to children. You'll have to use story to get through to many of them on many subjects.

How else can you learn to tell stories? **Read good stories.** Where are the best stories? **In the Bible.** How much of the Bible is story? Go on, give a guess, a fraction. I should think well over half of the Bible is story. It's quite amazing. Doesn't that speak for itself?

Our Lord told stories. He talked about things that happened at home and things that happened at the synagogue or at the temple. He talked about everyday objects and everyday experiences. He told stories that related directly to people's experiences. He didn't tell stories about talking animals, though there are two talking animals in the Bible. He didn't tell stories about fairies. I'm not saying that we should never read fairy stories, but He didn't use that in His preaching.

But He did tell stories that tuned in directly to the experiences of the people. So you've got to know your people, haven't you? If you are preaching on Prince Edward Island, it's no good telling stories about leopards prowling about the hut, is it? Now what troubles me about many preachers that I meet is that they tell stories from 16th century Geneva, or 19th century London, but never seem to be able to tell a story about an exploding airbag or a cellular phone or a satellite or a Pepsi-Cola vending machine.

Somehow they seem to be more tuned in to how one of Spurgeon's church members managed to sell some ducks than they are to the twenty-first century world in which God has called us to live. I want to plead with you then: please use stories that the people in front of you can relate to.

Number 5: Ask Questions

Number five is "ask questions" . What is a question? **It is a request for information**, yes, or for an opinion. What happens to you when the preacher asks a question? **You start thinking.** You give a response. In listening to preaching, it is generally expected that the congregation will remain silent and that there will be no vocal responses to questions. But they still give an inside response. What happens then to the sermon? Instead of becoming a monologue, it becomes...**a dialogue.** And you gave me all those answers by means of questions!

Why don't preachers use more questions? ***They don't understand preaching?*** Well, maybe. If you're a preacher and you see the lights going out (remember that? click, click, click as they go out?), there's a surefire way to get the congregation to life again, and that's to ask them a few questions. I have a friend who is not very good at this, so he just has one question which he asks. If he has really lost the congregation, he comes round in front of the pulpit and says, "Excuse me, but when was this church started?" It always works, but of course if you preach regularly in the same church, you'll have to vary that!

How many of the preachers that you know actually engage their hearers with questions? So whose example are you going to follow? Will it be that of the preacher whose monologue style pours volumes of information into passive ears, or that of the preacher who teaches precisely the same truths by means of questions?

Whose example are you going to follow? There is always a way to put what you have to say in question form. Let's take a simple statement like. "The door is brown." For myself, I would prefer to say, "What colour would you say that door is?" Everyone would turn and look and say inside themselves, "It's brown." I would then say, "Yes, it's brown." This approach teaches the same information but stimulates more response, doesn't it?

Let's try one. "When Paul and his missionary team arrived in Europe, they didn't preach in Neapolis but went straight on to Philippi." Now teach that same information by use of questions. Try it. How about this: "When Paul came to Europe, did he come alone? No, he had a missionary team with him. And where do you think they docked? It was at a town called Neapolis, right by the coast. But they didn't stay there. Do you know why? Nor do I. So where was the next nearest place which was truly important? It was Philippi, which was a colony, and they set out for it at once." This carries the same information, doesn't it? But I think it's a little easier for most people to grasp.

Let's try one more. "As our Lord crossed the lake, He saw Capernaum." Put as a question, this sentence would go like this: "What did Jesus see as He crossed the lake? Capernaum. Now some of you are saying, "What on earth is Capernaum?" There it is again; we have taught the same information, but we have done it with more effect simply by using questions.

The Bible contains lots of questions. How long would it take to read Matthew 5, 6 and 7 out loud, that is, the Sermon on the Mount? Probably fifteen minutes, or if you're slow like me, twenty minutes. How many questions do you think there are in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. Have a guess. Well, the correct answer is that it depends on your translation, because question marks didn't exist in the original Greek. But in our modern versions there are nineteen or twenty. Now here's an easy one. On average, how many questions did our Lord use per minute? Yes, one question per minute. What's interesting about the Sermon on the Mount is that our Lord uses single questions, and then suddenly He starts using a couple, and nearer the end He's got two or three together in clusters. Remember that in His preaching, our Lord, the Son of God, used about a question a minute.

How long does your pastor preach for? Forty minutes or may be thirty? Next time you hear him preach, just note down how many questions he asks (exercising your critical faculty, but shunning a critical spirit!) Get a piece of paper, and every time he asks a question put a little tick. Just do it once or twice, and then say, "Pastor, your score today was three. Pastor, there has been an improvement – thirteen." Just do it for three weeks, please. I think that would be enough. You don't want to kill the man!

Number 6: Keep eye contact

Next we talk about eye contact. Now we are in the West. If I were speaking in Africa, I might say something a little different about eye contact, because in certain parts of the world, as you may know, when an inferior meets a superior, it is extremely arrogant for the inferior to look the superior in the eyes. But we're not in Africa; we're in the West. What effect does it have on you when someone who's talking to you doesn't look you in the eyes? *It's rude*. Yes, and what happens to you? You turn off or you turn over. I once played table tennis in the school library. That wasn't a great offence, was it? But it was against the school rules. There were no bats, so we used books. There was no net, so we used books. There was a table, though it wasn't quite the right dimensions (note, this is a story!) The result of playing tennis in the library was that I was summoned before the headmaster. Now, our headmaster was a pretty frightening figure. He wore a long, puffy, black academic gown – enough to terrify anybody – with a big hood which was bright red at the back, and he wore one of these mortarboards. He would walk down the corridor with a cane – and I don't mean a walking stick, but an implement that leaves a mark on a child's posterior. He was a terrifying figure. Because of my offence, I was told that I must appear before him at two o'clock in the afternoon to answer to him for having played table tennis in the library. I had never been in his study before, and it was extremely frightening. In due time the secretary ushered me in, and there, to the right, was a cane rack. Behind the desk, facing me, was the headmaster in all his finery. I stood there, doing the best I could to look like a penitent child, and he started speaking. But he didn't look up. He told me what a terrible fellow I was, but he still didn't look up. He told me what punishment I would have to bear, but he still didn't look up. Then he told me to go, and I went. During the whole proceedings, he never saw my face once. What was the effect? I was never scared of him again. I could walk down the corridor, and he didn't know it was me. He had no idea that the Olyott he had spoken to in his study was that fellow walking the other way. I lost all respect for him.

And what happens when a preacher doesn't look at the congregation?

Do you know that it is only women who have ears, even though they are often hidden? Do you know that men and boys don't have ears? Well, they have ears, but they're only for decoration. Do you know that to speak to a man or a boy you have got to speak into his eyes – because that's where his hearing is? The reason why many boys and men switch off during the sermon is because the preacher never looks at them. My mother would say to me, "Look at me when I'm speaking to you!" And I did! She knew that she wouldn't get through to me any other way.

Do you ever go to the bank and the teller is there. She just had another customer, and another, and now it's your turn? You stand there, and she's waiting to hear what you have to say but is not looking up. Does that ever happen to you? For myself, I just stand there. At last, after a long pause, she looks up. Now you have met her, haven't you? You are finally in touch. And, by the way, you get better service!

We don't feel we've met people until we've looked them in the eye. And if the preacher doesn't look you in the eye, you don't feel that you have connected, do you? One of the reasons that people are bored is because the preacher doesn't look at them. Those who believe that they have got something really important to say look at those they are talking to.

In some of our Welsh churches we have galleries, and the galleries aren't only to the right and left and in front of the preacher, but behind him as well. Do you know who sits in the gallery behind him? The people who don't want to be seen by the preacher.

One of the most astonishing things for them is when the preacher turns around, looks them in the eyes and speaks to them directly! That wakes them up.

Are any of you school teachers? When Johnny is misbehaving, isn't the first thing you do to tell him to look at you? Then you've got him. Why are some preachers embarrassed to look at the congregation? **They feel intimidated.** Yes. Or perhaps they are unnecessarily bound to their manuscript, which is, of course, why sermon notes should never be written out in full – but that is not our subject today. It may be that they are afraid that they'll be distracted and lose their thought. In this case we can say that they are more concerned about getting the sermon **out** than getting it **in**.

How would you help a young preacher who has a problem with eye contact? What could you tell him that would help him to get over his embarrassment at looking people in the eyes? Give me a few tips, please. **Look over their heads?** Well ... yes. Just as long as he doesn't **preach** over their heads, that's okay. If he is really embarrassed, a simple trick is not to look people in the eyes, but to look at the top of their noses. They will never know that that is what he is doing, and he won't be embarrassed again. Is that deceitful? I don't think so, and it will get him out of the bad habit of not looking at people.

I'm half way through, and want to speed up a little bit now. . . .

Number 7: Use spoken English

Do you know the differences between rugby and soccer? Do you know the similarities between them? **Both games require a ball.** Yes, and both involve lots of kicking. **They are team sports.** Are there any other similarities between them? **There are goals.** They are different shaped goals, but there are goals. **There's a referee. There are two teams. There are lines.** There are plenty of similarities, aren't there? Now, ladies and gentlemen, spoken English and written English also enjoy lots of similarities. But is rugby soccer? Tell me some of the differences between them. **The shape of the ball.** In rugby you can carry the ball in certain circumstances. **Rugby has more contact,** and so on. So there are lots of differences, aren't there?

Spoken English is not written English. Written English is not spoken English. Spoken English uses short sentences. Why? It is because the spoken language is not like a video recording; there is no rewind button. If I come to a long paragraph in a book and I don't get it the first time, I can read it again, can't I? And then I can read it yet again, if I need to. But in a spoken sentence, I can't do that. If someone is at the front speaking, I can't interrupt and say, "Excuse me. Can you say that again?"

Spoken English uses ordinary words, very ordinary words. Why? In order to be clear. The spoken language has got to be understood straight away. If you're reading a textbook and you come to a word you don't understand, you can re-read the sentence until you get hold of it. But you can't do that with spoken English. In addition, spoken English uses lots of repetition. What would happen with a book if you found lots of repetition? You'd put it down and think you'd wasted your money. Now here's a more difficult point: spoken English uses mostly the active voice. "I hit the dog" is the active voice. "The dog was hit by me" is the passive voice. Spoken English prefers the active voice. Now can you see the preacher's problem? Preachers read. They read a lot. They are always at it. They read books, articles and websites. With all this reading in mind, they then write notes. At last, when they come to preach, they end up speaking in *written* English...and bore people. You've got to keep the style spoken.

The Church of Jesus Christ is an oral society, not a written society, not a literary society. Almost nothing should be written in the Christian Church, almost nothing. I said *almost* nothing. What should be written? God's Word, and we can manage with little else.

The style has got to be conversational – not aloof, not distant, and certainly not made up of shouting and bawling, except just occasionally to make a point. Have you ever listened to a preacher who shouts all the time? What happened to you? You tuned out. In fact, with many modern young people, when they hear a preacher shouting they start looking for the TV remote control. They feel that they ought to have some sort of control over the volume, and when they discover that they haven't, they are overcome with a sense of frustration. We've got to use spoken English, and spoken English is the language that is usually used between friend and friend.

How can you learn spoken English? *Speak*. Yes. How can I learn not to use written English in the pulpit? *Don't use a manuscript. Get to know your people*. Any other tips? *Stay away from technical words*. Yes, don't normally use any words which ordinary people don't use in ordinary life.

When I speak to ministerial students, I make them do little exercises. For example, I make them explain something to me in words of one syllable, because in spoken English ninety percent of the words only have one or two syllables. This doesn't apply to French and certainly doesn't apply to Welsh, but it does apply to English. Avoid long and unusual words. "Marmalade" should be the longest word used in the pulpit, apart from the word "syllable" that I have just mentioned! So what are we to do with a word like "justification"? Explain it. There are certain technical words that we have to use if we are going to properly teach the faith, but we must explain them. This does not alter the fact that *spoken* English is to be our language whenever we preach.

Number 8: Take care of your voice

Sometimes when I'm in church, I look at the preacher and he's not singing any of the psalms or hymns. There he is at the front, leading the service. Everybody else is singing, but he is just standing there. Sometimes I ask such preachers, —Why didn't you sing the psalms and hymns today? The normal reply is, —I was saving my voice for the sermon. We have three words to describe that answer – —stuff and nonsense. The very best thing you can do if you're going to preach is to sing the hymns and psalms and to sing them with a full voice. In this way you warm up the instrument. Be like those who play the horn, cornet, trumpet or trombone; warm up the instrument. Get your voice's lubrication flowing to prepare it for the preaching that follows. What's good for singing is what's good for speaking, and what's good for proper speaking is what's good for singing. Sing the hymns! That's one way of looking after your voice.

Another thing that lots of preachers do is to hide in their pulpit a glass of water. (Here Dr. Olyott pulled out an almost empty glass from behind the pulpit of the church where the seminar was being held.) This is actually a very bad sign, isn't it, because this glass is almost empty, which suggests that last Sunday's preacher drank from it. If he drank it after the sermon, then full marks to him. But if he drank it during the sermon, he should be severely reprimanded, because a commandment all preachers should respect is – *never drink water!* This rule runs contrary to popular wisdom but is extremely important. Why is that? It is because God made your voice to be self-lubricating. I listened to a preacher recently who's been preaching for forty years. He's a very good preacher, a very experienced preacher. He led the service with a beautiful voice that made the building resonate.

Then just before he preached, he drank a whole glass of water. What happened for the first ten minutes of the sermon? He coughed and spluttered and croaked. Of course he did, because he had washed away all the natural juices which God had given him, and it took ten minutes for his voice to recover. What do you do if you feel dry as a preacher? I mean physically dry. You keep going, because basically it's just a sign of nerves, and your voice will self-lubricate. It will be okay. Just keep going. Look after your voice.

Now let's look at the mouth. Here are the teeth, at the front of the mouth. Here's the roof of your mouth. Here's the tongue. Is the picture clear? When we speak English (and this doesn't apply to every language), we should feel the top of the mouth near the front vibrate or resonate. If we don't, it is because we are speaking incorrectly. How could you learn to do that? It's easy, ladies and gentlemen. What you do is hum. You do it with your mouth shut. Starting on Monday, you go round the house humming a hymn tune. You do it until the family is tired of it. After about Wednesday, you mix some sung syllables into the humming. Later on, you start saying words with your humming. By Saturday you will probably be speaking properly. When you go into the pulpit next Sunday, hopefully that little place behind your top teeth will vibrate or resonate like the hum, and you'll never have voice strain again.

Breathing is another point. Have you ever heard a preacher who keeps stopping every couple of minutes to catch a breath because he can't breathe properly? What effect does he have on you? You're so irritated that you switch off. It is essential that we learn intercostal diaphragmatic breathing. This simply means that when we sit down in a chair and breathe in, our tummy should fill up and stick out; and when we breathe out, our tummy should recede and go in. Many preachers do exactly the opposite; and because they do exactly the opposite in their day-to-day life, they continue the bad habit when they stand in the pulpit. As a result, they run out of breath very quickly indeed. When we breathe in the tummy rises; when we breathe out, the tummy goes in. If it doesn't, practise, practise and practise again, until it does!

Can you do anything else to help look after your voice? You can start your preaching at the right pitch for you. Have you ever heard a preacher who starts out like this (in a high, falsetto voice...), but it's not his natural voice? After a few minutes, what happens to his voice? It runs out. (Then in a super bass voice...) On the other hand, you get these other preachers who start out very low and are basically incomprehensible. Everyone of us has a natural pitch, and you don't discover it in the shower. You discover it simply by lightly tapping your sola plexus while you talk and continuing to do this until you discover the note that's comfortable for you. That is the note on which you need to start every sentence. You didn't expect to hear this sort of thing this morning, did you? But if you take heed to it, you will never have voice trouble again.

Number 9: Remember that *less means more*

When I had been married about nine months, I was ill for quite a long period. After several weeks of total rest, I remained too ill to preach but was now well enough to go to church. It was a very strange experience. After the preacher had been speaking for what seemed quite a long time, I would give my wife a little nudge and gently whisper, "How long has he been going now?" She would say, "Shhhhh, ten minutes." "How long now?" "Thirteen minutes." I never knew sermons were so long until I had to listen to them. I made up my mind that if I ever returned to the pulpit, I would preach less in each sermon but that more would stick.

And this is what happened. Instead of preparing my sermons on a piece of paper the long way (portrait), I prepared the first draft across the length of the paper (landscape). I made three columns.

The first column was headed “State”, the second column —Illustrate, and the third column “Apply”. In the first column was written the message, that is, all the main truths that had to be preached. In the second column, for every main truth that had to be said, there was an illustration. In the third column, for every main truth taught and illustrated, there was an application.

In this way I found that I could preach shorter sermons, but that more would remain in people’s minds. Before my illness I had been preaching fifty to fifty-five minutes of uncut roast beef. I believe it was good food, but the people couldn’t swallow it. After my illness I was able to put a bit of sauce on it and some vegetables, spices and anything else that was necessary. That’s the way I’ve prepared my sermons, at least mentally, for years now – state, illustrate, apply. My average sermon went down from fifty to fifty-five minutes to somewhere around thirty-five minutes, and I found that the folk retained far, far more.

State	Illustrate	Apply
1. AAAAAAAAAAAA	aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa	aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
2. BBBBBBBBBBBB	bbbbbbbbbbbbbbbb	bbbbbbbbbbbbbbbb
3. CCCCCCCCCCCC	cccccccccccccccc	cccccccccccccccc

Isn’t it good when people stop you on the church porch and say, “I wish you’d gone on longer!”? Otherwise, do you know what happens? They shake your hand, they look you in the eye and they say, “Lovely.” That basically means, “It was so boring and so long that really I can’t think of anything nice to say to you!”

Young men, you don’t have to say everything you discover in the study! You should always discover much more in the study than you will ever preach. You select from what you’ve discovered in the study to serve the big idea of the passage, and you preach the big idea of the passage from the material that serves it. When you return to the same passage at some future date, you may decide to preach a different big idea, so on that occasion you would preach the material which serves *that* big idea. In preaching on the Prodigal Son, you might focus on God’s joy over receiving a sinner. That would be the big idea, and all the material would be preached with that in mind. But in preaching on the Prodigal Son later, or elsewhere, you might preach on the broken heart and repentance of the prodigal; that might be the big idea. And so all the material you preach serves *that*. You don’t have to preach everything you discover. Otherwise you’ll preach like that great man who preached on the book of Job for forty years. I have heard that when he started he had eight hundred hearers and that when he finished he had eight. Undoubtedly those eight knew the book of Job rather well. I don’t know what happened to the others.

Number 10: Be the slave of structure and logic

Structure means that the sermon has an introduction; then it goes somewhere, and you can see where it’s going and where it’s been; and finally you tie everything up in a little bag and give it to the hearers to take away with them. That’s what structure is. Between the introduction and the conclusion are a number of points that flow in logical sequence.

Let's try a little exercise. Give me the third line. "All sailors wear blue trousers. John is a sailor. Therefore....**John wears blue trousers.**" The logic is clear to us all. *(6) Now some sermons I listen to go like this: "All sailors wear blue trousers. John is a sailor. Therefore blue is beautiful." And the congregation thinks, "Where on earth did that come from?" Now, that can't be right, not if you're going to leave a compelling message in people's minds. You've got to be the slave of logic or you will lose your congregation.

I visit a lot of farms. Every farm I know has a broken ladder. It's all right going up a broken ladder. You go up the rungs one at a time. But try coming down! Have you ever done it? You come down one rung, two rungs, and then suddenly you've fallen through. It's dangerous. Some sermons are like that. The first rung seems okay, the second rung seems okay, and the third rung isn't there and you fall through. You end up lost and bewildered.

Number 11: Be *in* the message!

In Britain we have postmen who come to our houses. We don't have mailboxes. We have a slit in the door which we call a letter box. Be careful with the letter box, because there may be a dog on the other side. This being so, the postman always pushes the letters through, but never his fingers, in case they get bitten. Some preachers are like that. They have a message. They bring it to you. They push it through, turn around and walk away.

That's not preaching! Preaching is coming with a message, climbing through the letter box and arriving with the message inside your person. The Bible is full of this. It says, "If you reject the person, you reject the message. If you reject the message, you reject the person who brings the message. If you accept the person who brings the message, you accept the message. If you accept the message, you accept the person who brings the message." You can't distinguish the preacher from the message. Many preachers forget this, so they're quite content just to give the message and not to give anything of themselves. You can listen to some preachers for ten years and not know them any better at the end of that time than at the beginning. That's not the way it is in the Bible, nor is it the sort of preaching that impresses young people. Young people detest sham. All young people detest sham. They detest all forms of insincerity and humbug. They want to know that this man is *in* the message that he's preaching.

This does not mean that the preacher has to be a shouter. I came home at the end of an afternoon's visiting and found that the family was already sitting round the meal table waiting for me. You always feel a bit guilty when that happens. I sat down and looked across at our oldest boy and noticed that his eyes were shining. I thought, "That's a bit suspicious. He's fifteen. I have never seen his eyes shine like that before." Throughout our meal I kept looking at him. Do you have secret signals in your family? I sent a secret signal across the table to my wife: "What's wrong with him?" She signaled back, "I don't know." "Is he in love?" "Don't think so", came the answer, invisible to all but myself. Then I had the awful thought - is it drugs? What happens if he's on drugs? How do I deal with this? Do I accuse him of being on drugs and then find that I've got it wrong?

"Alex, could we have a man-to-man talk after supper?"

"All right, Dad."

So up to his bedroom he went, and I had fifteen minutes before I went up to join him.

(6) This simple piece of logic is known as a *syllogism*. It is a deductive inference by which a conclusion is derived from two propositions, known as *the major premiss* and *the minor premiss*. What is interesting is that its logic is plain to all, even to those who have no training or experience in this area.

What would you have done in those fifteen minutes? You pray, and then you walk up and down and think, "How am I going to say this? If he's on drugs, do I say this, this and this? If he's not on drugs, do I say this, this and this? And how do I say it? Do I shout at him? Do I not shout at him? Do I punish him?" It's all going through your mind. When you think you've got it right and with a good conscience before God, up the stairs you go and you sit on the bed with the lad and talk with him quietly. And he knows that the *whole of you* is in that message, doesn't he? That's because it is. There's no shouting or bawling, but there's deep calling to deep and spirit calling to spirit. The boy knows that it's not just words, but that it's *you*, dealing with him; that there's the action of your soul on his soul. That's what it means to be *in* the message. *(7)

Number 12: Assault the conscience

Next, assault the conscience. Everyone will wake up if you assault their conscience. Too many preachers are saying, "Here's my message. I've got to get it out of me. I've just got to get it out!" instead of asking, "What do I want to happen next?" What I want to happen next is that the exposition of Scripture will move people to think great thoughts about God; that it will cause sanctified people to become more sanctified; and that it will transform unconverted people into converted people. *The sermon is nothing in and of itself! It is a means to these ends.*

As a preacher I have to remember that I am not a sermon maker. The moment I become a sermon maker, I should leave the ministry. I'm a *saint* maker, and I do it through preaching sermons. This means, of course, that the sermon's target is always the conscience, so that the life of every hearer is changed.

Now I have a problem, and hopefully you're going to help me. If you preach to five hundred, it's very easy to speak bluntly to people. But I preach in Wales, and I preach to a lot of congregations where there are only five or six people present. I find it very, very hard to be blunt, really blunt about sin, known sin, when there is only a handful of people in front of me.

Could you help me, please? I don't have any trouble with a big congregation. Nothing holds me back at all. But with a small congregation, for some reason or other, I find that it is very, very difficult to assault the conscience. Could you give me some help on that one?

I find that there is really only one thing that helps me – that is to remember that my life is getting shorter every moment. There's a little bit of sand in the hour glass, but my life will soon be done, and then I shall be at the judgment seat answering to Christ alone. If I ever lose that thought when I'm preaching, then I lose all my power to speak bluntly to people. The only thing that has kept me going through the years is to remember that at the last I shall answer to Him and not to them. What's important then is that I should please *Him*, even if this means offending others. So I must speak to my hearers bluntly. I am called to address their minds and stir their emotions, but my target is always to be their consciences.

(7) It seems unfair not to give you the outcome of this story! The fact is that we never discovered why his eyes were shining in such a way on that day.

Number 13: Conquer God before you start

Last of all, conquer God before you start. On Wednesday, 5th October, 1859, a Welsh preacher called David Morgan woke up very early. Later that day he wrote in his diary, "I awoke about four in the morning remembering everything of a religious nature that I had ever learnt or heard." *(8) After days of wrestling in prayer, something extraordinary had happened to him. For the next two and a half years he travelled widely and preached with unusual power.

It is calculated that between 1858 and 1860 over one hundred thousand people came to Christ in the little principality of Wales, vast numbers of them through the preaching of David Morgan and a friend. One night after those wonderful years he went to bed like a lion and woke up like a lamb. For the rest of his life he remained a perfectly normal minister whose ministry was blessed with a constant trickle of conversions, but he never saw again what he had witnessed in 1859 and 1860.

Why am I telling you all this? One particular sermon of his resulted in the instantaneous conversion of many hundreds of people. Someone asked him, "David Morgan, where did you get that sermon?" He replied, "Come and see." He took the enquirer into his study where there were a few books, a piece of carpet on the floor and a window looking out on to the hills. He said, "As the moon came up through that window, I was on my knees asking God for his blessing. At last, when the stars disappeared in the light of dawn, I felt some personal conviction that God had given me a message that he was going to bless. That's where I got that sermon."

That's an interesting illustration, isn't it? Before he preached it, David Morgan had a personal conviction that God was going to bless his sermon. Something similar happened to John Livingstone at the time of the Kirk o' Shotts Revival in Scotland. Church history is full of similar incidents. The point is this: there is such a thing as waiting upon God, pleading with Him and dealing with Him. Our forefathers called it "conquering God". I don't know whether that's the right expression.

But, ladies and gentlemen, there is an intimate connection between prayer and blessing, blessing and prayer. There really is. The apostle said, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). I wouldn't want anything, anything, anything I've said this morning to give the impression that we can ever manage without the blessing of God. Therefore, in all our preaching, we must seek it. And when the blessing of God is on a sermon, even if all the rules are broken (and sometimes they are!), nobody will be bored.

(8) See Eifion Evans, *When He is come: an account of the 1858-1860 Revival in Wales* (Bala: Evangelical Movement of Wales, 1959), 45.

Stuart Olyott conducted this seminars at Haddington House, Charlottetown, on October 28, 2006. We trust that what follows will allow you to "listen in". Despite some editing of the transcription, we have retained the informal, spoken English and interactive style, as his seminar was in part a living demonstration of some of his points. In addition to the normal use of italics, vocal contributions by the participants are also italicized.

(Note: many hundreds of Dr Olyott's sermons can be accessed in MP3 format by going to www.knowyourbible recordings.org)